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HARRY POTTER *and the* METHODS OF RATIONALITY

Volume III

Based on the works of J.K. Rowling

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Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality

Arc Set Five

MULTIPLE HYPOTHESIS TESTING

(International news headlines of April 7th, 1992)

Toronto Magical Tribune:

ENTIRE BRITISH WIZENGAMOT
REPORTS SEEING 'BOY-WHO-LIVED'
FRIGHTEN A DEMENTOR

EXPERT ON MAGICAL CREATURES:
"NOW YOU'RE JUST LYING"

FRANCE, GERMANY ACCUSE BRITAIN
OF MAKING THE WHOLE THING UP

New Zealand Spellcrafter's Diurnal Notice:

WHAT DROVE BRITISH LEGISLATURE INSANE?
COULD OUR GOVERNMENT BE NEXT?

EXPERTS LIST TOP 28 REASONS
TO BELIEVE IT'S ALREADY HAPPENED

American Mage:

WEREWOLF CLAN TO BECOME
FIRST INHABITANTS OF WYOMING

The Quibbler:

MALFOY FLEES HOGWARTS
AS VEELA POWERS AWAKEN

Daily Prophet:

LEGAL TRICKS FREE
“MAD MUGGLEBORN”
AS POTTER THREATENS MINISTRY
WITH ATTACK ON AZKABAN



Hypothesis: Voldemort
(April 8th, 1992, 7:22 PM)



THE four of them gathered once more around the ancient desk of the Headmaster of Hogwarts, with its drawers within drawers within drawers, wherein all the past paperwork of the Hogwarts School was stored; legend had it that Headmistress Shehla had once gotten lost in that desk, and was, in fact, still there, and wouldn't be let out again until she got her files organized. Minerva didn't particularly look forward to inheriting those drawers, when she inherited that desk someday – if any of them survived.

Albus Dumbledore was seated behind his desk, looking grave and composed.

Severus Snape was standing next to the dead Floo and its ashes, hovering ominously like the vampire that students sometimes accused him of pretending to be.

Mad-Eye Moody had been meant to join them, but was yet to arrive.

And Harry...

A boy's small, thin frame, perched on the arm of his chair, as though the energies running through him were too great to allow ordinary seating. Set face, sweaty hair, intent green eyes, and within it all, the jagged lightning-bolt of his never-healing scar. He seemed grimmer, now; even compared to a single week earlier.

For a moment Minerva flashed back to her trip to Diagon Alley with Harry, what seemed like ages and ages ago. There'd been this somber boy inside that Harry, somehow, even then. This wasn't entirely her own fault, or Albus's fault. And yet there was something almost unbearably sad about the contrast between the young boy she'd first met, and what magical Britain had made of him. Harry had never had much of an ordinary childhood, she'd

gathered; Harry's adoptive parents had said to her that he'd spoken little and played less with Muggle children. It was painful to think that Harry might have had only a few months of playing beside the other children in Hogwarts, before the war's demands had stripped it all away. Maybe there was another face that Harry showed to the children his own age, when he wasn't staring down the Wizengamot. But she couldn't stop herself from imagining Harry Potter's childhood as a heap of firewood, and herself and Albus feeding the wooden branches, piece by piece, into the flames.

"Prophecies are strange things," said Albus Dumbledore. The old wizard's eyes were half-lidded, as though in weariness. "Vague, unclear, meaning escaping like water held between loose fingers. Prophecy is ever a burden, for there are no answers there, only questions."

Harry Potter was sitting tensely. "Headmaster Dumbledore," said the boy with soft precision, "my friends are being targeted. Hermione Granger almost went to Azkaban. The war has begun, as you put it. Professor Trelawney's prophecy is key information for weighing up the balance of my hypotheses about what's going on. Not to mention how silly it is – and dangerous – that the Dark Lord knows the prophecy and I don't."

Albus looked a grim question at her, and she shook her head in reply; in whatever unimaginable way Harry had discovered that Trelawney had made the prophecy and that the Dark Lord knew of it, he hadn't learned that much from her.

"Voldemort, seeking to avert that very prophecy, went to his defeat at your hands," the old wizard said then. "His knowledge brought him only harm. Ponder that carefully, Harry Potter."

"Yes, Headmaster, I do understand that. My home culture also has a literary tradition of self-fulfilling and misinterpreted prophecies. I'll interpret with caution, rest assured. But I've already guessed quite a bit. Is it safer for me to work from partial guesses?"

Time passed.

"Minerva," said Albus. "If you would."

"The one..." she began. The words came falteringly to her throat; she was no actress. She couldn't imitate the deep, chilling tone of the original prophecy; and yet somehow that tone seemed to carry all the meaning. "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies..."

"And the Dark Lord shall mark him as his equal," came Severus's voice,

making her jump within her chair. The Potions Master loomed tall by the fireplace. "But he shall have power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must destroy all but a remnant of the other, for those two different spirits cannot exist in the same world."

That last line Severus spoke with so much foreboding that it chilled her bones; it was almost like listening to Sybill Trelawney.

Harry was listening with a frown. "Can you repeat that?" said Harry.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month –"

"Actually, hold on, can you write that down? I need to analyze this carefully –"

This was done, with both Albus and Severus watching the parchment hawklike, as though to make sure that no unseen hand reached in and snatched the precious information away.

"Let's see..." Harry said. "I'm male and born on July 31st, check. I did in fact vanquish the Dark Lord, check. Ambiguous pronoun in line two... but I wasn't born yet so it's hard to see how my parents could have thrice defied me. This scar is an obvious candidate for the mark..." Harry touched his forehead. "Then there's the power the Dark Lord knows not, which probably refers to my scientific background –"

"No," said Severus.

Harry looked at the Potions Master in surprise.

Severus's eyes were closed, his face tightened in concentration. "The Dark Lord could obtain that power by studying the same books as you, Potter. But the prophecy did not say, power the Dark Lord has not. Nor even, power the Dark Lord cannot have. She spoke of power the Dark Lord knows not... it will be something stranger to him than Muggle artifacts. Something perhaps that he cannot comprehend at all, even having seen it..."

"Science is not a bag of technological tricks," Harry said. "It's not just the Muggle version of a wand. It's not even knowledge like memorizing the periodic table. It's a different way of thinking."

"Perhaps..." the Potions Master murmured, but his voice was skeptical.

"It is hazardous," Albus said, "to read too far into a prophecy, even if you have heard it yourself. They are things of exceeding frustration."

"So I see," Harry said. His hand rose up, rubbed the scar on his forehead. "But... okay, if this is really all we know... look, I'll just put it bluntly. How do you know that the Dark Lord actually survived?"

“What?” she cried. Albus just sighed and leaned back in the vast Headmaster’s chair.

“Well,” Harry said, “imagine how this prophecy sounded back when it was made. You-Know-Who learns the prophecy, and it sounds like I’m destined to grow up and overthrow him. That the two of us are meant to have a final battle where either of us must destroy all but a remnant of the other. So You-Know-Who attacks Godric’s Hollow and immediately gets vanquished, leaving behind some remnant which may or may not be his disembodied soul. Maybe the Death Eaters are his remnant, or the Dark Mark. This prophecy could already be fulfilled, is what I’m saying. Don’t get me wrong – I do realize that my interpretation sounds stretched. Trelawney’s phrasing doesn’t seem natural for describing only the events that historically happened on October 31st, 1981. Attacking a baby and having the spell bounce off, isn’t something you’d normally call ‘the power to vanquish’. But if you think of the prophecy as being about several possible futures, only one of which was actually realized on Halloween, then the prophecy could already be complete.”

“But –” Minerva blurted. “But the raid on Azkaban –”

“If the Dark Lord survived, then sure, he’s the most likely suspect for the Azkaban breakout,” Harry said reasonably. “You could even say that the Azkaban breakout is Bayesian evidence for the Dark Lord surviving, because an Azkaban breakout is more likely to happen in worlds where he’s alive than worlds where he’s dead. But it’s not strong Bayesian evidence. It’s not something that can’t possibly happen unless the Dark Lord is alive. Professor Quirrell, who didn’t start from the assumption that You-Know-Who was still around, had no trouble thinking of his own explanation. To him, it was obvious that some powerful wizard might want Bellatrix Black because she knew a secret of the Dark Lord’s, like some of his magical knowledge that he’d told to only her. The priors against anyone surviving their body’s death are very low, even if it’s magically possible. Most times it doesn’t happen. So if it’s just the Azkaban breakout... I’d have to say formally that it isn’t enough Bayesian evidence. The improbability of the evidence assuming that the hypothesis is false, is not commensurate with the prior improbability of the hypothesis.”

“No,” Severus said flatly. “The prophecy is not yet fulfilled. I would know if it were.”

“Are you sure of that?”

“Yes, Potter. If the prophecy had already come true, I would understand

it! I heard Trelawney's words, I remember Trelawney's voice, and if I knew the events that matched the prophecy, I would recognize them. What has already happened... does not fit." The Potions Master spoke with certainty.

"I'm not really sure what to do with that statement," Harry said. His hand rose up, absently rubbed at his forehead. "Maybe it's just what you think happened that doesn't fit, and the true history is different..."

"Voldemort is alive," Albus said. "There are other indications."

"Such as?" Harry's reply was instant.

Albus paused. "There are terrible rituals by which wizards have returned from death," Albus said slowly. "That much, anyone can discern within history and legend. And yet those books are missing, I could not find them; it was Voldemort who removed them, I am sure –"

"So you can't find any books on immortality, and that proves that You-Know-Who has them?"

"Indeed," said Albus. "There is a certain book – I will not name it aloud – missing from the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts library. An ancient scroll which should have been at Borgin and Burkes, with only an empty place on a shelf to show where it was –" The old wizard stopped. "But I suppose," the old wizard said, as though to himself, "you will say that even if Voldemort tried to make himself immortal, it does not prove that he succeeded..."

Harry sighed. "Proof, Headmaster? There are only ever probabilities. If there are known, particular books on immortality rituals which are missing, that increases the probability that someone attempted one. Which, in turn, raises the prior probability of the Dark Lord surviving his death. This I concede, and thank you for contributing the fact. The question is whether the prior probability goes up enough."

"Surely," Albus said quietly, "if you concede even a chance that Voldemort survived, that is worth guarding against?"

Harry inclined his head. "As you say, Headmaster. Though once a probability drops low enough, it's also an error to go on obsessing about it... Given that books on immortality are missing, and that this prophecy would sound somewhat more natural if it refers to the Dark Lord and I having a future battle, I agree that the Dark Lord being alive is a probability, not just possibility. But other probabilities must also be taken into account – and in the probable worlds where You-Know-Who is not alive, someone else framed Hermione."

“Foolishness,” Severus said softly. “Utter foolishness. The Dark Mark has not faded, nor has its master.”

“See, that’s what I mean by formally insufficient Bayesian evidence. Sure, it sounds all grim and foreboding and stuff, but is it that unlikely for a magical mark to stay around after the maker dies? Suppose the mark is certain to continue while the Dark Lord’s sentience lives on, but a priori we’d only have guessed a twenty percent chance of the Dark Mark continuing to exist after the Dark Lord dies. Then the observation, ‘The Dark Mark has not faded’ is five times as likely to occur in worlds where the Dark Lord is alive as in worlds where the Dark Lord is dead. Is that really commensurate with the prior improbability of immortality? Let’s say the prior odds were a hundred-to-one against the Dark Lord surviving. If a hypothesis is a hundred times as likely to be false versus true, and then you see evidence five times more likely if the hypothesis is true versus false, you should update to believing the hypothesis is twenty times as likely to be false as true. Odds of a hundred to one, times a likelihood ratio of one to five, equals odds of twenty to one that the Dark Lord is dead –”

“Where are you getting all these numbers, Potter?”

“That is the admitted weakness of the method,” Harry said readily. “But what I’m qualitatively getting at is why the observation, ‘The Dark Mark has not faded’, is not adequate support for the hypothesis, ‘The Dark Lord is immortal.’ The evidence isn’t as extraordinary as the claim.” Harry paused. “Not to mention that even if the Dark Lord is alive, he doesn’t have to be the one who framed Hermione. As a cunning man once said, there could be more than one plotter and more than one plan.”

“Such as the Defense Professor,” Severus said with a thin smile. “I suppose I must agree that he is a suspect. It was the Defense Professor last year, after all; and the year before that, and the year before that.”

Harry’s eyes dropped back to the parchment in his lap. “Let’s move on. Are we certain that this Prophecy is accurate? Nobody messed with Professor McGonagall’s memory, maybe edited or subtracted a line?”

Albus paused, then spoke slowly. “There is a great spell laid over Britain, recording every prophecy said within our borders. Far beneath the Most Ancient Hall of the Wizengamot, in the Department of Mysteries, they are recorded.”

“The Hall of Prophecy,” Minerva whispered. She’d read about that place, said to be a great room of shelves filled with glowing orbs, one after another

appearing over the years. Merlin himself had wrought it, it was said; the greatest wizard's final slap to the face of Fate. Not all prophecies conduced to the good; and Merlin had wished for at least those spoken of in prophecy, to know what had been spoken of them. That was the respect Merlin had given to their free will, that Destiny might not control them from the outside, unwitting. Those mentioned within a prophecy would have an glowing orb float to their hand, and then hear the prophet's true voice speaking. Others who tried to touch an orb, it was said, would be driven mad – or possibly just have their heads explode, the legends were unclear on this point. Whatever Merlin's original intention, the Unspeakables hadn't let anyone enter in centuries, so far as she'd heard. Works of the Ancient Wizards had stated that later Unspeakables had discovered that tipping off the subjects of prophecies could interfere with seers releasing whatever temporal pressures they released; and so the heirs of Merlin had sealed his Hall. It did occur to Minerva to wonder (now that she'd spent a few months around Mr. Potter) how anyone could possibly know that; but she also knew better than to ask Albus, in case Albus tried to tell her. Minerva firmly believed that you only ought to worry about Time if you were a clock.

"The Hall of Prophecy," Albus confirmed lowly. "Those who are spoken of in a prophecy, may listen to that prophecy there. Do you see the implication, Harry?"

Harry frowned. "Well, I could listen to it, or the Dark Lord... oh, my parents. Those who had thrice defied him. They were also mentioned in the prophecy, so they could hear the recording?"

"If James and Lily heard anything different from what Minerva reported," Albus said evenly, "they did not say so to me."

"You took James and Lily there?" Minerva said.

"Fawkes can go to many places," Albus said. "Do not mention the fact."

Harry was staring directly at Albus. "Can I go to this Department of Mysteries place and hear the recorded prophecy? The original tone of voice might be helpful, from what I've heard."

Light glinted from the reflection of Albus's half-moon glasses as the old wizard slowly shook his head. "I think that would be unwise," Albus said. "For reasons beyond the obvious. It is dangerous, that place which Merlin made; more dangerous to some people than others."

"I see," Harry said tonelessly, and looked back down at the parchment. "I'll take the prophecy as assumed accurate for now. The next part says that

the Dark Lord has marked me as his equal. Any ideas on what that means exactly?"

"Surely not," said Albus, "that you must imitate his ways, in any wise."

"I'm not dumb, Headmaster. Muggles have worked out a thing or two about temporal paradoxes, even if it's all theoretical to them. I won't throw away my ethics just because a signal from the future claims it's going to happen, because then that becomes the only reason why it happened in the first place. Still, what does it mean?"

"I do not know," said Severus.

"Nor I," she said.

Harry took out his wand, turned it over in his hands, gazing meditatively at the wood. "Eleven inches, holly, with a core of phoenix feather," Harry said. "And the phoenix whose tail feather is in this wand, only ever gave one other, which Mr... what was his name, Olive-something... made into the core of the Dark Lord's wand. And I'm a Parselmouth. It seemed like a lot of coincidence even then. And now I find out there's a prophecy stating that I'll be the Dark Lord's equal."

Severus's eyes were thoughtful; the Headmaster's gaze, unreadable.

"Could it be," Minerva said falteringly, "that You-Know-Who – that Voldemort – transferred some of his own powers to Mr. Potter, the night he gave him that scar? Not something he intended to do, surely. Still... I don't see how Mr. Potter could be his equal, if he had any less magic than the Dark Lord himself..."

"Meh," said Harry, still looking meditatively at his wand. "I'd fight the Dark Lord without any magic at all, if I had to. Homo sapiens didn't become the dominant species on this planet by having the sharpest claws or hardest armor – though I suppose some of that point may be lost on wizards. Still, it's beneath my dignity as a human being to be scared of anything that isn't smarter than I am; and from what I've heard, on that particular dimension the Dark Lord wasn't very scary."

The Potions Master spoke, his voice taking on some of his customary contemptuous drawl. "You imagine yourself more intelligent than the Dark Lord, Potter?"

"Yes, in fact," said Harry, pulling back the left sleeve of his robes, and rolling up the shirtsleeve beneath to expose the bare elbow. "Oh, that reminds me! Let's make sure nobody here has the clearly visible tattoo in the standard, easily checkable location which would mark them as a secret enemy spy."

Albus made a quieting gesture that halted the Potions Master before he could say anything scathing. "Tell me, Harry," Albus said, "how would you have crafted the Dark Mark?"

"Nonstandard locations," Harry said promptly, "not easily found without embarrassment and fuss, though of course any security-conscious person would check anyway. Make it smaller, if possible. Overlay another non-magical tattoo to obscure the exact shape – better yet, cover it with a layer of fake skin –"

"Cunning indeed," Albus said. "But tell me, suppose you could craft any conditions you wished into the Mark, fading it or raising it as you wished. What would you do then?"

"Make it completely invisible at all times," Harry said in tones of stating the obvious. "You don't want there to be any detectable difference between a spy and a non-spy."

"Suppose you are more cunning still," Albus said. "You are a master of trickery, a master of deception, and you employ your abilities to the fullest."

"Well –" The boy stopped, frowning. "It seems unnecessarily complicated, more like a tactic a villain would use in a role-playing game than something you'd try in a real-life war. But I suppose you could put fake Dark Marks on people who aren't really Death Eaters, and keep the Dark Marks on the real Death Eaters invisible. But then there's the question of why people would start believing in the first place that the Dark Mark identified a Death Eater... I'd have to think about it for at least five minutes, if I were going to take the problem seriously."

"I ask you this," Albus said, still in that mild tone, "because I did indeed, in the early days of the war, perform such tests as you suggested. The Order survived my folly only because Alastor did not trust in the bare arms we saw. I had thought, afterward, that the bearers of the Mark might hide it or show it at their will. And yet when we hied Igor Karkaroff before the Wizengamot, that Mark showed clear on his arm, for all that Karkaroff wished to protest his innocence. What true rule may govern the Dark Mark, I do not know. Even Severus is still bound by his Mark not to reveal its secrets to any who do not know them."

"Oh, well that makes it obvious," Harry said promptly. "Wait, hold on – you were a Death Eater?" Harry transferred his stare to Severus.

Severus returned a thin smile. "I still am, so far as they know."

"Harry," said Albus, eyes only for the boy. "What do you mean, that makes

it obvious?”

“Information theory 101,” the boy said in a lecturing tone. “Observing variable X conveys information about variable Y , if and only if the possible values of X have different probabilities given different states of Y . The instant you hear about anything whatsoever that varies between a spy and a nonspy, you should immediately think of exploiting it to distinguish spies from non-spies. Similarly, to distinguish reality from lies, you need a process which behaves differently in the presence of truth and falsehood – that’s why ‘faith’ doesn’t work as a discriminant, while ‘make experimental predictions and test them’ does. You say someone with the Dark Mark can’t reveal its secrets to anyone who doesn’t already know them. So to find out how the Dark Mark operates, write down every way you can imagine the Dark Mark might work, then watch Professor Snape try to tell each of those things to a confederate – maybe one who doesn’t know what the experiment is about – I’ll explain binary search later so that you can play Twenty Questions to narrow things down – and whatever he can’t say out loud is true. His silence would be something that behaves differently in the presence of true statements about the Mark, versus false statements, you see.”

Minerva’s mouth was hanging open, she realized; and she closed it abruptly. Even Albus looked surprised.

“And after that, like I said, any behavioral difference between spies and nonspies can be used to identify spies. Once you’ve identified at least one magically censored secret of the Dark Mark, you can test someone for the Dark Mark by seeing if they can reveal that secret to somebody who doesn’t already know it –”

“Thank you, Mr. Potter.”

Everyone looked at Severus. The Potions Master was straightening, his teeth bared in a grimace of angry triumph. “Headmaster, I can now speak freely of the Mark. If we know we are caught for a Death Eater, before others who have not yet seen our bare arms, our Mark reveals itself whether we will it or no. But if they have already seen our arms bare, it does not reveal itself; nor if we are only being tested from suspicion. Thus the Dark Mark seems to identify Death Eaters – but only those already found, you perceive.”

“Ah...” Albus said. “Thank you, Severus.” He closed his eyes briefly. “That would indeed explain why Black escaped even Peter’s notice... ah, well. And Harry’s proposed test?”

The Potions Master shook his head. “The Dark Lord was no fool, despite

Potter's delusions. The moment such a test is suspected, the Mark ceases to bind our tongues. Yet I could not hint at the possibility, but only wait for another to deduce it." Another thin smile. "I would award you a good many House points, Mr. Potter, if it would not compromise my cover. But as you can see, the Dark Lord was quite cunning." His gaze grew more distant. "Oh," Severus breathed, "he was very cunning indeed..."

Harry Potter sat still for a long moment.

Then –

"No," Harry said. The boy shook his head. "No, that can't actually be true. First of all, we're talking about the kind of logic puzzle that would appear in chapter one of a Raymond Smullyan book, nowhere near the level of what Muggle scientists do for a living. And second, for all I know, it took the Dark Lord five months of thinking to invent the puzzle I just solved in five seconds –"

"Is it that inconceivable to you, Potter, that anyone could be so intelligent as yourself?" The Potions Master's voice held more curiosity than scorn.

"It's called a base rate, Professor Snape. The evidence is equally compatible with the Dark Lord inventing that puzzle over the course of five months or over the course of five seconds, but in any given population there'll be many more people who can do it in five months than in five seconds..." Harry pasted a hand against his forehead. "Darn it, how can I explain this? I suppose, from your perspective, the Dark Lord came up with a clever puzzle and I cleverly solved it and that makes us look equal."

"I remember your first day of Potions class," the Potions Master said dryly. "I think you have a ways still to go."

"Peace, Severus," Albus said. "Harry has already accomplished more than you know. Yet tell me, Harry – why do you believe the Dark Lord is less than you? Surely he is a damaged soul in many ways. But cunning for cunning – you are not yet ready to face him, I would judge; and I know the full tally of your deeds."



The frustrating thing about this conversation was that Harry couldn't say his actual reasons for disagreeing, which violated several basic principles of cooperative discourse.

He couldn't explain how Bellatrix had really been removed from Azkaban – not by You-Know-Who in any guise, but by the combined wits of Harry and Professor Quirrell.

Harry didn't want to say in front of Professor McGonagall that the existence of brain damage implied that there were no such things as souls. Which made a successful immortality ritual... well, not impossible, Harry certainly intended to forge a road to magical immortality someday, but it would be a lot harder and require much more ingenuity than just binding an already-existent soul to a lich's phylactery. Which no intelligent wizard would bother doing in the first place, if they knew their souls were immortal.

And the true and honest reason Harry knew the Dark Lord couldn't have been that smart... well... there wasn't any tactful way to say it, but...

Harry had been to a convocation of the Wizengamot. He'd seen the laughable 'security precautions', if you could call them that, guarding the deepest levels of the Ministry of Magic. They didn't even have the Thief's Downfall which goblins used to wash away Polyjuice and Imperius Curses on people entering Gringotts. The obvious takeover route would be to Imperius the Minister of Magic and a few department heads, and owl a hand grenade to anyone too powerful to Imperius. Or owl them knockout gas, if you needed them alive and in a state of Living Death to take hairs for Polyjuice potions. Legilimency, False Memories, the Confundus Charm – it was ridiculous, the magical world was supersaturated with ways to cheat. Harry might not do any of those things himself, during his own takeover of Britain, since he was constrained by Ethics... well, Harry might do some of the lesser ones, since Polyjuice or a temporary Confundus or read-only Legilimency all sounded better than an extra day of Azkaban... but...

If Harry hadn't been constrained by Ethics, it was possible he could've wiped out the eviller sections of the Wizengamot that day; all by himself, using only a first-year's magical power, on account of being clever enough to figure out Dementors. Though Harry might not have been in such a great political position after that, the surviving Wizengamot members might've found it easy and cheap to disavow his actions for P.R. purposes and condemn him, even if the smarter ones realized it was for the greater good... but still.

If you were completely unrestrained by ethics, armed with the ancient secrets of Salazar Slytherin, had dozens of powerful followers including Lucius Malfoy, and it took you more than ten years to fail to overthrow the government of magical Britain, it meant you were stupid.

“How can I put this...” Harry said. “Look, Headmaster, you’ve got ethics, there’s a lot of battle tactics you don’t use because you’re not evil. And you fought the Dark Lord, a tremendously powerful wizard who wasn’t so restrained, and you held him off anyway. If You-Know-Who had been super-smart on top of that, you’d be dead. All of you. You’d have died instantly –”

“Harry,” Professor McGonagall said. Her voice was faltering. “Harry, we almost did all die. More than half the Order of the Phoenix died. If not for Albus – Albus Dumbledore, the greatest wizard in two centuries, Harry – we surely would have perished.”

Harry passed a hand across his forehead. “I’m sorry,” Harry said. “I’m not trying to minimize what you went through. I know that You-Know-Who was a completely evil, incredibly powerful Dark Wizard with dozens of powerful followers, and that’s... bad, yes, definitely bad. It’s just...” All that isn’t on remotely the same threat scale as the enemy being smart, in which case they Transfigure botulinum toxin and sneak a millionth of a gram into your teacup. Was there any safe way to convey that concept without citing specifics? Harry couldn’t think of one.

“Please, Harry,” said Professor McGonagall. “Please, Harry, I beg you – take the Dark Lord seriously! He is more dangerous than –” The senior witch seemed to be having trouble finding words. “He is far more dangerous than Transfiguration.”

Harry’s eyebrows went up before he could stop himself. A dark chuckle came from Severus Snape’s direction.

Um, said the voice of Ravenclaw within him. Um, honestly Professor McGonagall is right, we’re not taking this as seriously as we’d take a scientific problem. The difficult thing is to react at all to new information, instead of just flushing it out the window. Right now it looks like we didn’t shift belief at all after encountering an unexpected, important argument. Our dismissal of Lord Voldemort as a serious threat was originally based on the Dark Mark being blatantly stupid. It would require a focused effort to de-update and suspect the whole garden-path of reasoning we went down based on that false assumption, and we’re not putting in that effort right now.

“All right,” Harry said, just as Professor McGonagall seemed to be about to speak again. “All right, to take this seriously, I need to stop and think for five minutes.”

“Please do,” said Albus Dumbledore.

Harry closed his eyes.

His Ravenclaw side divided into three.

Probability estimate, said Ravenclaw One, who was acting as moderator. That the Dark Lord is alive, and as smart as we are, and hence a genuine threat.

Why aren't all his enemies already dead? said Ravenclaw Two, who was prosecuting.

Note, said Ravenclaw One, we had already thought of that argument so we can't use it to shift belief again each time we rehearse it.

But what's the actual flaw in the logic? said Ravenclaw Two. In worlds with a smart Lord Voldemort, everyone in the Order of the Phoenix died in the first five minutes of the war. The world doesn't look like that, so we don't live in that world. QED.

Is that really certain? asked Ravenclaw Three, who'd been appointed as the defender. Maybe there was some reason Lord Voldemort wasn't fighting all-out back then –

Like what? demanded Ravenclaw Two. Furthermore, whatever your excuse, I demand that the probability of your hypothesis be penalized in accordance with its added complexity –

Let Three talk, said Ravenclaw One.

Okay... look, said Ravenclaw Three. First of all, we don't know that anyone can take over the Ministry just with mind control. Maybe magical Britain is really an oligarchy and you need enough military power to intimidate the family heads into submission –

Imperius them too, interjected Ravenclaw Two.

– and the oligarchs have Thief's Downfall in the entrances to their homes –

Complexity penalty! cried Ravenclaw Two. More epicycles!

– oh, be reasonable, said Ravenclaw Three. We haven't actually seen anyone taking over the Ministry with a couple of well-placed Imperius curses. We don't know that it can actually be done that easily.

But, said Ravenclaw Two, even taking that into account... it really seems like there should've been some other way. Ten years of failure, really? Using only conventional terrorist tactics? That's just... not even trying.

Maybe Lord Voldemort did have more creative ideas, replied Ravenclaw Three, but he didn't want to tip his hand to other countries' governments, didn't want them to know how vulnerable they were and install Thief's

Downfall in their Ministries. Not until he had Britain as a base and enough servants to subvert all the other major governments simultaneously.

You're assuming he wants to conquer the whole world, noted Ravenclaw Two.

Trelawney prophesized that he would be our equal, intoned Ravenclaw Three solemnly. Therefore, he wanted to take over the world.

And if he is your equal, and you do have to fight him –

For an instant, Harry's mind tried to imagine the specter of two creative wizards fighting an all-out-war against each other.

Harry had noted all the Charms and Potions in his first-year books that could be creatively used to kill people. He hadn't been able to help himself. Literally. He'd tried to stop his brain from doing it each time, but it was like looking at a fish and trying to stop your brain from noticing it was a fish. What someone could creatively do with seventh-year, or Auror-level, or ancient lost magic such as Lord Voldemort had possessed... didn't bear thinking about. A magically-superpowered creative-genius psychopath wasn't a 'threat', it was an extinction event.

Then Harry shook his head, dismissing the gloomy line his reasoning had been going down. The question was whether there was a significant probability of facing anything so terrible as a Dark Rationalist in the first place.

Prior odds that someone attempting an immortality ritual would actually have it work...

Call it one to a thousand, at a generous overestimate; it was not the case that roughly one wizard in a thousand survived their death. Though, admittedly Harry didn't have data on how many had attempted immortality rituals first.

What if the Dark Lord is as smart as us? said Ravenclaw Three. You know, the way Trelawney prophesied him being our equal. Then he would make his immortality ritual work. P.S., don't forget that 'destroy all but a remnant of the other' line.

Requiring that level of intelligence was an additional burdensome detail; prior odds of a random population member being that intelligent were low...

But Lord Voldemort wasn't a randomly selected wizard, he was one particular wizard in the population who'd come to everyone's attention. The puzzle of the Mark implied a certain minimum level of intelligence, even if (hypothetically) the Dark Lord had taken longer to think it through. Then

again, in the Muggle world, all of the extremely intelligent people Harry knew about from history had not become evil dictators or terrorists. The closest thing to that in the Muggle world was hedge-fund managers, and none of them had tried to take over so much as a third-world country, a point which put upper bounds on both their possible evil and possible goodness.

There were hypotheses where the Dark Lord was smart and the Order of the Phoenix didn't just instantly die, but those hypotheses were more complicated and ought to get complexity penalties. After the complexity penalties of the further excuses were factored in, there would be a large likelihood ratio from the hypotheses 'The Dark Lord is smart' versus 'The Dark Lord was stupid' to the observation, 'The Dark Lord did not instantly win the war'. That was probably worth a 10:1 likelihood ratio in favor of the Dark Lord being stupid... but maybe not 100:1. You couldn't actually say that 'The Dark Lord instantly wins' had a probability of more than 99 percent, assuming the Dark Lord started out smart; the sum over all possible excuses would be more than .01.

And then there was the Prophecy... which might or might not have originally included a line about how Lord Voldemort would immediately die if he confronted the Potters. Which Albus Dumbledore had then edited in Professor McGonagall's memory, in order to lure Lord Voldemort to his doom. If there was no such line, the Prophecy did sound somewhat more like You-Know-Who and the Boy-Who-Lived were destined to have some later confrontation. But in that case, it was less likely that Dumbledore would've come up with a plausible-sounding excuse not to take Harry to the Hall of Prophecy...

Harry was wondering if he could even get a Bayesian calculation out of this. Of course, the point of a subjective Bayesian calculation wasn't that, after you made up a bunch of numbers, multiplying them out would give you an exactly right answer. The real point was that the process of making up numbers would force you to tally all the relevant facts and weigh all the relative probabilities. Like realizing, as soon as you actually thought about the probability of the Dark Mark not-fading if You-Know-Who was dead, that the probability wasn't low enough for the observation to count as strong evidence. One version of the process was to tally hypotheses and list out evidence, make up all the numbers, do the calculation, and then throw out the final answer and go with your brain's gut feeling after you'd forced it to really weigh everything. The trouble was that the items of evidence weren't

conditionally independent, and there were multiple interacting background facts of interest...

...well, one thing at least was certain.

If the calculation could be done at all, it was going to take a piece of paper and a pencil.

In the fireplace at one side of the Headmaster's office, the flames suddenly flared up, turning from orange to bright billious green.

"Ah!" said Professor McGonagall into the uncomfortable non-silence. "That would be Mad-Eye Moody, I suppose."

"Let this matter bide for now," the Headmaster said in some relief, as he too turned to regard the Floo. "I believe we are about to receive some news regarding it, as well."



Hypothesis: Hermione Granger

(April 8th, 1992, 6:53 PM)



Meanwhile in the Great Hall of Hogwarts, as the students who didn't have secret meetings with the Headmaster bustled about their dinner around four huge tables –

"It's funny," Dean Thomas said thoughtfully. "I didn't believe the General when he said that what we learned would change us forever, and we'd never be able to return to a normal life afterward. Once we knew. Once we saw what he could see."

"I know!" said Seamus Finnigan. "I thought it was just a joke too! Like, you know, everything else General Chaos ever said ever."

"But now –" Dean said sadly. "We can't go back, can we? It'd be like going back to a Muggle school after having been to Hogwarts. We've just... we've just got to stay around each other. That's all we can do, or we'll go crazy."

Seamus Finnigan, next to him, just nodded wordlessly and ate another bite of veldbeest.

Around them, the conversation at the Gryffindor table continued. It wasn't as relentless as it'd been yesterday, but now and then the topic wandered back.

"Well, there must've been some sort of love triangle," said a second-year witch named Samantha Crowley (she never answered when asked if there

was any relation). “The question is, which ways was it going before it all went wrong? Who was in love with who – and whether or not that person loved them back – I don’t know how many possibilities there are –”

“Sixty-four,” said Sarah Varyabil, a blossoming beauty who probably should’ve been Sorted into Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff instead. “No, wait, that’s wrong. I mean, if nobody loved Malfoy and Malfoy didn’t love anyone then he wouldn’t really be part of the love triangle... this is going to take Arithmancy, could you all wait two minutes?”

“I, for one, think it perfectly clear that Granger is Potter’s moirail, and that Potter was auspisticing between Malfoy and Granger.” The witch who’d spoken nodded with the self-satisfaction of someone who has just precisely nailed down a complicated issue.

“Those aren’t even words,” objected a young wizard. “You’re just making them up as you go.”

“Sometimes you can’t describe a thing using real words.”

“It’s so sad,” said Sherice Ngaserin, who actually had tears in her eyes. “They were just – they were just so obviously meant to be together!”

“You mean Potter and Malfoy?” said a second-year named Colleen Johnson. “I know – their families hated each other so much, there’s no way they couldn’t fall in love –”

“No, I mean all three of them,” said Sherice.

This produced a brief pause in the huddled conversation. Dean Thomas was quietly choking on his lemonade, trying not to make any sounds as it trickled out of his mouth and soaked into his shirt.

“Wow,” said a dark-haired witch by the name of Nancy Hua. “That’s really... sophisticated of you, Sherice.”

“Look, you all, we need to keep this realistic,” said Eloise Rosen, a tall witch who’d been General of an army and hence spoke with an air of authority. “We know – because she kissed him – that Granger was in love with Potter. So the only reason she’d try to kill Malfoy is if she knew that she was losing Potter to him. There’s no need to make it all sound so complicated – you’re all acting like this is a play instead of real life!”

“But even if Granger was in love, it’s still funny that she’d just snap like that,” said Chloe, whose black robes combined with her night-black skin to make her look like a darkened silhouette. “I don’t know... I think maybe there’s more to this than just a romance novel gone wrong. I think maybe most people haven’t got any idea at all what’s going on.”

“Yes! Thank you!” burst out Dean Thomas. “Look – don’t you realize – like Harry Potter told us all – if you didn’t predict that something would happen, if it took you completely by surprise, then what you believed about the world when you didn’t see it coming, isn’t enough to explain...” Dean’s voice trailed off, as he saw that nobody was listening. “It’s completely hopeless, isn’t it?”

“You hadn’t figured that out yet?” said Lavender Brown, who was sitting across the table from her two fellow former Chaotics. “How’d you ever make Lieutenant?”

“Oh, you two be quiet!” Sherice snapped at them. “It’s obvious you both want the three of them for yourselves!”

“I mean it!” Chloe said. “What if what’s really going on is different from all the, you know, normal things that all the ordinary people are talking about? What if somebody – made Granger do what she did, just like Potter was trying to tell everyone?”

“I think Chloe’s right,” said a foreign-looking boy wizard who always introduced himself as ‘Adrian Turnipseed’, though his parents had actually named him Mad Drongo. “I think this whole time there’s been...” Adrian lowered his voice ominously, “...a hidden hand...” Adrian raised his voice again, “shaping all that’s happened. One person who’s been behind everything, from the beginning. And I don’t mean Professor Snape, either.”

“You don’t mean –” gasped Sarah.

“Yes,” Adrian said. “The real one behind it all is – Tracey Davis!”

“That’s what I think too,” Chloe said. “After all –” She glanced around rapidly. “Ever since that thing with the bullies and the ceiling – even the trees in the forests around Hogwarts look like they’re shaking, like they’re afraid –”

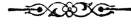
Seamus Finnigan was frowning thoughtfully. “I think I see where Harry gets his... you know... from,” Seamus said, lowering his voice so that only Lavender and Dean could hear.

“Oh, I totally know what you mean,” Lavender said. She didn’t bother to lower her own voice. “It’s a wonder he didn’t crack and just start killing everyone ages ago.”

“Personally,” Dean said, also in a quieter voice, “I’d say the really scary part is – that could’ve been us.”

“Yeah,” said Lavender. “It’s a good thing we’re all perfectly sane now.”

Dean and Seamus nodded solemnly.



Hypothesis: G. L.
(April 8th, 1992, 8:08 PM)



The Floo-Fire of the Headmaster's office blazed a bright pale-green, the fire concentrating in on itself into a spinning emeraldine whirlwind, and then flared even brighter and spit a human figure into the air –

There was a blur of motion as the resolving figure snapped up a wand, smoothly spinning with the Floo's momentum like a ballet dance step, so that his firing arc covered the entire 360-degree arc of the room; and then just as abruptly, the figure stopped in place.

In the first instant that Harry saw that man, before Harry even took in the eye, he noticed the scars on the hands, the scars on the face, like the man had been burned and cut over his entire body; though only the man's hands and face were visible, of all his flesh. The rest of the man's body was hidden, encased not in robes, but in leather that looked more like armor than clothing; dark gray leather, matching the man's mess of grayed hair.

The next thing that Harry's vision comprehended was the brilliant blue eye occupying the right side of the man's face.

One part of Harry's mind realized that the person whom Professor McGonagall had named 'Mad-Eye Moody' was the same as the one Dumbledore had called 'Alastor', within the memory Dumbledore had shown Harry; an image from before whatever event had scarred every inch of the man's body and taken a chunk out of his nose –

And another part of his mind noticed the jolt of adrenaline. Harry had drawn his wand in sheer reflex when the man had spun out of the Floo like that, there'd been something about it that felt like ambush, Harry's hand had already started to level his wand for a Somnium before he'd managed to stop himself. Even now the armored man was holding his wand level, not pointed at any particular person but covering the whole room, and that wand was already in perfect line with his eyes, like a soldier sighting down a gun. There was danger in the man's stance and the set of his boots, danger in the leather armor he wore and danger in that brilliant blue eye.

When the scarred man spoke, addressing the Headmaster, his voice was edged. "I suppose you think this room is secure?"

"There are only friends here," Dumbledore said.

The man's head jerked toward Harry. "That include him?"

"If Harry Potter is not our friend," Dumbledore said gravely, "then we are all certainly doomed; so we may as well assume that he is."

The man's wand stayed level, not quite pointing at Harry. "Boy almost drew on me just then."

"Er..." Harry said. He noticed that his hand was still tightly holding the wand, and consciously relaxed his hand and dropped it back to his side. "Sorry about that, you looked a bit... combat-ready."

The scarred man's wand moved slightly away from where it had almost pointed at Harry, though it didn't lower, and the man let out a short bark of laughter. "Constant vigilance, eh, lad?" said the man.

"It's not paranoia if they really are out to get you," Harry recited the proverb.

The man turned fully toward Harry; and insofar as Harry could read any expression on the scarred face, the man now looked interested.

Dumbledore's eyes had regained some of the brilliant twinkle that they'd had before the Azkaban breakout, a smile beneath his silver mustache as though that smile had never left. "Harry, this is Alastor Moody, called also Mad-Eye, who will command the Order of the Phoenix after me – if anything should happen to me, that is. Alastor, this is Harry Potter. I have every hope the two of you shall get along fantastically."

"I've heard a good deal about you, boy," said Mad-Eye Moody. His one dark natural eye stayed fixed on Harry, while the point of brilliant blue spun frantically, seeming to rotate all the way around within its socket. "Not all of it good. Heard they're calling you the Dementor Spooker, in the Department."

After some consideration, Harry decided to reply with a knowing smile.

"How'd you pull off that one, boy?" the man said softly. Now his blue eye was fixed on Harry as well. "I had a little chat with one of the Aurors who escorted the Dementor there from Azkaban. Beth Martin said it came straight from the pit, and no-one gave it any special instructions along the way. Of course, she could be lying."

"There wasn't any sneaky trick to that one," Harry said. "I just did it the hard way. Of course, I could also be lying."

Dumbledore was leaning back in his chair, chuckling in the background, like he was just another device in the Headmaster's Office and that was the sound he made.

The scarred man turned back to face the Headmaster, though his wand stayed pointed low and in Harry's general direction. When he spoke his voice was gruff and businesslike. "I have a lead on a recent host of Voldie's. You're certain his shade is in Hogwarts now?"

"Not certain –" Dumbledore began.

"Say what?" Harry interrupted. After having nearly concluded that the Dark Lord didn't exist, it was a shock to hear it being discussed that matter-of-factly.

"Voldie's host," Moody said shortly. "The one he possessed before he took over Granger."

"If the tales speak true," Dumbledore said, "there is some device of power which binds Voldemort's shade to this world; and by that means he may bargain with a host for possession of their body, conferring on them some portion of his power and his pride –"

"So the obvious question is who's gained too much power too quickly," Moody said abruptly. "And it turns out that there's a fellow who's gone and banished the Bandon Banshee, staked an entire rogue vampire clan in Asia, tracked down the Wagga-Wagga Werewolf, and exterminated a pack of ghouls using a tea-strainer. And he's milking it for all it's worth; there's been talk of the Order of Merlin. Seems to have turned into a charmer and a politician, not just a powerful wizard."

"Dear me," murmured Dumbledore. "Are you certain that he is not relying on his own skills?"

"Checked his grades," Moody said. "Record shows Gilderoy Lockhart received a Troll in his Defense O.W.L.S., didn't bother with the N.E.W.T. Just the sort of sucker to take the deal Voldie was offering." The blue eye whirled crazily within its socket. "Unless you remember Lockhart as a student, and think he had enough potential to do all that by himself?"

"No," said Professor McGonagall. She frowned. "Not a chance, I should say."

"I fear I must agree," Dumbledore said with an undertone of pain. "Ah, Gilderoy, you poor fool..."

Moody's grin was more like a snarl. "Three in the morning work for you, Albus? Lockhart should be at his home tonight."

Harry listened to this with increasing alarm, wondering if even the Ministry had any rules about magistrates needing to issue warrants – never mind

the illegal vigilante organization Harry now seemed to have joined. "Excuse me," Harry said. "What exactly happens at three in the morning?"

There must have been something in Harry's voice that gave him away, because the scarred man whirled on him. "You have a problem with that, boy?"

Harry paused, trying to figure out how to phrase this to the stranger –

"You want to take him down yourself?" pressed the scarred man. "Get revenge for your parents, eh?"

"No," Harry said as politely he could. "Honestly – look, if we knew for certain he was a willing host for You-Know-Who, that's one thing, but if we're not sure and you're heading off to kill him –"

"Kill?" Mad-Eye Moody snorted. "It's what's locked up in his head," Moody tapped his forehead, "that we need from him, boy. If we're lucky, Voldie can't wipe the sucker's memories as easy as in his living days, and Lockhart will remember what the horcrux looked like."

Harry mentally noted down the word horcrux for future research, and said, "I'm just worried that someone innocent – what sounds like a pretty decent person, if he did do all that himself – might be about to get hurt."

"Aurors hurt people," the scarred man said shortly. "Bad people, if you're lucky. Some days you won't be lucky, and that's all there is to it. Just remember, Dark Wizards hurt a lot more people than we do."

Harry took a deep breath. "Can you at least try not to hurt this person, in case he's not –"

"What is a first-year doing in this room, Albus?" demanded the scarred man, now whirling to face the Headmaster. "And don't tell me it's for what he did when he was a baby."

"Harry Potter is not an ordinary first-year," the Headmaster said quietly. "He has already accomplished feats impossible enough to shock even me, Alastor. His is the only intellect in the Order which might someday match that of Voldemort himself, as you or I never could."

The scarred man leaned over the Headmaster's desk. "He's a liability. Naive. Doesn't know a bloody thing about what war's like. I want him out of here and all his memories of the Order wiped before one of Voldie's servants plucks them straight out of his mind –"

"I'm an Occlumens, actually."

Mad-Eye Moody directed a narrow look at the Headmaster, who nodded. And then the scarred man turned to face Harry, their gazes meeting.

The sudden fury of the Legilimency attack almost made Harry fall off his chair, as a blade of white-hot steel cut into the imaginary person at the forefront of his mind. Harry hadn't had a chance to practice since Mr. Bester's training, and Harry very nearly lost his grip on the imaginary person the back-of-his-mind was pretending to be, as that person's world turned into searing lava and a furious probe of questions. Harry almost lost his grip on only pretending to hallucinate, only pretending to be the imaginary person that was screaming in shock and pain as the Legilimency tore apart his sanity and reshaped him to believe that he was on fire –

Harry managed to break eye contact, dropping his eyes to Moody's chin.

"You're out of practice, boy," Moody said. Harry wasn't looking at the man's face, but his voice was deadly grim. "And I'll warn you of this but once. Voldie isn't like any other Legilimens in recorded history. He doesn't need to look you in the eyes, and if your shields are that rusty he'd creep in so softly you'd never notice a thing."

"Duly noted," Harry said to the scarred chin. Harry was more shaken than he'd have admitted; Mr. Bester hadn't been anywhere near that powerful, and had never tested Harry like that. Pretending to be someone hurting that much had... Harry couldn't find words for describing what it felt like to contain an imaginary person in that much pain, but it hadn't been normal. "Do I get any credit for being an Occlumens in the first place?"

"So you're think you're all grown up already, eh? Look me in the eyes!"

Harry strengthened his shields, and looked once more into the dark grey eye and the brilliant blue.

"Ever watched someone die?" asked Mad-Eye Moody.

"My parents," Harry said evenly. "I recovered the memory in January when I went in front of a Dementor to learn the Patronus Charm. I remember You-Know-Who's voice –" A chill went through Harry's body, his wand twitching in his hand. "My main tactical report is that You-Know-Who could speak the Killing Curse in less than half a second, but you probably already knew that."

There was a gasp from Professor McGonagall's direction, and Severus's face had tightened.

"All right," Mad-Eye Moody said softly. A strange, thin grin twisted up the lips within the scarred face. "I'll make you the same offer I'd make to any trainee Auror. Land one touch on me, boy – one hit, one spell – and I'll concede your right to talk back to me."

“Alastor!” exclaimed Professor McGonagall’s voice. “Surely that’s an unreasonable test! Mr. Potter, whatever his other merits, does not have a hundred years of fighting experience!”

Harry’s eyes made a lightning dart around the room, passing over the peculiar devices, glancing past Dumbledore and Severus and the Sorting Hat, settling briefly here and there. Harry couldn’t see Professor McGonagall from where he was, but that didn’t matter. There was only one device he’d really wanted to look at, and the point of all the other glances had just been to conceal which one.

“All righty,” Harry said, and hopped off his chair, ignoring Professor McGonagall’s inhalation and the Potions Master’s snort of disbelief. Dumbledore’s eyebrows had lifted, and Moody was grinning like a tiger. “Be sure to wake me up in forty minutes if he does get me.” Harry settled into a duelist’s starting stance, his wand held low. “Let’s go, then –”



Harry opened his eyes, his head feeling like it had been stuffed with cotton wool.

Everyone else was gone from the Headmaster’s office, the Floo-Fire dimmed; only Dumbledore still waited behind the desk.

“Hello, Harry,” the Headmaster said quietly.

“I didn’t even see him move,” Harry marvelled, muscles creaking as he sat up.

“You were standing two paces away from Alastor Moody,” said Dumbledore, “and you took your eye off his wand.”

Harry nodded, as he took the Cloak of Invisibility out of his pouch. “I mean – I was taking the dueling stance so that he’d think I was a standard idiot and underestimate me – but I have to admit, that was impressive.”

“So you planned it all along, Harry?” Dumbledore said.

“Of course,” Harry said. “Note how I’m doing this as soon as I wake up, rather than pausing to think of it.”

Harry drew the hood of the Cloak over his head, and glanced back up at the wall clock he’d surreptitiously glanced at earlier.

It had then shown around twenty-three minutes after eight, and now it was five minutes after nine.



Minerva stared as the boy put himself into the dueling stance, his wand held low. For a second Minerva wondered if Harry might possibly – no, that was completely ridiculous, it was Mad-Eye Moody and that was beyond impossible. Of course that was what she'd thought about his partial Transfiguration, too...

"Let's go, then," Harry said and fell over.

Severus gave a single chuckle. "Mr. Potter has his points, I must confess," the Potions Master said. "Though I would never say it while he was awake, and if you repeat the words I shall deny them, for the boy's ego is quite large enough already. Mr. Potter does have his points, Mad-Eye, but duelling is not among them."

Mad-Eye's own chuckle was lower and grimmer. "Oh, yes," said Mad-Eye. "Only fools duel. Standing like that and waiting for me to attack, what was the boy thinking? Why, I ought to give him a scar, to remember this occasion –"

"Alastor!" barked Albus, just as she cried "Stop!", Severus dashed forward, and Mad-Eye Moody deliberately leveled his wand on Harry Potter's body.

"Stupefy!"

Mad-Eye's body seemed to almost flicker as he spun on his wooden foot like lightning, faster than she'd ever seen anyone move without magic, the red Stunning Hex passing through the suddenly empty air and barely missing Severus to crash into the opposite wall, and by the time her eyes jerked back to Moody there were seventeen radiant orbs in the pattern of a Sagitta Magica, visible for only an instant before they streaked brilliance and struck something that fell to the floor with a thud –



"Hello again, Harry," said Dumbledore.

"I cannot believe that guy's reaction time," Harry said, brushing off his Cloak as he stood up from where he'd been lying invisible on the floor, unseen by his previous self. "I can't believe his movement speed either. I'm going to have to figure out some way to zap him without speaking an incantation that gives it away..."



– and then Mad-Eye ducked hard and fast, his hands hitting flat on the floor. She almost didn't see the two tiny white threads passing through the space he'd been, but her eyes went to the blue spark when the threads impacted on

one of the Headmaster's devices, and by the time she managed to turn her eyes back, Mad-Eye had spun smoothly up to his feet, his wand was dancing unseeably fast and there was another thudding sound –



“Hello again, Harry.”

“Pardon me, Headmaster, but could you let me go down your stairs, and then come back up again, before I make the final jump backward? This is going to take longer than one hour of preparation –”



Minerva gaped at Mad-Eye Moody, who hadn't lowered his wand in the slightest; and Severus had a look on his face that was almost like shock.

“Well, boy?” said Mad-Eye Moody. “What else have you got?”

Harry Potter's head appeared, floating in midair as an invisible hand drew back the hood of his invisibility cloak.

“That eye,” said Harry Potter. There was a strange fierce light in the boy's eyes. “That isn't any ordinary device. It can see right through my invisibility cloak. You dodged my Transfigured taser as soon as I started raising it, even though I didn't speak any incantations. And now that I've watched it again – you spotted all my Time-Turned selves the moment you Flooed into this room, didn't you?”

Mad-Eye Moody was smiling, the same teeth-bared grin she'd seen him wear as they'd faced off against Voldemort himself. “Spend a hundred years hunting Dark wizards, and you see everything,” said Moody. “I once arrested a young Japanese who tried a similar trick. He found out the hard way that his shadow replica technique was no match for this eye of mine.”

“You see in all directions,” Harry Potter said, that strange fierce light still in his gaze. “No matter where that eye is pointing, it sees everything around you.”

Moody's tiger-grin grew wider. “There's no more of you in this room, now,” Mad-Eye said. “Think that's because you'll give up after this time, or because you'll win? Any bets, boy?”

“It's my final attempt because I decided to stake my last three hours on one shot,” said Harry Potter. “As for whether I win –”

There was a blur filling the whole air of the Headmaster's office. Mad-Eye Moody leapt to one side with blinding speed and an instant later Harry's head darted backward as he cried "Stuporfy!"

Three shimmers in the air went past Harry's moving head, just as a red bolt erupted from Harry's location, shooting past Moody as he dodged in yet another direction –

If she'd blinked, she would have missed it, the red bolt making an angled turn in midair and slamming into Moody's ear.

Moody fell.

Harry Potter's floating head dropped to the height of a first-year on their hands and knees, then dropped further to the ground, his face showing sudden exhaustion.

Minerva McGonagall said, "What in Merlin's name just –"



"So you went to Flitwick, then," Moody said. The retired Auror was now sitting in a chair, drinking long draughts from a restorative in a bottle he'd taken off his belt.

Harry Potter nodded, now sitting in his own chair instead of perched on an armrest. "I tried the Defense Professor first, but –" The boy grimaced. "He... wasn't available. Well, I'd decided it was worth risking five House points, and if you say a risk is worth it, you can't complain when you have to pay up. Anyway, I figured that if you had an eye that saw things other people couldn't see, then as Isaac Asimov pointed out in *Second Foundation*, the weapon to use is a brilliant light. Read enough science fiction, you know, and you'll read everything at least once. Anyway, I told Professor Flitwick that I needed a Charm that would make a huge number of shapes, bright and flickering and filling the whole office, but invisible, so only your eye could see them. I had no idea what it would even mean to cast an illusion and then make it invisible, but I figured if I didn't mention that out loud, Professor Flitwick would just do it anyway, and he did. Turns out there was no spell like that I could cast myself, but Flitwick Charmed me a one-time device for it – though I had to persuade him that it wasn't cheating, since nothing could possibly be cheating against an Auror who'd lived long enough to retire. And then I still didn't see how I could hit you, when you were moving that fast. So I asked about targeted spells, and that was when Flitwick showed me that

hex I cast at the end, the Swerving Stunner. It's one of Professor Flitwick's own inventions – he's a champion duellist as well as a Charms Master –"

"I know that, son."

"Sorry. Anyway, the Professor says he left the duelling circuit before he got a chance to use that spell, since it only works as a finishing move on an unshielded opponent. The hex gets as close to the target as possible along its original trajectory, and then once it detects that the target is getting more distant again, the hex turns in midair and heads straight for the target. It can only swerve once – but the incantation sounds very close to 'Stupefy' and the hex is the same red color, so if the enemy thinks it's a regular Stunning Hex and tries a normal dodge, that midair retargeting will finish them off. Oh, and the Professor requested that none of us talk about his special move, just in case he does get a chance to use it during competition someday."

"But –" said Professor McGonagall. She glanced at Mad-Eye Moody, who was nodding his approval, and at Severus, who was keeping his face decidedly blank. "Mr. Potter, you just stunned Mad-Eye Moody! The most famous Dark wizard hunter in the history of the Auror Office! That should've been impossible!"

Moody let out a dark chuckle. "What's your answer to that one, kid? I'm curious."

"Well..." Harry said. "First of all, Professor McGonagall, neither of us were fighting seriously."

"Neither of you?"

"Of course," Harry said. "In a serious fight, Mr. Moody would've dropped all my copies immediately without waiting for them to attack. And on my side, if it was actually necessary to take down the most famous Auror in the history of the office, I'd get Headmaster Dumbledore to do it for me. And beyond that... since that wasn't a real fight..." Harry paused. "How can I put this? Wizards are used to duels where people fight back and forth with spells for a while. But if two Muggles with guns stand in a small room and fire bullets at each other... then whoever hits first, wins. And if one of them is deliberately missing his shots, giving the other person one chance after another – like Mr. Moody gave me one chance after another – well, you'd have to be pretty pathetic to lose."

"Oh, not that pathetic," Moody said with a slightly threatening grin.

Harry didn't seem to notice. "You might say that Mr. Moody was testing me to see if I would try to fight him, or try to win. That is, whether I'd carry

out the role of somebody fighting – use standard spells I already knew, even though I didn’t expect the consequences of that action to be victory – or if I’d search through unusual plans until I found something that could win. Like the difference between a student who sits in class because that’s what students do, versus a student who cares enough to ask themselves what it takes to actually learn a piece of material, and practices however necessary – you see, Professor McGonagall? When you look at it that way – realize that Mr. Moody was giving me chances, and that I shouldn’t attack in the first place unless I think I can win – then I don’t come out looking so well, since it actually took me three tries to get him. Plus, like I said, in a real fight Mr. Moody could’ve turned himself invisible, or put up shields –”

“Don’t go relying too much on shields, boy,” Mad-Eye said. The leather-clad Auror took another sip from his restorative flask. “What you learn in your first year at the academy doesn’t stay true forever, not against the strongest Dark Wizards. Every shield ever made, there’s some curse that goes straight through it, if you’re not quick enough to cast the counter. And there’s one curse that goes through everything, and it’s a curse any Death Eater will use.”

Harry Potter nodded gravely. “Right, some spells are impossible to block. I’ll remember that, in case anyone casts the Killing Curse at me. Again.”

“That kind of cleverness gets people killed, boy, and don’t you forget it.”

A sad-sounding sigh from the Boy-Who-Lived. “I know. Sorry.”

“So, son. You had something to say about when Albus and I go after Lockhart?”

Harry opened his mouth, then paused. “I won’t tell you how to run a war,” the Boy-Who-Lived said eventually. “I don’t have any experience at that. All I know is that there are consequences. Please be advised that my own assessment is that Lockhart is probably innocent, so if you can avoid hurting him without too much risk –” The boy shrugged. “I don’t know the cost. Just please, if you can, be careful not to hurt him if he’s innocent.”

“If I can,” said Moody.

“And – you’re aiming to look through his mind for evidence about the Dark Lord, aren’t you? I don’t know what the rules are in magical Britain about admissible evidence – but everyone’s always guilty of breaking some law or another, there’s just too many laws. So if it’s not about the Dark Lord, don’t turn him in to the Ministry, just Obliviate him and go, okay?”

Moody frowned. “Son, nobody gains power that fast without being up

to something.”

“Then leave it for the ordinary Aurors, if and when they find evidence the ordinary way. Please, Mr. Moody. Call it a quirk of my Muggle upbringing, but if it’s not about the war I don’t want us to be the evil police who break into people’s houses in the middle of the night, rummage through their minds and send them off to Azkaban.”

“I don’t see the sense of it, son, but I suppose I could do you the favor.”

“Is there aught else, Alastor?” inquired Albus.

“Yes,” said Moody. “About that Defense Professor of yours –”

Hypothesis: Gilderoy Lockhart: END



Hypothesis: Dumbledore
(April 9th, 1992, 5:32 PM)



As Professor Quirrell slowly raised up his tea, the teacup jerked in midair, sending the dark translucent liquid just barely slopping over the side, so that only three single drops crawled down the side of the teacup. Harry would have missed it, if he hadn’t happened to be watching closely; for Professor Quirrell’s hand was perfectly steady on the cup before and after.

If that small jerky motion advanced to a constant tremor, it would be the end of any non-wandless magic for the Defense Professor. Wandwork had no room for trembling fingers. How much that would actually handicap Professor Quirrell, if at all, Harry couldn’t guess. The Defense Professor was certainly capable of wandless magic, yet still tended to use a wand for larger things – but for him that might only be a convenience...

“Insanity,” said Professor Quirrell, as he carefully sipped from his tea – he was looking at the teacup, not at Harry, which was unusual for him – “can be a signature all its own.”

The Defense Professor’s small office was silent, the sound-warded room quiet in a way the Headmaster’s office never could be. Sometimes the two of them both happened to finish exhaling or inhaling at the same time; and then there was an auditory emptiness that was almost a sound in itself.

“I’ll agree with that in one sense,” Harry said. “If somebody tells me that everyone is staring at them and that their underwear is being dusted with thought-controlling powder, I know they’re psychotic, because that’s the

standard signature of psychosis. But if you tell me that anything confusing points to Albus Dumbledore as a suspect, that seems... overreaching. Just because I can't see a purpose doesn't mean there is no purpose."

"Purposeless?" said Professor Quirrell. "Oh, but the madness of Dumbledore is not that he is purposeless, but that he has too many purposes. The Headmaster might have planned this to make Lucius Malfoy throw away his game for vengeance on you – or it might be a dozen other plots. Who knows what the Headmaster thinks he has reason to do, when he has found reason to do so many strange things already?"

Harry had politely declined tea, even knowing that Professor Quirrell would know what it meant. He'd considered bringing his own can of soda – but had decided against that as well, after realizing how easy it would be for the Defense Professor to teleport in a bit of potion, even if the two of them couldn't touch each other with direct magic.

"I have seen a little now of Dumbledore," Harry said. "Unless everything I have seen is a lie, I find it difficult to believe that he would plot to send any Hogwarts student to Azkaban. Ever."

"Ah," the Defense Professor said softly, the tiny reflection of the teacup gleaming in his pale eyes. "But perhaps that is another signature, Mr. Potter. You have not yet comprehended the perspective of a man like Dumbledore. If he must, in some sufficiently noble cause, sacrifice a student – why, who would he choose, but she who declared herself a heroine?"

That gave Harry some pause. It might just be hindsight bias, but that did seem to concentrate some of that hypotheses's probability mass onto framing Hermione in particular. Similarly, Professor Quirrell had predicted in advance that Dumbledore might target Draco...

But if it's you behind all of this, Professor, you might have shaped your plans to frame the Headmaster, and taken care to cast suspicion on him in advance.

The concept of 'evidence' had something of a different meaning, when you were dealing with someone who had declared themselves to play the game at 'one level higher than you'.

"I see your point, Professor," Harry said evenly, giving no hint of his other thoughts. "So you think it most probable that it was the Headmaster who framed Hermione?"

"Not necessarily, Mr. Potter." Professor Quirrell drained his teacup in one swallow and then set it down, the cup making a sharp rap as it descended.

"There is also Severus Snape – though what he might think to gain from this, I could not guess. Thus he is not my prime suspect either."

"Then who is?" Harry said, somewhat puzzled. Professor Quirrell surely wasn't about to reply 'You-Know-Who' –

"The Aurors have a rule," said Professor Quirrell. "Investigate the victim. Many would-be criminals imagine that if they are the apparent victims of a crime, they shall not be suspected. So many criminals imagine it, indeed, that every senior Auror has seen it a dozen times over."

"You're not seriously trying to convince me that Hermione –"

The Defense Professor was giving Harry one of those slit-eyed looks that meant he was being stupid.

Draco? Draco had been interrogated under Veritaserum – but Lucius might have had enough control to subvert Aurors to... oh.

"You think Lucius Malfoy set up his own son?" Harry said.

"Why not?" Professor Quirrell said softly. "From Mr. Malfoy's recorded testimony, Mr. Potter, I gather that you enjoyed some success in changing Mr. Malfoy's political views. If Lucius Malfoy learned of that earlier... he might have decided that his former heir had become a liability."

"I don't buy it," Harry said flatly.

"You are being wantonly naive, Mr. Potter. The history books are full of family disputes turned murderous, for inconveniences and threats far less than those which Mr. Malfoy posed to his father. I suppose next you will tell me that Lord Malfoy of the Death Eaters is far too gentle to wish his son such harm." A tinge of heavy sarcasm.

"Well, yes, frankly," Harry said. "Love is real, Professor, a phenomenon with observable effects. Brains are real, emotions are real, and love is as much a part of the real world as apples and trees. If you made experimental predictions without taking parental love into account, you'd have a heck of a time explaining why my own parents didn't abandon me at an orphanage after the Incident with the Science Project."

The Defense Professor did not react to this at all.

Harry continued. "From what Draco says, Lucius prioritized him over important Wizengamot votes. That's significant evidence, since there's less expensive ways to fake love, if you just want to fake it. And it's not like the prior probability of a parent loving their child is low. I suppose it's possible that Lucius was just taking on the role of a loving father, and he renounced

that role after he learned Draco was consorting with Muggleborns. But as the saying goes, Professor, one must distinguish possibility from probability.”

“All the better the crime,” the Defense Professor said, still in that soft tone, “if no one would believe it of him.”

“And how would Lucius even Memory-Charm Hermione in the first place, without setting off the wards? He’s not a Professor – oh, right, you think it’s Professor Snape.”

“Wrong,” said the Defense Professor. “Lucius Malfoy would trust no servant with that mission. But suppose some Hogwarts Professor, intelligent enough to cast a well-formed Memory Charm but of no great fighting ability, is visiting Hogsmeade. From a dark alley the black-clad form of Malfoy steps forth – he would go in person, for this – and speaks to her a single word.”

“Imperio.”

“Legilimens, rather,” said Professor Quirrell. “I do not know if the Hogwarts wards would trigger for a returning Professor under the Imperius Curse. And if I do not know, Malfoy probably does not know either. But Malfoy is a perfect Occlumens at least; he might be able to use Legilimency. And for the target... perhaps Aurora Sinistra; none would question the Astronomy Professor moving about at night.”

“Or even more obviously, Professor Sprout,” said Harry. “Since she’s the last person anyone would suspect.”

The Defense Professor hesitated minutely. “Perhaps.”

“Actually,” Harry said then, putting a thoughtful frown on his face, “I don’t suppose you know offhand if any of the current Professors at Hogwarts were around back when Mr. Hagrid got framed in 1943?”

“Dumbledore taught Transfiguration, Kettleburn taught Magical Creatures, and Vector taught Arithmancy,” Professor Quirrell said at once. “And I believe that Bathsheda Babbling, now of Ancient Runes, was then a Ravenclaw prefect. But Mr. Potter, there is no reason to suppose that anyone besides You-Know-Who was involved in that affair.”

Harry shrugged artfully. “Seemed worth asking the question, just to check. Anyway, Professor, I agree it’s possible that some outsider Legilimized a member of Hogwarts staff – and then Obliviated them afterward, there’s no way anyone would forget that part. But I don’t think Lucius Malfoy is a probable candidate for the mastermind. It’s possible but not probable that all of Lucius’s apparent love for Draco was just a sense of duty, and that it all went up in a puff of smoke. It’s possible though not probable that everything

Lucius did in front of the Wizengamot was just an act. People's outsides do not always resemble their insides, like you said. But there's one piece of evidence that doesn't fit at all."

"And that would be?" said the Defense Professor, his eyes half-lidded.

"Lucius tried to reject a hundred thousand Galleons for Hermione's life. I saw how surprised the Wizengamot was, when Lucius said he was refusing it despite the rules of honor. The Wizengamot didn't expect that of him. Why wouldn't he just take the money while acting all indignant and pretending to grit his teeth? He wouldn't actually care that much about throwing Hermione into Azkaban."

There was a pause. "Perhaps the role he was playing ran away with him," said Professor Quirrell. "It does happen, Mr. Potter, in the heat of the moment."

"Perhaps," Harry said. "But it's still one more improbability to be postulated – and by the time you have to add up that many excuses in a theory, it can't be at the top of the list anymore. Anything else in particular you think I ought to think about, within the range of all other possibilities?"

There was a long silence. The Defense Professor's eyes dropped down to look at the empty teacup before them, seeming unusually distant.

"I suppose I can think of one final suspect," the Defense Professor said at last.

Harry nodded.

The Defense Professor didn't seem to notice, but only spoke on. "Has the Headmaster told you anything – even a hint – about Professor Trelawney's prophecy?"

"Huh?" Harry said automatically, converting his own sudden shock into the best dissembling he could manage. It probably was at the wrong level to fool Professor Quirrell but Harry certainly couldn't take time to think before replying – wait, but how on Earth would Professor Quirrell know about that – "Professor Trelawney made a prophecy?"

"You were there to hear its beginning," Professor Quirrell said, frowning. "You called out to the entire school that the prophecy could not be about you, since you were not coming here, you were already here."

HE IS COMING. THE ONE WHO WILL TEAR APART THE VERY –

And that was as far as Professor Trelawney had gotten before Dumbledore had grabbed her and vanished.

"Oh, that prophecy," Harry said. "Sorry! It went clear out of my mind."

Harry thought he'd put too much force into the end statement, and was 80%-expecting Professor Quirrell to say, Aha, now Mr. Potter, what is this mysterious other prophecy you went to such lengths to deny –

"That is foolish," the Defense Professor said sharply, "if indeed you are telling me the truth. Prophecies are not trivial things. I have racked my brain much over the little that I heard, but such a small fragment is simply too little."

"You think the one who's coming is the one who might've framed Hermione?" said Harry. As his mind allocated yet another hypothesis, uncertain predicate referent, he-who-is-coming.

"With no offense meant to Miss Granger," the Defense Professor said with another frown, "her life or death does not seem that important. But someone was to come – one who, in your interpretation, was not already there – and someone so significant, and unknown as a player... who knows what else they may have done?"

Harry nodded, and mentally sighed because he was going to have to redo his Lord-Voldemort odds calculation with yet another piece of evidence in the mix.

Professor Quirrell spoke with eyes half-lidded, looking out like through slits. "More than the question of whom the prophecy spoke – who was meant to hear it? It is said that fates are spoken to those with the power to cause them or avert them. Dumbledore. Myself. You. As a distant fourth, Severus Snape. But of those four, Dumbledore and Snape would often be in Trelawney's presence. You and I are the ones who would not have spent much time around her before that Sunday. I think it quite likely that the prophecy was meant for one of us – before Dumbledore took the prophetic away. Did the Headmaster say nothing more to you?" Professor Quirrell's voice was demanding now. "I thought I heard too much force in that denial, Mr. Potter."

"Honestly, no," Harry said. "It had honestly slipped clear out of my mind."

"Then I am rather put out with him," Professor Quirrell said softly. "In fact, I think that I am angry."

Harry said nothing. He didn't even sweat. It might've been a poor reason for confidence, but on this particular score, Harry did happen to be innocent.

Professor Quirrell nodded once, sharply, as though in acknowledgment. "If there is nothing more to say between us, Mr. Potter, you may go."

"I can think of one other suspect," Harry said. "Someone you didn't put on your list at all. Would you analyze him to me, Professor?"

There was another of those moments of silence that was almost a sound in itself.

"As for that suspect," the Defense Professor said softly, "I think you shall prosecute him on your own, Mr. Potter, without help from me. I have heard such requests before, and experience leads me to refuse. Either I will do too good a job of prosecuting myself, and convince you that I am guilty – or else you will decide that my prosecution was too half-hearted, and that I am guilty. I will remark only this in my defense – that I would have needed a very good reason indeed to jeopardize your fragile alliance with the heir to House Malfoy."



Hypothesis: The Defense Professor

(April 8th, 1992, 8:37 PM)



"...so I fear I must take my leave," Dumbledore was saying gravely. "I promised Quirinus... that is to say, I promised the Defense Professor... that I would not make any attempt to uncover his true identity, in my own person or any other."

"And why'd you make a fool promise like that, then?" snapped Mad-Eye Moody.

"It was an unalterable condition of his employment, or so he said." Dumbledore glanced at Professor McGonagall, a wry smile briefly flitting over his face. "And Minerva made it clear to me that Hogwarts required a competent Defense Professor this year, even if I had to haul Grindelwald out of Nurmengard and prevail on old affections to persuade him to take the position."

"I did not quite phrase it in that fashion –"

"Your expression said it for you, my dear."

And so soon the four of them – Harry, Professor McGonagall, the Potions Master, and Alastor Moody aka 'Mad-Eye' – were ensconced all by themselves in the Headmaster's office.

It was strange how the Headmaster's office seemed... unbalanced... without the Headmaster in it. If you didn't have the ancient wizened master to

make it all seem solemn, you were just four people trying to have a serious meeting while surrounded by bizarre, noisy gadgets. Clearly visible from where Harry had perched himself on his chair's arm was a truncated-conical object, like a cone with its top snipped off, slowly spinning around a pulsating central light which it shaded but did not obscure; and each time the inner light pulsed, the assembly made a vroop-vroop-vroop sound that sounded oddly distant, muffled like it was coming from behind four solid walls, even though the spinning-conical-section thingy was only a meter or two away.

Vroop... vroop... vroop...

And then there were the various still-breathing bodies of Harry Potter he'd stashed in one quiet corner, cleaning up a mess that was his own in more ways than one. (Only one body wasn't inside a copy of the Invisibility Cloak; but then it merely took a small effort of concentration for Harry to perceive his other selves beneath the Cloak of which he was master – an effort which Harry had carefully not put forth earlier, to avoid getting advance temporal information he wanted to determine by his own decision.) The sad thing was that by this point, having his own body visibly lying in a corner didn't seem all that crazy. It was just... Hogwarts.

"All right, then," Moody said, looking rather sour about it. From within his leather armor, the scarred man took out a black folder. "This is a copy of what Amelia's people put together. She almost certainly knows we've got it, but it's all off the books, that clear? Anyway –"

And Moody told them who the Department of Magical Law Enforcement thought 'Quirinus Quirrell' really was. A seemingly ordinary Hogwarts student (though talented enough that he'd been only narrowly beaten out for the Head Boy position) who'd gone vacationing in Albania after his graduation, disappeared, returned after 25 years, and then been caught up in the Wizarding War –

"It was murdering the House of Monroe that made Voldie's name," Moody said. "Until then, he was just another Dark Wizard with delusions of grandeur and Bellatrix Black. But after that –" Moody snorted. "Every fool in the country flocked to serve him. You would've hoped the Wizengamot would turn serious, once they realized Voldie was willing to kill their own sacred selves. And that's just what the bastards did – hope that some other bastard would turn serious. None of the cowards wanted to step in front. It was Monroe, Crouch, Bones, and Longbottom. That was nearly everyone in the Ministry who'd dare say a word that might give Voldie offense."

“That was how your House came to be ennobled, Mr. Potter,” injected the solemn voice of Professor McGonagall. “There is an ancient law that if anyone ends a Most Ancient House, whoever avenges that blood will be made Noble. To be sure, the House of Potter was already older than some lines called Ancient. But yours was titled a Noble House of Britain after the end of the war, in recognition that you had avenged the Most Ancient House of Monroe.”

“Flush of gratitude and all that,” Mad-Eye Moody said sourly. “It didn’t last, but at least James and Lily got a fancy title and a useless medal to take to their graves. But that’s leaving out eight years of complete horror after Monroe disappeared and Regulus Black – he was Monroe’s private source in the Death Eaters, we’re pretty sure – was executed by Voldie. Like a dam breaking and gore flooding out, drowning the whole country. Albus bloody Dumbledore himself had to step into Monroe’s shoes, and that was barely enough for us to survive.”

Harry listened with an odd sense of unreality. Some of it felt right, matched up with observation – especially with the speech Professor Quirrell had made before Christmas – and yet...

This was Professor Quirrell they were talking about.

“So that’s who the Department thinks is your Defense Professor,” Mad-Eye Moody finished up his account. “Now what do you think, son?”

“Well...” Harry said slowly. It is also possible to have a mask behind the mask. “The obvious next thought is that this ‘David Monroe’ person died in the war after all, and this is just someone else pretending to be David Monroe pretending to be Quirinus Quirrell.”

“That’s obvious?” said Professor McGonagall. “Dear Merlin...”

“Really, boy?” said Mad-Eye Moody, his blue eye spinning rapidly. “I’d say that’s a little... paranoid.”

You don’t know Professor Quirrell, Harry did not say. “It’s an easy theory to test,” Harry said out loud. “Just check whether the Defense Professor remembers something about the war that the real David Monroe would’ve known. Though I suppose, if he’s playing the part of David Monroe pretending to be someone else, he has a good excuse to pretend he’s pretending he doesn’t know what you’re talking about –”

“A little paranoid,” said the scarred man, his voice rising. “Not paranoid enough! CONSTANT VIGILANCE! Think about it, lad – what if the real David Monroe never came back from Albania?”

There was a pause.

"I see..." Harry said.

"Of course you do," Professor McGonagall said. "Don't mind me, please. I'll just sit here quietly going mad."

"In this line of work, if you survive, you learn that there's three kinds of Dark Wizards," Moody said grimly; his wand wasn't pointed at anyone, it was angled slightly downward, but it was in his hand. It had never left his hand since the moment he'd entered the room. "There's Dark Wizards that have one name. There's Dark Wizards that have two names. And there's Dark Wizards that change names like you and I change clothes. I saw 'Monroe' go through three Death Eaters like he was snapping twigs. There's not many wizards that good at age forty-five. Dumbledore, maybe, but not many others."

"Perhaps that is true," said the Potions Master from where he was lurking. "But what of it, Mad-Eye? Whatever his identity, Monroe was surely the Dark Lord's enemy. I've heard Death Eaters curse his name even after they thought him dead. They feared him well."

"So far as Defense Professors are concerned," Professor McGonagall said primly, "I shall take it and be grateful."

Moody swung around to glare at her. "Just where the devil was 'Monroe' all those years he was gone, eh? Maybe he thought he could make a name for himself in Britain by opposing Voldie, and vanished away when he found out he was wrong. Then why'd he come back now, hah? What's his new plan?"

"He, ah..." Harry ventured tentatively. "He says he always wanted to be a great Defense Professor because all the best fighting wizards have taught at Hogwarts. And he kind of is being an incredibly good Defense Professor, actually... I mean, if he just wanted to keep up a disguise, he could get away with much sloppier work..."

Professor McGonagall was nodding firmly.

"Naive," Moody said flatly. "I suppose you all haven't wondered if your Defense Professor set up the whole House of Monroe to be wiped out?"

"What?" cried Professor McGonagall.

"Our mystery wizard hears about a missing kid from a Most Ancient House of Britain," Moody said. "Steps into the shoes of 'David Monroe', but stays away from the real Monroe family. But eventually the House is bound to notice something wrong. So this imposter somehow prods Voldie into

wiping them all out – maybe leaked a password they'd given him for their wards – and then he was a Lord of the Wizengamot!"

There seemed to be a fight going on inside Harry's mind between Hufflepuff One, who'd never trusted the Defense Professor in the first place; and Hufflepuff Two, who was far too loyal to Harry's friend, Professor Quirrell, to believe something like that just because Moody said so.

It is kind of obvious, though, observed his Slytherin part. I mean, do you actually believe that under natural circumstances, anyone would end up as the last heir to a Most Ancient House AND Lord Voldemort killed his family AND he has to avenge his martial arts sensei? If anything I'd say he went too far over the top in setting up his new identity as the ideal literary hero. That sort of thing doesn't happen in real life.

This from an orphan who was raised unaware of his heritage, commented Harry's Inner Critic. With a prophecy about him. You know, I don't think we've ever read a story about two equally destined heroes competing to see who's cliched enough to take down the villain –

Yes, replied the central Harry over the distant vroop-ing noise in the background, it's a very sad life we lead and YOU'RE NOT HELPING.

There's only one thing to do at this point, said Ravenclaw. And we all know what it is, so why argue?

But, Harry replied, how do we test experimentally whether or not Professor Quirrell is the original David Monroe? I mean, what sort of observable behaves differently, depending on whether he's the real David Monroe or an impostor?

"What do you want me to do about it, Mad-Eye?" Professor McGonagall was demanding. "I can't –"

"You can," the scarred man said, glaring at her fiercely. "Just fire the bloody Defense Professor."

"You say that every year," said Professor McGonagall.

"Yes, and I'm always right!"

"Constant vigilance or no, Alastor, the students must be taught!"

Moody snorted. "Pfah! I swear the curse gets worse every year, as you lot get more and more reluctant to let them go. Your precious Professor Quirrell would have to be Grindelwald in disguise, to get himself sent off!"

"Is he?" Harry couldn't help asking. "I mean, could he actually be –"

"I check Grindie's cell every two months," Moody said. "He was there in March."

“Could the person in the cell be a ringer?”

“I administer a blood test for his identity, son.”

“Where do you keep the blood you use as a reference?”

“In a safe place.” Something like a smile was stretching the scarred lips. “Have you considered the Auror Office after you graduate?”

“Alastor,” Professor McGonagall said reluctantly. “The Defense Professor does have a... health condition. I suppose you will call it suspicious in itself – but it is by no means certain that it will be any ill-doing on his part which prevents us from renewing his employment.”

“Yes, his little naptimes,” Moody said darkly. “Amelia thinks he stepped into the path of a high-level curse. Sounds to me more like a Dark ritual gone wrong!”

“You’ve no proof of that!” Professor McGonagall said.

“That man might as well be wearing a sign saying ‘Dark Wizard’ in glowing green letters over his head.”

“Ah...” Harry said. It didn’t seem like an especially good time to ask what Mr. Moody thought of the ‘not all sacrificial rituals are evil’ standpoint. “Excuse me, but you said earlier that Professor Quirrell – I mean the old David Monroe – I mean the Monroe from the seventies – anyway, you said that person used the Killing Curse. What does that imply? Does somebody have to be a Dark Wizard to use it?”

Moody shook his head. “I’ve used it myself. All it takes is power and a certain mood.” The grimacing lips were showing teeth. “The first time I cast it was against a wizard named Gerald Grice, and you can ask me what he did after you graduate Hogwarts.”

“But why is it Unforgiveable, then?” Harry said. “I mean, a Cutting Hex can kill someone too. So why’s it any better to use a Reducto instead of Avada Kedav-”

“Shut your mouth!” Moody said sharply. “Someone might take it the wrong way, your saying that incantation. You look too young to cast it, but there’s such a thing as Polyjuice. And to answer your question, boy, there’s two reasons why that spell’s in the blackest book. The first is that the Killing Curse strikes directly at the soul, and it’ll just keep going until it hits one. Straight through shields. Straight through walls. There’s a reason why even Aurors fighting Death Eaters weren’t allowed to use it before the Monroe Act.”

“Ah,” said Harry. “That does seem like an excellent reason to ban –”

"I'm not finished, son. The second reason is that the Killing Curse doesn't just take a powerful bit of magic. You've got to mean it. You've got to want someone dead, and not for the greater good, either. Killing Grice didn't bring back Blair Roche, or Nathan Rehfuss, or David Capito. It wasn't for justice, or to stop him doing it again. I wanted him dead. You understand now, lad? You don't have to be a Dark Wizard to use that spell – but you can't be Albus Dumbledore, either. And if you're arrested for killing with it, there's no possible defense."

"I... see," murmured the Boy-Who-Lived. You can't want the person dead as an instrumental value on the way to some positive future consequence, you can't cast it if you believe it's a necessary evil, you have to actually want them dead for the sake of being dead, as a terminal value in your utility function. "A magically embodied preference for death over life, striking within the plane of pure life force... that does sound like a difficult spell to block."

"Not difficult," Moody snapped. "Impossible."

Harry nodded gravely. "But David Monroe – or whoever – used the Killing Curse against a couple of Death Eaters even before they wiped out his family. Does that mean he already had to hate them? Like, the martial arts story was probably true?"

Moody shook his head slightly. "One of the dark truths of the Killing Curse, son, is that once you've cast it the first time, it doesn't take much hate to do it again."

"It damages the mind?"

Again Moody shook his head. "No. It's the killing that does that. Murder tears the soul – but that's just the same if it's a Cutting Hex. The Killing Curse doesn't crack your soul. It just takes a cracked soul to cast." If there was a sad expression on the scarred face, it could not be read. "But that doesn't tell us much about Monroe. The ones like Dumbledore who'll never be able to cast the Curse all their lives, because they never crack no matter what – they're the rare ones, very rare. It only takes a little cracking."

There was a strange heavy feeling in Harry's chest. He'd wondered what exactly it had meant, that Lily Potter had tried to cast the Killing Curse at Lord Voldemort with her last breath. But surely it was forgivable, it was right and proper for a mother to hate the Dark Wizard who was coming to kill her baby, mocking her for how she couldn't stop him. There was something wrong with you as a parent if you couldn't cast Avada Kedavra, in that situation. And no other spell could've gone past the Dark Lord's shields;

you'd have to at least try to hate the Dark Lord enough to want him dead for the sake of dead, if that was the only way to save your baby.

It only takes a little cracking...

"Enough," said Professor McGonagall. "What would you have us do?"

Moody's smile twisted. "Get rid of the Defense Professor and see if all your troubles mysteriously clear up. Bet you a Galleon they do."

Professor McGonagall looked like she was in pain. "Alastor – but – will you teach the classes, if –"

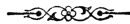
"Ha!" said Moody. "If I ever say yes to that question, check me for Polyjuice, because it's not me."

"I'll test it experimentally," Harry said. And then, as everyone looked at him, "I'll ask Professor Quirrell a question that the real David Monroe would know – like who else was in the Slytherin class of 1945, or something like that – hopefully without making it obvious. It won't be definitive proof, he could've studied the role, but it would be evidence. Still, Mr. Moody, even if Professor Quirrell isn't the original Monroe, I'm not sure that getting rid of him is a free action. He saved my life twice –"

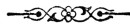
"What?" demanded Moody. "When? How?"

"Once when he knocked down a bunch of witches who were summoning me toward the ground, once when he figured out that the Dementor was draining me through my wand. And if Professor Quirrell wasn't the one who set up Draco Malfoy in the first place, then he saved Draco Malfoy's life, and things would be a lot worse if he hadn't. If the Defense Professor isn't behind it all – he's not someone we can afford to just get rid of."

Professor McGonagall nodded firmly.



Hypothesis: Severus Snape
(April 8th, 1992, 9:03 PM)



Harry and Professor McGonagall now stood on the slowly turning stairs, turning without descending; or at least one Harry stood upon those stairs – his other three selves had been left behind in the Headmaster's office.

"Can I ask you a private question?" Harry said, when he thought they were far enough away not to be heard. "And in particular, private from the Headmaster."

“Yes,” Professor McGonagall said, not quite sighing. “Though I hope you realize that I cannot do anything which conflicts with my duties to –”

“Yes,” Harry said, “that’s exactly what I need to ask you about. In front of the Wizengamot, when Lucius Malfoy was saying that Hermione was no part of House Potter and that he wouldn’t take the money, you told Hermione how to swear that oath. I want to know, if something like that comes up again, if your first duty is to the Hogwarts student Hermione Granger, or to the head of the Order of the Phoenix, Albus Dumbledore.”

Professor McGonagall looked like someone had hit her in the face with a cast-iron frying-pan, a few minutes earlier, and now she’d been told that somebody was about to do it again, and not to flinch.

Harry flinched a little himself. Somewhere along the line he needed to pick up the knack of not phrasing things to hit as hard as he possibly could.

The walls rotated around them, behind them, and somehow, they descended.

“Oh, Mr. Potter,” Professor McGonagall said with a low exhalation. “I... wish you wouldn’t ask me such questions... oh, Harry, I wasn’t thinking then, not at all. I only saw a chance to help Miss Granger and... I was Sorted into Gryffindor, after all.”

“You’ve got a chance to think now,” Harry said. It was all coming out wrong, but he had to say it anyway, because – “I’m not asking you to be loyal to me. But if you do know – if you are sure – what you’ll do if it comes down to an innocent Hogwarts student versus the Order of the Phoenix a second time...”

But Professor McGonagall shook her head. “I’m not sure,” the Transfiguration Professor whispered. “I don’t know if it was the right choice even then. I’m sorry. I can’t decide such awful things!”

“But you’ll do something if it happens again,” Harry said. “Indecision is also a choice. You can’t just imagine having to make an immediate decision?”

“No,” Professor McGonagall said, sounding a little stronger; and Harry realized that he’d accidentally offered a way out. The Professor’s next words confirmed Harry’s fears. “Such a dreadful choice as that, Mr. Potter – I think I should not make it until I must.”

Harry gave an internal sigh. He supposed he had no right to expect Professor McGonagall to say anything else. In a moral dilemma where you lost something either way, making the choice would feel bad either way, so you could temporarily save yourself a little mental pain by refusing to decide.

At the cost of not being able to plan anything in advance, and at the cost of incurring a huge bias toward inaction or waiting until too late... but you couldn't expect a witch to know all that. "All right," Harry said.

Though it wasn't right at all, not really. Dumbledore might want that debt removed, Professor Quirrell would also want Harry out of that debt. And if the Defense Professor was David Monroe, or could convincingly appear to be David Monroe, then Lord Voldemort technically hadn't exterminated the House of Monroe. In which case somebody might be able to pass a Wizengamot resolution revoking the Noble status of House Potter, which had been granted for avenging the Most Ancient House of Monroe.

In which case Hermione's vow of service to a Noble House might be null and void.

Or maybe not. Harry didn't know anything about the legalities, especially not whether House Potter got the money back if someone managed to send Hermione to Azkaban. Just because you lost something might not mean the payment was returned, legally speaking. Harry wasn't sure and he didn't dare ask a magical solicitor...

...it would have been nice to be able to trust at least one adult to take Hermione's side instead of Dumbledore's, if an issue like that threatened to come up.

The stairs they were upon ceased rotating, and they were before the backs of the great stone gargoyles, which rumbled aside, revealing the hallway.

Harry stepped out –

A hand caught at Harry's shoulder.

"Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said in a low voice, "why did you to tell me to keep watch over Professor Snape?"

Harry turned around again.

"You told me to keep watch, and see if he'd changed," Professor McGonagall went on, her tone urgent. "Why did you say that, Mr. Potter?"

It took a moment, at this point, for Harry to think back and remember why he had said that. Harry and Neville had rescued Lesath Lestrange from bullies, and then Harry had confronted Severus in the hallway and, at least according to the Potions Master's own words, 'almost died' –

"I learned something that made me worry," Harry said after a moment. "From someone who made me promise not to tell anyone else." Severus had made Harry swear that their conversations wouldn't be shared with anyone, and Harry was still bound by it.

“Mr. Potter –” began Professor McGonagall, and then exhaled, the flash of sharpness disappearing as quickly as it had come. “Never mind. If you cannot say, you cannot say.”

“Why do you ask?” Harry said.

Professor McGonagall seemed to hesitate –

“All right, let me be more specific,” Harry said. After Professor Quirrell had done it to him several times, Harry was starting to get the hang of it. “What change have you already observed in Professor Snape that you’re trying to decide whether to tell me about?”

“Harry –” the Transfiguration Professor said, and then closed her mouth.

“I obviously know something you don’t,” Harry said helpfully. “See, this is why we can’t always put off trying to decide our awful moral dilemmas.”

Professor McGonagall closed her eyes, drew in a deep breath, pinched the bridge of her nose and squeezed it several times. “All right,” she said. “It’s a subtle thing... but worrying. How can I put this... Mr. Potter, have you read many books that young children are not meant to read?”

“I’ve read all of them.”

“Of course you have. Well... I don’t quite understand it myself, but for so long as Severus has been employed in this school, stalking about in that awful stained cloak, there has been a certain sort of girl that stares at him with longing eyes –”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing?” Harry said. “I mean, if there’s one thing I did understand from those books, it’s that you’re not supposed to question people’s preferences.”

Professor McGonagall gave Harry a very strange look.

“I mean,” Harry said again, “from what I’ve read, when I’m a bit older there’s something like a 10% chance that I’ll find Professor Snape attractive, and the important thing is for me to just accept whatever I –”

“In any case, Mr. Potter, Severus has always been entirely indifferent to the stares of those young girls. But now –” Professor McGonagall seemed to realize something, and hastily said, her hands rising in warding, “Please don’t mistake me, Professor Snape certainly has not taken advantage of any young witches! Absolutely not! He has never even so much as smiled at one, not that I ever heard. He has told the young girls to stop gaping at him. And if they stare at him regardless, he looks away. That I have seen with my own eyes.”

“Er...” Harry said. “Sorry, but just because I’ve read those books doesn’t mean I understood them. What does all that mean?”

“That he is noticing,” Professor McGonagall said in a low voice. “It is a subtle thing, but now that I have seen it, I am certain. And that means... I am very much afraid... that the bond which held Severus to Albus’s cause... may have weakened, or even broken.”

$2 + 2 = \dots$

“Snape and Dumbledore?” Then Harry heard the words that had just come out of his mouth, and hastily added, “Not that there’s anything wrong with that –”

“No!” said Professor McGonagall. “Oh, for pity’s sake – I can’t explain it to you, Mr. Potter!”

The other shoe finally dropped.

He was still in love with my mother?

This seemed somewhere between beautifully sad, and pathetic, for around five seconds before the third shoe dropped.

Of course, that was before I gave him my helpful relationship advice.

“I see,” Harry said carefully after a few moments. There were times when saying ‘Oops’ didn’t fully cover it. “You’re right, that’s not a good sign.”

Professor McGonagall put both hands over her face. “Whatever you’re thinking right now,” she said in a slightly muffled voice, “which I assure you is also wrong, I don’t want to hear about it, ever.”

“So...” Harry said. “If, like you said, the bond that held Professor Snape to the Headmaster has broken... what would he do then?”

There was a long silence.



What would he do then?

Minerva lowered her hands, gazing down at the upturned face of the Boy-Who-Lived. One simple question shouldn’t have caused her so much dismay. She’d known Severus for years; the two of them bound, in some strange way, by the prophecy they’d both heard. Though Minerva suspected, from what she knew of the rules of prophecy, that she had only overheard it herself. It had been Severus’s acts which had brought about the prophecy’s fulfillment. And the guilt, the heartbreak which had come of that choice, had been tormenting the Potions Master for years. She couldn’t imagine who

Severus would be without it. Her mind went blank, trying to imagine; her thoughts an empty parchment.

Surely Severus was no longer the man he'd once been, that angry and terribly foolish young man who'd brought the prophecy before Voldemort in exchange for being admitted into the Death Eaters. She'd known him for years, and surely Severus was no longer that man...

Did she really know him at all?

Had anyone ever seen the real Severus Snape?



"I don't know," Professor McGonagall finally said. "I truly don't know at all. I can't even imagine. Do you know anything of this, Mr. Potter?"

"Er..." Harry said. "I think I can say that my own evidence points in the same direction as yours. I mean, it increases the probability that Professor Snape isn't in love with my mother anymore."

Professor McGonagall closed her eyes. "I give up."

"I don't know of anything wrong he's done apart from that, though," Harry added. "I assume the Headmaster cleared you to ask me about this?"

Professor McGonagall looked away from him, staring at the wall. "Please don't, Harry."

"All right," Harry said, and turned and hurried out into the hallways, hearing Professor McGonagall more slowly walking after, and the rumbling sound of the gargoyles moving into place.



It was the morning after next, during Potions class, that Harry's potion of cold resistance boiled over his cauldron with a green froth and mildly nauseating smell, and Professor Snape, looking more resigned than disgusted, told Harry to stay after class. Harry had his own suspicions about this affair, and as soon as class let out – Hermione, as usual for the last few days, being the first to flee out the door – the door swung shut and locked behind the departing students.

"I apologize for ruining your potion, Mr. Potter," Severus Snape said quietly. There was upon his face the strange sad look that Harry had seen only once before, in a hallway some time ago. "It will not be reflected in your grades. Please, sit down."

Harry sat back down at his desk, filling up the time by scrubbing a bit more at the green stain on the wooden surface, as the Potions Master incanted a few privacy spells.

When the Potions Master was done, he spoke again. "I... do not know how to broach this topic, Mr. Potter, so I will simply say it... before the Dementor, you recovered your memory of the night your parents died?"

Harry silently nodded.

"If... I know it must not be a pleasant memory, but... if you could tell me what happened...?"

"Why?" Harry said. His voice was solemn, definitely not mocking the pleading look that Harry had never expected to see from that person. "I wouldn't think that would be a pleasant thing for you to hear either, Professor –"

The Potions Master's voice was almost a whisper. "I have imagined it every night these last ten years."

You know, said Harry's Slytherin side, it might not be such a good idea to give him closure, if his guilt-based loyalties are already wavering –

Shut up. Overruled.

It wasn't something that Harry could actually bring himself to deny. He took one suggestion from his Slytherin side, and that was it.

"Will you tell me exactly how you came to learn about the Prophecy?" Harry said. "I'm sorry to make this a trade, I will tell you afterward, only, it could be really important –"

"There is little to say. I had come to be interviewed by the Deputy Headmistress for the position of Potions Master, and so I was waiting outside the room of the Hog's Head Inn when the applicant before me, Sybill Trelawney, came to seek the position of Professor of Divination. As soon as Trelawney finished speaking her words, I fled, forsaking my chance at Hogwarts's Mastery, and went to the Dark Lord." The Potions Master's face was drawn and tight. "I did not even pause to consider why that riddle might have come to me, before I sold it to another."

"A job interview?" Harry said. "Where you and Professor Trelawney both happened to be applying, and Professor McGonagall was interviewing? That seems... like rather a large coincidence..."

"Seers are the pawns of time, Mr. Potter. Coincidence is beneath them, and they are above it. I was the one meant to hear that prophecy and become its fool. Minerva's presence made no final difference to how it came about.

There was no Memory Charm as you supposed, I do not know why you thought that, but there was no Memory-Charm, there could have been no Memory-Charm. The voice of a seer has a quality, an enigma which even Legilimency cannot share, how could that be imbued in a false memory? Do you think the Dark Lord would believe my mere words? The Dark Lord seized my mind and saw the mystification there, even if he could not seize the mystery, and so he knew the prophecy had been true. The Dark Lord could have killed me then, having taken what he wanted – I was a fool indeed to go to him – but he saw something in me I do not know, and took me into the Death Eaters, though on his terms rather than mine. That is how I brought it about, brought it all about, from beginning to end, always my own doing.” Severus’s voice had gone rather hoarse, and his face was filled with naked pain. “Now tell me, please, how did Lily die?”

Harry swallowed twice, and began his recounting.

“James Potter shouted for Lily to run away with me, that he would hold off You-Know-Who.”

“You-Know-Who said –” Harry stopped, the chills going all over his own skin, his own muscles tightening as if in preparing for a seizure. The memory was returning strongly, now, accompanied by cold and darkness in association. “He used... the Killing Curse... and then he came upstairs somehow, I think he must have flown, I don’t remember any footsteps on stairs or anything like that... and then my mother said, ‘No, not Harry, please not Harry!’ or something like that. And the Dark Lord – his voice was so high, like water whistling out of a teakettle only cold – the Dark Lord said –”

Stand aside, woman! For you I am not come, only the boy.

The words were very clear in Harry’s memory.

“– he told my mother to get out of his way, that he was only there for me, and my mother begged him to have mercy, and the Dark Lord said –”

I give you this rare chance to flee.

“– that he was being generous and giving her a chance to run, but he wouldn’t bother fighting her, and even if she died, she couldn’t save me –” Harry’s voice was unsteady, “– and so she ought to get out of his way. And that was when my mother begged the Dark Lord to take her life instead of mine – and the Dark Lord – the Dark Lord said to her – and his voice was lower this time, like he was dropping a pose –”

Very well, I accept the bargain.

“– he said that he accepted her offer, and that she should drop her wand

so he could kill her. And then the Dark Lord waited, just waited. I, I don't know what Lily Potter was thinking, it hadn't even made sense in the first place, what she said, it wasn't like the Dark Lord would kill her and then just leave, when he'd come there for me. Lily Potter didn't say anything, and then the Dark Lord started laughing at her and it was horrible and – and she finally tried the only thing left that wasn't abandoning me or just giving up and dying. I don't know if she even could've, if the spell would've worked for her, but when you think about, she had to try. The last thing my mother said was 'Avada Ke-' but the Dark Lord started his own curse as soon as she said 'Av' and he said it in less than half a second and there was a flash of green light and then – and then – and then –"

"That's enough."

Slowly, like a body floating to the surface of water, Harry returned from wherever he'd been.

"That's enough," the Potions Master said hoarsely. "She died... Lily died without pain, then? The Dark Lord... did not do anything to her, before she died?"

She died thinking that she'd failed, and that the Dark Lord was going to kill her baby next. That's pain.

"He – the Dark Lord didn't torture her –" Harry said. "If that's what you're asking."

Behind Harry, the door unlocked itself and swung open.

Harry left.

It was Friday, April 10th, of 1992.

HEDONIC AWARENESS

Thursday, April 16th, 1992.

THE school was almost deserted now, nine-tenths of the students having gone home for the Easter holiday, just about everyone she knew missing. Susan had stayed behind, her grand-aunt being quite busy, as had Ron for reasons she didn't know – maybe the Weasley family was poor enough that feeding all the children for an extra week would've been a noticeable strain? It all worked out well enough, since Ron and Susan were just about the only ones left who'd still talk to her. (At least that she wanted to talk back to. Lavender was still nice to her, and Tracey was, um, Tracey, but neither of them were quite relaxing to spend a free hour around; and in any case, neither of those two had stayed over for the Easter hols.)

If she couldn't go home – and she wasn't allowed to go home, her parents had been lied-to and told she'd had Glowpox – then an almost-empty Hogwarts was the next best thing.

She could even visit the library without people staring at her, since there were no lessons and nobody was trying to do schoolwork.

It would be a mistake to think that Hermione drooped about the corridors weeping all day long. Oh, she'd cried a lot the first two days, of course, but two days had been enough. There were parts of Harry's borrowed books about that, how even people who were paralyzed in car accidents weren't nearly as unhappy as they'd expected to be, six months later, just like lottery winners weren't nearly as happy as they'd expected. People adjusted, their happiness levels went back to their happiness set point, life went on.

A shadow fell over where Hermione was reading her current book and she whirled around, the wand hidden on her lap coming up to point directly at the surprised face of –

"Sorry!" Harry Potter said, hastily holding up his palms to show his left hand empty, and his right hand holding a small red-velvet pouch. "Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you."

There was an awful silence, her heartbeat increasing and her palms starting to sweat as Harry Potter just looked at her. She'd almost talked to him, on

the first morning of the rest of her life; but when she'd come down to breakfast Harry Potter had looked so awful – so she hadn't sat down beside him at the breakfast-table, just quietly eaten in her own little bubble of nobody else sitting next to her, and it had been horrible, but Harry hadn't come to her, and... she just hadn't talked to him, since then. (It wasn't hard to avoid everyone, if you stayed out of the Ravenclaw common room, and ran out of classes before anyone could talk to you.)

And ever since she'd been wondering what Harry thought of her now – if he hated her for having lost all his money – or if he really was in love with her and that's why he'd done it – or if he'd given up on her keeping pace with him because she couldn't frighten Dementors – she couldn't face him now, she just couldn't, she spent sleepless nights worrying what Harry thought of her now, and she was afraid, and she'd been avoiding the boy who'd spent all his money to save her, and she was a horrible ungrateful wretch, and a terrible person and –

Then her eyes glanced down to see that Harry was reaching into the red-velvet pouch and taking out a heart-shaped red-foil-wrapped sweet, and her brain melted down like chocolate left out in the sun.

"I was going to give you more space," said Harry Potter, "only I was reading up on Critch's theories about hedonics and how to train your inner pigeon and how small immediate positive and negative feedbacks secretly control most of what we actually do, and it occurred to me that you might be avoiding me because seeing me made you think of things that felt like negative associations, and I really didn't want to let that run any longer without doing something about it, so I got ahold of a bag of chocolates from the Weasley twins and I'm just going to give you one every time you see me as a positive reinforcement if that's all right with you –"

"Breathe, Harry," Hermione said without thinking about it.

It was the first word she'd spoken to him since the day of the trial.

The two of them stared at each other.

The books stared at them from the surrounding shelves.

They stared some more at each other.

"You're supposed to eat the chocolate," Harry said, holding out the heart-shaped sweet like a Valentine. "Unless just being given a chocolate feels good enough to count as a positive reinforcement, in which case you probably need to put it in your pocket or something."

She knew that if she tried speaking again she'd fail, so she didn't try.

Harry's head slumped a bit. "Do you hate me now?"

"No!" she said. "No, you shouldn't think that, Harry! Just – just – just everything!" She realized that her wand was still pointed at Harry, and she lowered it. She was trying very hard not to burst out into tears. "Everything!" she repeated, and couldn't find any better to say than that, although she was certain that Harry wanted to tell her to be specific.

"I think I understand," Harry said cautiously. "What're you reading?"

Before she could stop him, then, Harry bent over the library-desk to see the book she was reading, leaning his head forward before she could think to grab the book away –

Harry stared at the open page.

"The World's Wealthiest Wizards and How They Got That Way," Harry read off the book's title from the top. "Number sixty-five, Sir Gareth, owner of a transportation company that won the 19th-century shipping wars... monopoly on oh-tee-threes... I see."

"I s'pose you're going to tell me that I don't need to worry about anything and you'll take care of it all?" It came out sounding harsher than she would've wanted, and she felt another stab of guilt for being such a terrible person.

"Nah," Harry said, sounding oddly cheerful. "I can put myself in your shoes well enough to know that if you paid a bunch of money to save me, I'd be trying to pay it back. I'd know it was silly on some level, and I'd still be trying to pay it back all by myself. There's no way I wouldn't understand that, Hermione."

Hermione's face screwed up and she felt moisture in the corners of her eyes.

"Fair warning, though," Harry went on, "I might solve the debt to Lucius Malfoy myself if I see a way before you do, it's more important to get that sorted immediately than which one of us gets it sorted. Anything interesting so far?"

Three-quarters of her was running in circles and smashing into trees as she tried to figure out the implications of everything Harry had just said (did he still respect her as a heroine? or did that mean he thought she couldn't do it on her own?) and meanwhile a much more sensible part of Hermione flipped back the book to page 37 which had the most promising entry she'd seen so far (though in her imagination she always did it on her own and took Harry completely by surprise) –

"I thought this seemed quite interesting," her voice said.

“Number fourteen, ‘Crozier’, true name unknown,” Harry read. “Wow, that is... that is the gaudiest checkered top hat I’ve ever seen. Wealth, at least six hundred thousand Galleons... so around thirty million pounds, not enough to make a Muggle famous, but good enough for the smaller wizard population, I guess. Rumored to be a modern alias of the six-century-old Nicholas Flamel, the only known wizard to succeed at the incredibly difficult alchemical procedure for creating the Philosopher’s Stone, which enables the transmutation of base metals into gold or silver as well as... the Elixir of Life which indefinitely prolongs the youth and health of the user... Um, Hermione, this seems obviously false.”

“I’ve read more references to Nicholas Flamel,” Hermione said. “The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts says he secretly trained Dumbledore to stand up to Grindelwald. There’s a lot of books that take the story seriously, not just this one... you think it’s too good to be true?”

“No, of course not,” said Harry. Harry pulled out the chair next to her own, at the small table, and sat down beside her in his accustomed place on her right, just like he’d never left; she had to choke back a catch in her throat. “The idea of ‘too good to be true’ isn’t causal reasoning, the universe doesn’t check if the output of the equations is ‘too good’ or ‘too bad’ before allowing it. People used to think that airplanes and smallpox vaccines were too good to be true. Muggles have figured out ways to travel to other stars without even using magic, and you and I can use our wands to do things that Muggle physicists think are literally impossible. I can’t even imagine what we could rule out the real laws of magic being able to do.”

“So what’s the problem, then?” Hermione said. Her voice sounded more normal now, in her own ears.

“Well...” Harry said. The boy reached over her own outstretched arm, his robes brushing hers, and tapped the artist’s illustration of an ominously glowing red stone dripping scarlet liquid. “Problem one is that there’s no logical reason why the same artifact would be able to transmute lead to gold and produce an elixir that kept someone young. I wonder if there’s an official name for that in the literature? Like the ‘turned up to eleven effect’, maybe? If everyone can see a flower, you can’t get away with saying flowers are the size of houses. But if you’re in a flying saucer cult, since nobody can see the alien mothership anyway, you can say it’s the size of a city, or the size of the Moon. Observable things have to be constrained by evidence, but when somebody makes up a story, they can make the story as extreme as they want. So the

Philosopher's Stone gives you unlimited gold and eternal life, not because there's a single magical discovery that would produce both of those effects, but because someone made up a story about a super happy thingy."

"Harry, there's a lot of things in magic that aren't sensible," she said.

"Granted," said Harry. "But Hermione, problem two is that not even wizards are crazy enough to casually overlook the implications of this. Everyone would be trying to rediscover the formula for the Philosopher's Stone, whole countries would be trying to capture the immortal wizard and get the secret out of him –"

"It's not a secret." Hermione flipped the page, showing Harry the diagrams. "The instructions are right on the next page. It's just so difficult that only Nicholas Flamel's done it."

"So entire countries would be trying to kidnap Flamel and force him to make more Stones. Come on, Hermione, even wizards wouldn't hear about immortality and, and," Harry Potter paused, his eloquence apparently failing him, "and just keep going. Humans are crazy, but they're not that crazy!"

"Not everyone thinks the same way you do, Harry." He did have a point, but... how many different references had she come across to Nicholas Flamel? Besides World's Wealthiest Wizards and Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts, there'd also been Stories of Moderately Ancient Times and Biographies of the Justly Famous...

"All right then, Professor Quirrell would've kidnapped this Flamel guy. It's what an evil person or a good person or just a selfish person would do if they had any sense. The Defense Professor knows a lot of secrets and he wouldn't miss that one." Harry sighed and looked up; she followed his gaze, but he was apparently just looking at the larger library, the rows and rows and rows of bookcases. "I don't mean to mess with your project," said Harry, "and I certainly don't mean to discourage you, but... Honestly, Hermione, I'm not sure you're going to find any good ideas for making money in a book like this. Like the old joke about how if an economist sees a twenty-pound note lying in the street, they won't bother picking it up, because if it were real, someone else would've picked it up already. Any way of making lots of money that everyone knows about to the point where it's in books like this... you see what I'm saying? It can't be possible for everyone to make a thousand Galleons a month in three easy steps, or everyone would be doing it."

"So? That wouldn't stop you," Hermione said, her voice now roughening again. "You do impossible things all the time, I bet you've done something

impossible in the last week and you didn't bother telling anyone."

(There was a slight pause, which, if Miss Granger had known, was exactly the length of pause you'd make if you'd fought Mad-Eye Moody and won exactly eight days earlier.)

"Not in the last seven days, no," Harry said. "Look... part of the trick of doing the impossible is being selective about which impossibilities you challenge, and only trying when you have a special advantage. If there's a money-making method in this book that sounds difficult for a wizard, but it's easy if we can use Dad's old Mac Plus, then we'd have a plan."

"I know that, Harry," Hermione said, her voice wavering only slightly. "I was looking to see if there was anything here I could figure out how to do. I thought, maybe the difficult part about making a Philosopher's Stone was that the alchemical circle had to be super precise, and I could get it right by using a Muggle microscope –"

"That's brilliant, Hermione!" The boy rapidly drew his wand, said "Quietus," and then continued after the small noises of the rowdier books had died down. "Even if the Philosopher's Stone is just a myth, the same trick might work for other difficult alchemies –"

"Well, it can't work," Hermione said. She'd flown across the library to look up the only book on alchemy that wasn't in the Restricted Section. And then – she remembered the crushing letdown, all the sudden hope dissipating like mist. "Because all alchemical circles have to be drawn 'to the fineness of a child's hair', it isn't any finer for some alchemies than others. And wizards have Omnioculars, and I haven't heard of any spells where you use Omnioculars to magnify things and do them exactly. I should've realized that!"

"Hermione," Harry said seriously, as he started to dig down into the red-velvet pouch again, "don't punish yourself when a bright idea doesn't work out. You've got to go through a lot of flawed ideas to find one that might work. And if you send your brain negative feedback by frowning when you think of a flawed idea, instead of realizing that idea-suggesting is good behavior by your brain to be encouraged, pretty soon you won't think of any ideas at all." Harry put down two heart-shaped chocolates beside the book. "Here, have another chocolate. Besides the one from earlier, I mean. This one is to reinforce your brain for generating a good candidate strategy."

"I suppose you're right," Hermione said in a small voice, but she didn't touch the chocolate. She started to turn the pages back to 167, where she'd

been reading before Harry had come in.

(Hermione Granger did not require bookmarks, of course.)

Harry was leaning over slightly, his head almost touching her shoulder, watching the pages as she turned them, as though he might be able to glean valuable information from glimpsing the page for only a quarter-second. Breakfast hadn't been long ago, and she could clearly identify, from the faint scent of his breath, that Harry'd eaten banana pudding for dessert.

Harry spoke again. "So with all that said... and please take this as a positive reinforcement... did you really try to invent a way to mass-produce immortality so that I could pay off my debt to Lucius Malfoy?"

"Yes," she said in an even smaller voice. Even when she tried to think like Harry, it seemed she hadn't yet got the knack of it. "So what've you been doing this whole time, Harry?"

Harry made a disgusted face. "Trying to collect evidence on the whole 'Who Framed Hermione Granger' mystery."

"I..." Hermione looked up at Harry. "Shouldn't I... be trying to solve my own mystery, though?" It hadn't been her first thought, her first priority, but now that Harry mentioned it...

"That wouldn't work in this case," Harry said soberly. "There's too many people who'll talk to me and not you... and I'm also sorry to say that some of them made me promise not to talk to anyone else. Sorry, I don't think you can help much on this one."

"Okay, I guess," Hermione said leadenly. "Fine. You do everything. You gather all the clues and talk to all the suspects while I just sit here in the library. Let me know after it turns out that it was Professor Quirrell who did it."

"Hermione..." Harry said. "Why is it so important who does what? Shouldn't it be more important to get everything solved, than who solves it?"

"I guess you're right," Hermione said. She lifted her hands to press up at her eyes. "I guess it doesn't matter any more. Everyone's going to think – I know it's not your fault, Harry, you were – you were being Good, you were a perfect gentlemen – but no matter what I do now, they'll all think that I'm just – someone for you to rescue." She paused, and said, with her voice quivering, "And maybe they're right, Harry."

"Whoa, whoa, hold on there a second –"

"I can't scare Dementors. I can get Outstandings in Charms class, but I can't scare Dementors."

"I've got a mysterious dark side!" Harry hissed, after his head turned around to scan the library. (There was one boy in a distant corner, who did look in their direction occasionally, but he would've been too far away to hear anything even without the Quieting Barrier.) "I've got a dark side that definitely isn't a child, and who knows what other crazy magical stuff going on in my head – Professor Quirrell claimed that I become whoever I believe I am – that's all cheating, don't you see, Hermione? There's an arrangement that the school administration made that I'm not supposed to talk about, so that the Boy-Who-Lived could have more time to study every day, I'm cheating and you're still beating me in Charms class. I'm – I'm probably not – the Boy-Who-Lived probably isn't even something that you could properly call a child – and you're still competing with that. Don't you realize, if it wasn't for people paying attention to me, you'd look like the most powerful witch to come along in a century? When you can fight three older bullies by yourself, and win?"

"I don't know," she said, pressing her hands again over her eyes, with her voice wavering. "All I know is – even if that's all true – nobody's ever going to see me for myself anymore, ever."

"All right," Harry said after a while. "I see what you mean. Instead of the famous Potter-and-Granger research team, there'll be Harry Potter and his lab assistant. Um... here's an idea. How about if I don't focus on making money for a while? I mean, the debt doesn't come due until I graduate Hogwarts. So you can do it yourself and show the world you've still got it. And if you coincidentally crack the secret of immortality along the way, we'll just call it a bonus."

The thought of Harry relying on her to come up with a solution seemed... like a crushing burden of responsibility to dump on a poor traumatized twelve-year-old girl, and she wanted to hug him for offering her a way to restore her self-respect as a heroine, and it was what she deserved for being a horrible person and speaking sharply to Harry all the time, when all along he'd been a truer friend to her than she'd ever been to him, and it was good that he still thought she could do things, and...

"Is there some amazing rational thing you do when your mind's running in all different directions?" she managed.

"My own approach is usually to identify the different desires, give them names, conceive of them as separate individuals, and let them argue it out inside my head. So far the main persistent ones are my Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw,

Gryffindor, and Slytherin sides, my Inner Critic, and my simulated copies of you, Neville, Draco, Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick, Professor Quirrell, Dad, Mum, Richard Feynman, and Douglas Hofstadter.”

Hermione considered trying this before her Common Sense warned that it might be a dangerous sort of thing to pretend. “There’s a copy of me inside your head?”

“Of course there is!” Harry said. The boy suddenly looked a bit more vulnerable. “You mean there isn’t a copy of me living in your head?”

There was, she realized; and not only that, it talked in Harry’s exact voice.

“It’s rather unnerving now that I think about it,” said Hermione. “I do have a copy of you living in my head. It’s talking to me right now using your voice, arguing how this is perfectly normal.”

“Good,” Harry said seriously. “I mean, I don’t see how people could be friends without that.”

She continued reading her book, then, Harry seeming content to watch the pages over her shoulder.

She’d gotten all the way to number seventy, Katherine Scott, who’d apparently invented a way to turn small animals into lemon tarts, when she finally worked up the courage to speak.

“Harry?” she said. (She was leaning a bit away from him now, though she didn’t realize it.) “If there’s a copy of Draco Malfoy in your head, does that mean you’re friends with Draco Malfoy?”

“Well...” Harry said. He sighed. “Yeah, I’d been meaning to talk with you about this anyway. I kind of wish I’d talked to you sooner. Anyway, how can I put this... I was corrupting him?”

“What do you mean corrupting?”

“Tempting him to the Light Side of the Force.”

Her mouth just stayed open.

“You know, like the Emperor and Darth Vader, only in reverse.”

“Draco Malfoy,” she said. “Harry, do you have any idea –”

“Yes.”

“– the sort of things Malfoy has been saying about me? What he said he’d do to me, as soon as he got the chance? I don’t know what he told to you, but Daphne Greengrass told me what Malfoy says when he’s in Slytherin. It’s unspeakable, Harry! It’s unspeakable in the completely literal sense that I can’t say it out loud!”

“When was this?” Harry said. “At the start of the year? Did Daphne say when this was?”

“No,” Hermione said. “Because it doesn’t matter when, Harry. Anyone who said things – like Malfoy said – they can’t be a good person. It doesn’t matter what you tempted him to, he’s still a rotten person, because no matter what a good person would never –”

“You’re wrong.” Harry said, looking her straight in the eyes. “I can guess what Draco threatened to do to you, because the second time I met him, he talked about doing it to a ten-year-old girl. But don’t you see, on the day Draco Malfoy arrived in Hogwarts, he’d spent his whole previous life being raised by Death Eaters. It would’ve required a supernatural intervention for him to have your morality given his environment –”

Hermione was shaking her head violently. “No, Harry. Nobody has to tell you that hurting people is wrong, it’s not something you don’t do because the teacher says it’s not allowed, it’s something you don’t do because – because you can see when people are hurting, don’t you know that, Harry?” Her voice was shaking now. “That’s not – that’s not a rule people follow like the rules for algebra! If you can’t see it, if you can’t feel it here,” her hand slapped down over the center of her chest, not quite where her heart was located, but that didn’t matter because it was all really in the brain anyway, “then you just don’t have it!”

The thought came to her, then, that Harry might not have it.

“There’s history books you haven’t read,” Harry said quietly. “There’s books you haven’t read yet, Hermione, and they might give you a sense of perspective. A few centuries earlier – I think it was definitely still around in the seventeenth century – it was a popular village entertainment to take a wicker basket, or a bundle, with a dozen live cats in it, and –”

“Stop,” she said.

“– roast it over a bonfire. Just a regular celebration. Good clean fun. And I’ll give them this, it was cleaner fun than burning women they thought were witches. Because the way people are built, Hermione, the way people are built to feel inside –” Harry put a hand over his own heart, in the anatomically correct position, then paused and moved his hand up to point toward his head at around the ear level, “– is that they hurt when they see their friends hurting. Someone inside their circle of concern, a member of their own tribe. That feeling has an off-switch, an off-switch labeled ‘enemy’ or ‘foreigner’ or sometimes just ‘stranger’. That’s how people are, if they don’t learn otherwise.

So, no, it does not indicate that Draco Malfoy was inhuman or even unusually evil, if he grew up believing that it was fun to hurt his enemies –”

“If you believe that,” she said with her voice unsteady, “if you can believe that, then you’re evil. People are always responsible for what they do. It doesn’t matter what anyone tells you to do, you’re the one who does it. Everyone knows that –”

“No they don’t! You grew up in a post-World-War-Two society where ‘I was only following orders’ is something everyone knows the bad guys said. In the fifteenth century they would’ve called it honourable fealty.” Harry’s voice was rising. “Do you think you’re, you’re just genetically better than everyone who lived back then? Like if you’d been transported back to fifteenth-century London as a baby, you’d realize all on your own that burning cats was wrong, witch-burning was wrong, slavery was wrong, that every sentient being ought to be in your circle of concern? Do you think you’d finish realizing all that by the first day you got to Hogwarts? Nobody ever told Draco he was personally responsible for becoming more ethical than the society he grew up in. And despite that, it only took him four months to get to the point where he’d grab a Muggleborn falling off a building.” Harry’s eyes were as fierce as she’d ever seen him. “I’m not finished corrupting Draco Malfoy, but I think he’s done pretty well so far.”

The problem with having such a good memory was that she did remember.

She remembered Draco Malfoy grabbing her wrist, so hard she’d had a bruise afterward, while she was falling off the roof of Hogwarts.

She remembered Draco Malfoy helping her up, after that mysterious tripping jinx had sent her stumbling into the Slytherin Quidditch Captain’s plate of food.

And she remembered – it was, in fact, the reason she’d brought up the topic in the first place – how she’d felt when she’d heard Draco Malfoy’s testimony under Veritaserum.

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this?” Hermione said, and despite herself, her voice rose in pitch. “If I’d known –”

“It wasn’t my secret to tell you,” Harry said. “Draco’s the one who would’ve been at risk, if his father had found out.”

“I’m not stupid, Mr. Potter. What’s the real reason you didn’t tell me, and what were you actually doing with Mr. Malfoy?”

“Ah. Well...” Harry broke eye contact with her, and looked down at the library table.

“Draco Malfoy told the Aurors under Veritaserum that he wanted to know if he could beat me, so he challenged me to a duel to test it empirically. Those were his exact words according to the transcript.”

“Right,” Harry said, still not meeting her eyes. “Hermione Granger. Of course she’ll remember the exact wording. It doesn’t matter if she’s chained to her chair, on trial for murder in front of the entire Wizengamot –”

“What were you really doing with Draco Malfoy?”

Harry winced, and said, “Probably not quite what you’re thinking, but...”

The horror scaled and scaled within her, and finally broke loose.

“You were doing SCIENCE with him?”

“Well –”

“You were doing SCIENCE with him? You were supposed to be doing science with ME!”

“It wasn’t like that! It’s not like I was doing real science with him! I was just, you know, teaching him some harmless bits of Muggle science, like elementary physics with algebra and so on – it’s not like I was doing original magical research with him, the way I was with you –”

“And I suppose you didn’t tell him about me, either?”

“Um, of course not?” Harry said. “I’ve been doing science with him since October, and he wasn’t exactly ready to hear about you then –”

The inexpressible sense of betrayal inside her was welling and welling, taking over everything, her rising voice, her glaring eyes, her nose that she was certain was starting to run, the burning in her throat. She shoved herself up from the table and took a step back, the better to look down on her betrayer, and her voice was very nearly screeching as she yelled, “That is not okay! You can’t do science with two people at once!”

“Er –”

“I mean, you can’t do science with two different people and not tell them about each other!”

“Ah...” Harry said cautiously. “I did think of that, and I was very careful not to get your research mixed together with anything I did with him –”

“You were being careful.” She would have hissed it, if it had contained any Ss.

Harry raised a hand and rubbed at his messy hair, and somehow that made her want to scream at him even more. “Miss Granger,” said Harry, “I

think this conversation has become metaphorical on a level that's, um..."

"What?" she screeched at him, at the top of her lungs inside their Quieting barrier.

Then she realized and got so red that if she'd had an adult level of magical power her hair would have spontaneously caught on fire.

The lone other patron in the library, the Ravenclaw boy sitting in the far opposite corner, was staring wide-eyed at both of them while making a rather sad attempt to conceal it by holding up a book just below his face.

"Right," Harry said with a small sigh. "So, keeping firmly in mind that it was just a bad metaphor, and that real scientists collaborate with each other all the time, I don't think that I was cheating. Scientists often keep quiet about projects they're working on. You and I are doing research that we're keeping secret, and there were reasons not to tell Draco Malfoy in particular – he wouldn't have stayed around me at all, in the beginning, if he'd known I was your friend and not your rival. And Draco would've been the one at risk if I'd told anyone else about him –"

"Is that really all?" she said. "Really, Harry? You didn't want both of us to feel special, like we were the only ones you wanted to be with and the only ones who got to be with you?"

"That was not why I –"

Harry paused.

Harry looked at her.

All the blood was rushing back into her face, there probably should've been steam coming out of her ears, which in turn should've been melting off her head with the liquid flesh running down into her neck, as she realized what she'd just blurted out.

Harry was staring at her in dawning and complete terror.

"Well..." she said in a rather high-pitched voice, "it's... oh, I don't know, Harry! Is it just a metaphor? When a boy spends a hundred thousand Galleons to save a girl from certain doom, she's entitled to wonder, don't you think? It's like being bought flowers, only, you see, rather more so –"

Harry shoved himself up from the table and took a staggering step back, even as he brought up his arms to wave frantically. "That's not why I did it! I did it because we're friends!"

"Just friends?"

Harry Potter's breathing was starting to scale up toward hyperventilation. "Very good friends! Extra-special friends, even! Best friends forever, possibly!

But not that kind of friends!”

“Is it really that awful to think about?” she said with a catch in her voice. “I mean – I’m not saying I’m in love with you, but –”

“Oh, you’re not? Thank goodness.” Harry brought up the sleeve of his robe and wiped across his forehead. “Look, Hermione, please don’t misunderstand, I’m sure you’re a wonderful person –”

She took a staggering step back.

“– but – even with my dark side –”

“Is that what this is about?” said Hermione. “But I – I wouldn’t –”

“No, no, I mean, I have a mysterious dark side and probably other weird magic stuff going on, you know I’m not a normal child, not really –”

“It’s okay to not be normal,” she said, feeling increasingly desperate and confused. “I’m okay with it –”

“But even with all that weird magical stuff letting me be more adult than I should be, I haven’t gone through puberty yet and there’s no hormones in my bloodstream and my brain is physically incapable of falling in love with anyone. So I’m not in love with you! I couldn’t possibly be in love with you! For all I know at this point, six months from now my brain is going to wake up and decide to fall in love with Professor Snape! Er, can I take it from this that you have been through puberty?”

“Eep,” said Hermione in a high-pitched sound. She swayed where she stood, and a moment later Harry was rushing over to her side and helping lower her to sit on the ground, bracing her body with firm hands.

The fact was that she had staggered over to Professor McGonagall’s office back in December, not in total surprise because she’d done her reading, but still rather queasily and it was with great relief that she’d learned that witches had Charms to deal with the inconveniences and what was Harry even doing asking a poor innocent girl a question like that –

“Look, I’m sorry,” Harry said frantically. “I really didn’t mean most of that the way it sounded! I’m sure that anyone taking the outside view of the whole situation and offering betting odds on who I finally married would assign a higher probability to you than anyone else I can think of –”

Her intelligence, which had barely been starting to pull itself together, promptly exploded into sparks and flame.

“– though not necessarily a probability higher than fifty percent, I mean, from the outside view there’s a lot of other possibilities, and who I like before

I hit puberty probably isn't all that strongly diagnostic of who I'll be with seven years later – I don't want to sound like I'm promising anything –”

Her throat was making some sort of high-pitched sounds and she wasn't really listening to exactly what. All her universe had narrowed to Harry's terrible, terrible voice.

“– and besides I've been reading about evolutionary psychology, and, well, there are all these suggestions that one man and one woman living together happily ever afterward may be more the exception rather than the rule, and in hunter-gatherer tribes it was more often just staying together for two or three years to raise a child during its most vulnerable stages – and, I mean, considering how many people end up horribly unhappy in traditional marriages, it seems like it might be the sort of thing that needs some clever reworking – especially if we actually do solve immortality –”



Tano Wolfe, of fifth-year Ravenclaw, slowly stood up from his library desk, from which vantage point he'd just watched Granger flee the library, sobbing. He hadn't been able to hear the argument, but it had clearly been one of those.

Slowly and with his knees trembling, Tano approached the Boy-Who-Lived, who was staring in the direction of the library doors, still vibrating from the force of how they'd been slammed.

Tano didn't particularly want to do this, but Harry Potter had been Sorted into Ravenclaw. The Boy-Who-Lived was, technically, his fellow Ravenclaw. And that meant there was a Code.

The Boy-Who-Lived didn't say anything as Tano approached him, but his gaze wasn't friendly.

Tano swallowed, laid a hand on Harry Potter's shoulder, and recited, his voice cracking only slightly, “Witches! Go figure, huh?”

“Remove your hand before I cast it into the outer darkness.”

The library doors slammed open again in the wake of another departure.



TIME PRESSURE, PART I

APRIL 16th, 1992.
12:07 PM.

Lunchtime.

Harry stomped over to the mostly-deserted Gryffindor table, determining at a glance that lunch today was breen and Roopo balls. The ambient conversation, Harry could likewise hear, was Quidditch-related; an auditory environment which rated somewhat worse than the sound of rusty chain-saws, but better than what the Ravenclaw table was still blithering about Hermione. Gryffindor House, at least, had started out less sympathetic to Draco Malfoy and had more political incentive to wish that everyone would just forget certain unfortunate facts; and if that wasn't the right reason for silence, it was at least silence. Dean and Seamus and Lavender were all gone for the holidays, but at least that left...

"What was all that ruckus at the Head Table?" Harry said to the Weasley-twin group-mind, as he began to serve himself his own plate. "It looked like it was just ending as I walked in."

"Our beloved, but clumsy Professor Trelawney –"

"Seems to have gone and dropped an entire soup tureen on herself –"

"Not to mention Mr. Hagrid"

A quick glance at the Head Table confirmed that the Divination Professor was waving her wand frantically as the half-Giant dabbed at his clothes. Nobody else seemed to be paying much attention, even Professor McGonagall. Professor Flitwick was standing on his chair as usual, the Headmaster seemed to be absent again (he'd been gone most days of the holiday), Professors Sprout and Sinistra and Vector were eating in their usual grouping, and –

"You know," Harry said, as he turned his head away to stare at the ceiling illusion of a clear blue sky, "that still creeps me out sometimes."

"What does?" said Fred or George.

The powerful and enigmatic Defense Professor was 'resting' or whatever-the-heck-was-wrong-with-him, his hands making fumbling, hesitant grabs

at a chicken-leg that seemed to be eluding him on the plate.

"Eh, nothing," said Harry. "I'm not quite used to Hogwarts, yet."

Harry continued to eat in moderate silence, as various Weasleys discussed some bizarre mind-affecting substance called Chudley Cannons.

"What sort of deep mysterious thoughts are you thinking?" said a young-looking witch with short hair, sitting nearby. "I mean, just curious. I'm Brienne, by the way." She was gazing at him with one of those looks which Harry had firmly decided to just ignore until he was older.

"So," Harry said, "you know those really simple Artificial Intelligence programs like ELIZA that are programmed to use words in syntactic English sentences only they don't contain any understanding of what the words mean?"

"Of course," the witch said. "I have a dozen of them in my trunk."

"Well, I'm pretty sure my understanding of girls is somewhere around that level."

A sudden hush fell.

It took a few seconds for Harry to realize that, no, the entire Great Hall wasn't staring at him, and then Harry twisted his head around to look.

The figure who'd just staggered into the Great Hall appeared to be Mr. Filch, Hogwarts's token hallway monitor; who, along with his predatory cat Mrs. Norris, constituted a low-level random encounter whom Harry often breezed past wearing his epic-level Deathly Hallow. (Harry had once consulted the Weasley twins about pulling some sort of prank on this deserving target, whereupon Fred or George had quietly pointed out that Mr. Filch was never seen to use a wand, which was odd, really, considering how many spells would be useful in that position, and it made you wonder why Dumbledore had given the man a position at Hogwarts, and Harry had shut up.)

Right now Mr. Filch's brown clothing was disarrayed and soaked with sweat, his shoulders were visibly heaving as he breathed, and his everpresent cat was missing.

"Troll –" gasped Mr. Filch. "In the dungeons –"



Minerva McGonagall stood up from the Head Table so quickly that her chair fell to the ground behind her.

"Argus!" she cried. "What happened to you?"

Argus Filch staggered forward from the huge doors, his upper body streaked and dotted with small crimson dots as though someone had spattered steak sauce over his face. “Troll – grey – twice as tall as me – it – it –” Argus Filch covered his face with his hands. “It ate Mrs. Norris – ate her all up, in just one bite –”

Minerva felt a stab of dismay in her other self, she hadn’t liked the other cat very much but the two of them had still been felines.

An uproar started from the Great Hall. Severus stood up from the Head Table, somehow doing so without drawing any visible attention to himself, and strode out the huge doors without another word.

Of course, Minerva thought, the third-floor corridor – this could be a distraction –

She mentally consigned all such matters to Severus’s care, drew her wand, raised it high, and let out five sharp cracks of purple fire.

There was stunned silence but for Argus’s broken sobs.

“It seems we have a dangerous creature loose in Hogwarts,” she said to the faculty at the Head Table. “I will ask you all to aid in searching the halls.” Then she turned to the stunned and watching students, and raised her voice. “Prefects – lead your houses back to the dormitories immediately!”

Percy Weasley leaped up from the Gryffindor table. “Follow me!” he said in a high voice. “Stick together, first-years! No, not you –” but by that time the other prefects were raising their own voices as a renewed babble sprang up.

Then a clear, cool voice spoke under the sudden rush of sound.

“Deputy Headmistress.”

She turned.

The Defense Professor was calmly wiping off his hands on a napkin as he stood up from the Head Table. “With respect,” said the man of unknown identity, “you are not expert in battle tactics, madam. In this situation, it would be wiser to –”

“I do apologize, Professor,” said Professor McGonagall, as she turned toward the great doors. Filius and Pomona had already risen to follow her, with Rubeus Hagrid towering over all of them as the half-giant stood up. She’d been through similar experiences too many times, at this point. “Sad experience has taught me that on occasions such as these, it is not a good time to take any advice the current Defense Professor may offer. Indeed, I think it

wise that the two of us search for the troll together, so that no suspicions may be cast upon you for any untoward events which occur during that time.”

Without any hesitation, the Defense Professor swung smoothly on the Gryffindor table and clapped his hands with a sound like a floor cracking through.

“Michelle Morgan of House Gryffindor, second in command of Pinnini’s Army,” the Defense Professor said calmly into the resulting quiet. “Please advise your Head of House.”

Michelle Morgan climbed up onto her bench and spoke, the tiny witch sounding far more confident than Minerva remembered her being at the start of the year. “Students walking through the hallways would be spread out and impossible to defend. All students are to remain in the Great Hall and form a cluster in the center... not surrounded by tables, a troll would jump right over tables... with the perimeter defended by seventh-year students. From the armies only, no matter how good they are at duelling, so they don’t get in each other’s lines of fire.” Michelle hesitated. “I’m sorry, Mr. Hagrid, but – it wouldn’t be safe for you, you should stay behind with the students. And Professor Trelawney shouldn’t confront a troll on her own either,” Michelle sounded much less apologetic about this part, “but if she’s paired with Professor Quirrell the two of them together can form an additional trusted and effective battle unit. That concludes my analysis, Professor.”

“Adequate, for being put on the spot,” the Defense Professor said. “Twenty Quirrell points to you. But you neglect the still simpler point that home does not mean safe, and a troll is strong enough to rip a portrait door off its hinges –”

“Enough,” Minerva snapped. “Thank you, Miss Morgan.” She looked to the watching tables. “Students, you will do as she said.” Turned back to the Head Table. “Professor Trelawney, you will accompany the Defense Professor –”

“Ah,” Sybill said falteringly. Beneath her overdone makeup and mess of shawls, the woman looked rather pale. “I’m afraid – I’m not entirely well today – indeed, I feel rather faint –”

“You won’t have to fight the troll,” Minerva said sharply, her patience taxed as usual when dealing with the woman. “Just stay with the Defense Professor and do not let him out of your sight for an instant, you must be able to testify afterward that you were with him at all times.” She turned to Rubeus. “Rubeus, I am leaving you in charge here. Keep them safe.” The huge

man straightened at this, losing his glum look and nodding proudly to her.

Then Minerva looked at the students, and raised her voice. "It should go entirely without saying that anyone leaving the Great Hall for any reason, will be expelled. No excuses will be accepted. Am I understood?"

The Weasley twins, with whom she'd been making direct eye contact, nodded respectfully.

She turned without another word and marched off toward the hall doors with the other Professors behind her.

On the far side of the room, unnoticed on the wall, a clock showed 12:14 PM.



... and he still didn't realize.

Tick.

As Harry stared with narrowed eyes at where the Professors had gone out, wondering what was actually going on and what it meant, as the students came together into a more defensible mass and wands flicked to levitate the tables out of their way, Harry still didn't realize.

Tick.

"Shouldn't the Professors all have formed up into pairs?" said an older Gryffindor student whose name Harry didn't know. "I mean – it'd be slower, but it'd be safer, I think –"

Tick.

Someone else replied to this, raising her voice, but Harry didn't catch much of it, the gist was that mountain trolls were highly magic-resistant and incredibly strong and could regenerate but they were still noisy so if you heard them coming, it shouldn't be that hard for a Hogwarts Professor to wrap them up in Vadim's Unbreakable something something.

Tick.

And Harry still didn't realize.

Tick.

The crowd noises were subdued, people were talking in low voices to each other while they glanced around, listening for the sound of a crashing door or an angry roar.

Tick.

Some students were speculating in whispers about what the Defense Professor could possibly be trying to achieve by smuggling in a troll, and whether

he was angry that Professor McGonagall had caught on to his attempted distraction, and what it was a distraction from.

Tick.

And the thought still didn't come to Harry, not until after all the students had formed a mass of perhaps a hundred bodies patrolled by proudly grim-looking seventh-year-students with their wands all pointed outward, and somebody suggested doing a headcount, and someone else replied sarcastically that this might have made sense on some other day, but right now practically everyone was gone for the spring holiday and nobody really knew how many students were supposed to be in the room, let alone if any were missing.

Tick.

That was when Harry wondered where Hermione was.

Tick.

Harry looked over at where the Ravenclaws had clustered, he didn't see Hermione but then everyone was packed tightly-enough together that you wouldn't expect to see smaller students through the crowd, amid the upper-years.

Tick.

Harry then looked over at the Hufflepuffs to see if he could spot Neville, and even though Neville was standing behind a much taller student, Harry's visual processing managed to spot him almost immediately. Hermione wasn't with the Hufflepuffs either, not that Harry could see – and she certainly wouldn't be with the Slytherins –

Tick.

Harry pushed his way through the packed crowd, stepping beside or around older students and in one case just ducking between their legs, until he was standing among the Ravenclaws and could definitely verify that, nope, no Hermione.

Tick.

"Hermione Granger!" Harry said loudly. "Are you here?"

Nobody answered.

Tick.

Somewhere in the back of his mind was a rising sense of horror, as other parts of him tried to decide exactly how much to panic. The first Defense class of the year was rather fuzzy in Harry's mind, but he distantly

remembered something about trolls being able to track prey that was alone and undefended.

Tick.

Another track of thought searched frantically through inchoate possibilities, what could he do exactly? It wasn't 3 PM yet so he couldn't reach this now using his Time-Turner. Even if he could sneak out of the room – there had to be some way to put on his Cloak without being noticed, some sort of distraction he could use – he had no idea where Hermione was, and Hogwarts was huge.

Tick.

Another part of his mind tried to model possibilities. From what that other student had said, trolls weren't silent predators, they were noisy –

Hermione won't have any idea it's a troll, so she'll go investigate the noise. She's a heroine, isn't she?

– but Hermione now had an invisibility cloak and a broomstick in her pouch. Harry had insisted on that part for both her and Neville, and Professor McGonagall had told him it'd been done. That ought to be enough to let Hermione get away, even if she was lousy on a broomstick. All she had to do was get onto a section of roof, it was a clear day and sunlight was supposed to be bad for trolls somehow, Harry remembered that part and therefore Hermione would remember it exactly. And surely, even if Hermione wanted to prove herself again, she couldn't possibly be dumb enough to attack a mountain troll.

Tick.

She wouldn't.

Tick.

That just wasn't her.

Tick.

And then it occurred to Harry that somebody had previously tried to frame Hermione Granger for murder using Memory Charms. Had done so inside Hogwarts, without setting off any alarms. And had arranged for Draco to die slowly enough that it wouldn't set off the wards until at least six hours later when nobody could use a Time-Turner to check. And that whoever was clever enough to infiltrate a troll past the ancient wards of Hogwarts without the Headmaster coming to investigate the strange creature, could be clever enough to also take the obvious step of jinxing Hermione's magic items...

Tick.

There was a part of him that felt something like slowly rising panic as perspective shifted, a Necker Cube changing orientation, what the hell had Harry been thinking, letting Hermione and Neville be kept inside Hogwarts just because of them being given a few stupid trinkets, that wasn't going to stop anyone who wanted to kill them.

Tick.

Another part of his mind put up resistance, that possibility wasn't certain, it was complex and the probability could easily be under 50%. It was easy to imagine going into a huge panic in front of everyone and then Hermione getting back from the washrooms outside the Great Hall. Or if the troll ended up not going anywhere near her... like in the story of the boy who cried wolf, nobody would believe him the next time if she really was in trouble; it could use up reputational credit that he would later need for something else...

Tick.

Harry recognized an instance of the fear-of-embarrassment schema that stopped most people from ever doing anything under conditions of uncertainty, and squashed it down hard. Even then it was strange how much willpower it took to muster the decision to shout out loud in front of everyone, if he just hadn't seen Hermione in the crowd it was going to be embarrassing...

Tick.

Harry drew in a deep breath and shouted as loudly as he could, "Hermione Granger! Are you here?"

The students all turned to look at him. Then some of them turned around to look around themselves. The noise around the room went down in volume as some conversations stilled.

"Has anyone seen Hermione Granger since – since around ten-thirty today or so? Does anyone have any idea where she might be?"

The background babble stilled further.

Nobody raised their voice to shout anything at him, in particular not, Don't worry, Harry, I'm right here.

"Oh, Merlin," somebody said from nearby, and then the background babble started up again, taking on a new and excited tone.

Harry stared down at his hands, shutting out the yammering and tried to think, think, THINK –

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

Susan Bones and a redheaded boy with a battered-looking wand both shoved their way through the crowd to Harry at the same time.

"We've got to let the Professors know somehow –"

"We've got to go find her –"

"Find her?" Susan snapped, rounding on the other boy. "How'll we do that, Captain Weasley?"

"We'll go off and look for her!" Ron Weasley snapped back.

"Are you nuts? There's already Professors searching the hallways, what makes you think we've got any better chance than them of running across General Granger? Only we'll get eaten by the troll! And then expelled!"

It was odd, how sometimes hearing bad ideas made the right idea obvious by contrast.

"All right everyone! Listen up!"

People turned to look.

"QUIET! EVERYONE! SHUT UP!"

Harry's throat ached after that, but he had everyone's attention.

"I have a broomstick," Harry said as loudly as he could manage with his throat still hurting. He'd remembered Azkaban, and the broomstick which had only sat two, when he'd requested one that could carry three. "It's a 3-seater. I need one seventh-year from the armies to come with me. We're going to fly through the hallways as fast as possible looking for Hermione Granger, pick her up, and come back immediately. Who's with me?"

The Great Hall became entirely silent, then.



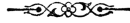
Students glanced at each other uneasily. The younger students looked expectantly at the older students, while they in turn turned to look at the students who were guarding the perimeter. Most of those were staring straight ahead, pointing their wands just in case the troll picked that moment to burst through a wall.

No one moved.

No one spoke.

Harry Potter spoke again. "We're not going to fight the troll. If we see it we'll just fly away and there's no way it'll be able to keep up with us on a broomstick. I'll take responsibility for squaring it with the administration. Please."

People went on looking at other people.



Harry stared at the silent crowd, the dozen seventh-years looking sternly outward, feeling the coldness coming over him. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Professor Quirrell was laughing scornfully and mocking the idea that ordinary fools would ever do something useful of their own will, without a wand pointed at their heads...

Tick.

The standard remedy for bystander apathy was to focus on a single individual. "All right," Harry said, trying to keep the commanding voice of the Boy-Who-Lived who didn't doubt obedience. "Miss Morgan, come with me, now. We've got no time to waste."

The witch he'd named turned from where she'd been staring steadily out at the perimeter, her expression aghast for the one second before her face closed up.

"The Deputy Headmistress ordered us all to stay here, Mr. Potter."

It took an effort for Harry to unclench his teeth. "Professor Quirrell didn't say that and neither did you. Professor McGonagall isn't a tactician, she didn't think to check if we had missing students and she thought it was a good idea to start marching students through the hallways. But Professor McGonagall understands after her mistakes are pointed out to her, you saw how she listened to you and Professor Quirrell, and I'm certain that she wouldn't want us to just ignore the fact that Hermione Granger is out there, alone –"

Tick.

"I'd expect the Professor to say she'd not wish any more students roaming the halls. The Professor said if anyone left for any reason, they'd be expelled. Maybe you don't need to worry because you're the Boy-Who-Lived, but the rest of us do!"

Tick.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Professor Quirrell was just laughing at him. Expecting some normal person to act without perfect strategic clarity, without a clear focus of responsibility on them personally, when they had a good excuse to do nothing... "A student's life is at stake," Harry said in a level voice. "She could be fighting the troll right now. Out of curiosity, does that mean anything to you at all?"

Tick.

Miss Morgan's face twisted. "You – you're the Boy-Who-Lived! Just go off by yourself and snap your fingers, if you want to help her!"

Tick.

Harry was hardly even aware of what he was saying. "That's just cleverness and bluffing, I don't have any power like that in real life, a young girl needs your help now are you a Gryffindor or not?"

"Why are you saying any of this to me?" cried Miss Morgan. "I wasn't left in charge here! Mr. Hagrid was!"

There was an awkward pause that suffused the whole room.

Harry spun to look up at the huge half-giant towering over the crowd of students, as all other heads also turned toward him as one.

"Mr. Hagrid," Harry said, trying to keep his voice commanding. "You need to authorize this expedition and you need to do it now."

Rubeus Hagrid looked conflicted, though that was hard to judge with his vast head so surrounded by his unshorn beard and locks; only his eyes looked alive, embedded in all that hair. "Eh..." said the half-giant. "I was tol' to keep yeh all safe –"

"Great, now can we also keep Hermione Granger safe? You know, the student framed for a murder she did not commit who needs someone to help her?"

The half-giant startled as Harry spoke the words.

Harry stared at the enormous man, desperately willing him to pick up on the hint, hoping the words hadn't given it away to anyone else – he couldn't be just muscle, surely James and Lily had been friends with this man out of more than pity –

"Framed?" called out an anonymous voice, from somewhere over near where the Slytherins gathered. "Ha, are you still on that? It'd serve her right if she did get eaten."

There was some laughter, even as cries of indignation came from elsewhere.

The half-giant's face firmed up. "Yeh stay here, lad," Mr. Hagrid said in a booming tone that was probably meant to be gentle. "I'll go and look fer her meself. Truth is, trolls can be a mite tricky – yeh've got to catch 'em by an ankle and dangle 'em just right, or they'll rip yeh clean in half –"

"Can you ride a broomstick, Mr. Hagrid?"

"Eh –" Rubeus Hagrid frowned. "No."

“Then you can’t search fast enough. Sixth-years! Calling all sixth-years! Are there any sixth-years here who aren’t worthless cowards?”

Silence.

“Fifth years? Mr. Hagrid, tell them they’re authorized to go with me and keep me safe! I’m trying to be sensible, damn it!”

The half-giant wrung his hands with an agonized expression. “Eh – I –”

Something snapped inside Harry and he started to stride directly toward the doors to the Great Hall, pushing aside anyone who didn’t get out of his way as though they were doughy statues. (He didn’t run, because running was an invitation for somebody to stop you.) Somewhere in his mind he was moving through an empty room filled with mechanical puppets by whose meaningless lip-moving noises he’d been distracted –

A huge figure interposed itself in his way.

Harry looked up.

“I can’t let yeh do that, Harry Potter, not yeh of all people. There’s strange things afoot in this castle, and someone might be after Miss Granger – or they might be after yeh.” Rubeus Hagrid’s voice was regretful but firm, and his gigantic hands lay at his side like forklifts. “I can’t let yeh go out there, Harry Potter.”

“Stupefy!”

The red bolt crashed into the side of Hagrid’s head and made the huge man startle. His head snapped around faster than anything that large should’ve moved, and bellowed, “What do yeh think yeh’re doing!” at the young form of Susan Bones.

“Sorry!” she screamed. “Incendium! Glisseo!”

The huge man’s hands, now slapping at the fire in his beard, didn’t quite manage to catch himself as he crashed to the floor, but it didn’t matter by then because Harry was past him and –

Neville Longbottom stepped in front of him, looking desperate but determined, the Hufflepuff boy’s wand already level in his hand.

Harry’s hand went for his wand in a sheer reflex action, he barely managed to check himself before Neville could fire on him, staring at his Lieutenant as though the world had gone mad.

“Harry!” Neville burst out. “Harry, Mr. Hagrid’s right, you can’t, this could all be a trap, they could be after you –”

All of Neville’s muscles went rigid and he toppled to the ground, stiff as a board.

A pale-looking Ron Weasley stepped out from behind Neville, his own wand level, and said, "Go."

"Ron, you madman, what are you doing –" came a voice distantly identifiable as Miss Clearwater's boyfriend, but Harry was already dashing for the door without looking back, even as Ron's voice and Susan's voice rose again in incantation. There was a huge indignant bellow, and unknown voices began to yell.

Then Harry was through, his hand reaching into his pouch and his voice was saying "broomstick", as behind him the great doors began to swing shut again.

Harry continued running through the Entrance Hall even as the long three-person broomstick and its sets of stirrups began to protrude from the pouch, repeating a number of swearwords in his head and thinking this is what happens when you try to be sensible with the part of his mind that wasn't trying to figure out a search pattern to cover places where Hermione might be. The Library was on the third floor and practically on the other side of the castle... Harry had almost reached the great marble staircase by the time the broomstick was in his hand and "Up!" he was in the air and accelerating up toward the second floor –

"Gah!" Harry screamed, and barely managed to spin his broom in the air so that he didn't impale one of the human figures lurking at the top of the stairs. There was a ghastly moment of trying not to fall off the broom, perform the twists that would keep him in the stirrups, despite being really close to the ground and having almost no room to maneuver and then –

"Fred? George?"

"We can't figure out how to find her!" one of the Weasley twins blurted, hands twisting in distress. "We snuck out because we thought we could find Miss Granger – there has to be a quick way to find anyone inside the Hogwarts castle, we're both sure of it – but we can't figure out what it is!"

Harry stared at both of them, from where he was hanging upside down from the broomstick where his desperate maneuver had brought him, and entirely by reflex his mouth said, "Well, why were you so sure you could find her?"

"We don't know!" cried the other Weasley twin.

"Have you been able to find people inside Hogwarts before?"

"Yes! We –" and the Weasley twin who was speaking stopped abruptly, both redheads staring off into the distance with a blank expression.

There was a thundering crash, as of two huge doors being shoved open by someone very, very strong.

Harry spun around in the air to present the two open stirrup-positions on the broomstick to the Weasley twins, he didn't say anything, there was no reason for them to give away their positions if they didn't have to. Time seemed to move too slowly as the Weasley twins scrambled into the stirrups, Harry's heart beating hard despite his mental calculation that Mr. Hagrid, running, shouldn't reach even the foot of the stairway in time. Then the three of them were accelerating hard and away toward the nearest corridor, the stone floor beneath them blurring and the walls seeming to make an audible whooshing sound (though that was just the wind in their ears) as they went past; Harry remembered that he was riding a longer three-person broomstick barely in time to slow down for the next turn.

And now all the broomstick seats were occupied, but if they actually found Hermione then – Harry could put on the Cloak of Invisibility, that should hide him from the troll, and that would free up a seat for Hermione –

Harry ducked hard before a sudden archway took his head off.

"We found Jesse!" the Weasley twin seated behind Harry blurted. "I know we did! That time we needed to tell him that Filch was hunting for him!"

"How?" Harry said, most of his brain engaged in not dying in a horrible air accident. He should have slowed down for safety, but there was a tension rising in him, a sourceless dread. He couldn't slow down, something terrible would happen if he slowed down...

"We –" said the Weasley twin seated lower down. "We can't remember!"

Another sharp turn taken at, Harry estimated, roughly 0.3% of the speed of light, and they were going through a twisty curving corridor that Harry always took to get from the Great Hall to the library only it wasn't the shortest way if you were on a broomstick, he should've taken the long straight West Corridor instead –

The part of his brain that wasn't steering caught up with reality.

"Someone's been tampering with your minds!" Harry yelled, as he weaved through the curving corridor so fast that the tail-end Weasley sometimes lightly smacked into the wall as the length of the broomstick conflicted with Harry's maladapted air skills.

"What?" cried Fred or George.

"Whoever got to Hermione messed with your minds too!" It could be an Obliviation, it could be a False Memory that hadn't been planted right, but

right now Harry couldn't think –

The broomstick turned and shot upward beside a spiral staircase, all three of them flattened themselves against the broomstick so they could make in through the gap in the ceiling that opened onto the third floor, and then they were in front of the library, the broomstick slowing to a halt with a shriek despite the lack of anything it could be friction-braking against. Harry shot the Weasley twins a quick glance to stay put, as he clambered off the broomstick to shove open the doors of the library, controlling his breathing as he shoved his head inside.

Hermione Granger wasn't there.

Madam Pince, who was eating a sandwich at her desk, looked up with a sudden glare. "Library's closed!"

"Have you seen Hermione Granger?" Harry said.

"I said the library's closed, boy! Lunch hours!"

"This is extremely important. Have you seen Hermione Granger or do you have any idea where she might be?"

"No, now be off!"

"Do you have any fast way of contacting Professor McGonagall in an emergency?"

"Eh?" said the librarian, startled. She rose up from behind her desk. "What is –"

"Yes or no. Please answer immediately."

"Ah – there's the Floo –"

"She's not in her office," Harry said. "Do you have any other way of reaching her. Yes or no."

"Young man, I insist that you –"

Harry's brain flagged this as I'm talking to NPCs again and he spun on his heel and dashed back for the broomstick.

"Stop!" cried Madam Pince, bursting too late from the doors as Harry and the Weasley twins shot off again, out of the librarian's sight. The pressure in Harry's mind still rising, like a physical hand squeezing his chest, he had to find Hermione and he had no other notion of where she could be, unless it was the witches' dorms in the Ravenclaw tower and that he couldn't enter. Searching all of Hogwarts bordered on a mathematical impossibility, there probably was no continuous flight path that entered all the rooms at least once – why hadn't he thought to demand for Hermione and Neville and him to be given a set of those neat little mirrors the Aurors used to communicate –

The realization that he was being stupid hit Harry like a blow to the stomach. He didn't need mirrors to send a message, he hadn't needed mirrors since January. Harry slowed the broomstick to a halt in midair of a hallway, his wand already coming into his hand, the driving will to protect Hermione Granger rising to the front of his mind like a sun of silver fire and flowing down his arm as he cried

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

and the blazing white humanoid burst into existence like a nova, the Weasley twins' voices crying aloud in shock.

“Tell Hermione Granger – that there's a troll loose in Hogwarts – it could be hunting for her – she needs to get into direct sunlight, now!”

The silver figure turned as though it was departing, and then vanished.

“Merlin's underpants,” breathed Fred or George.

The silver outline blasted back into the world, and said in the strange outside version of Harry's own voice, “Hermione Granger says,” the blazing figure's voice became higher-pitched, “АННННННННННН!”

Time seemed to fracture, like everything was moving very quickly and slowly at the same time. A desperate impulse to accelerate the broomstick, fly at its maximum speed, only Harry didn't know where –

“If you know where she is,” Harry shouted to the blazing humanoid figure, staring into it as though it were a sun, “then take me to her!”

The silver blaze moved and Harry accelerated after it, the Weasley twins giving out high-pitched shrieks behind him as he fired through the air like a cannonball, moving faster than sanity, he didn't focus on the walls whizzing past him or how fast he was moving, just followed the silver light through corridors and flying up staircases and blitzing through doors that Fred or George cried desperate incantations to open and it was all still taking too much time, somewhere deep inside Harry felt like he was sinking through molasses as windows and portraits shot past.

The broomstick screamed through a final turn that whacked one of the Weasley twins against the wall not quite as hard as a Bludger would hit, and then they followed the brilliant Patronus through an open space in the ceilings, blasting up and upwards, rising past one floor and then another in less than a breath.

His Patronus slowed to a halt (Harry braking hard in response) just as they reached the level of a wide-open floor space that spread out until it

escaped the ceiling and turned into an outdoor terrace, a spread of tiled marble open to the air and sky –

TIME PRESSURE, PART II

COOL blue fires clung to the floor in small masses, surrounding a blazing pool that seemed to burn with a deadlier, hotter blue.

In one narrow circle the marble tiles were scorched and shattered by some explosive spell that only the most prodigious of first-year witches could have cast, with the last of her strength.

On the terrace, still moving beneath the open sunlight, stood a great lumpy creature of dull granite-grey. Body like a boulder with small bald head perched on top like a stone, short legs thick as tree trunks with flat, horny feet. One hand held a tremendous stone club as long and as wide as an adult human, and the other hand held

The Weasley twins screamed.

Harry's Patronus shattered.

The troll snorted and spun around to face them, dropping into the red pool that had spread out beneath its feet, raising its club high.

Then a Weasley cried an incantation and the club was torn from the troll's hand, smashed into its face so hard it drove the troll back for one of its steps, a blow that might have killed a Muggle. The troll gave a bellow of anger, its nose squashed and blood-spattered, and then the nose straightened once more, regenerated. The troll grabbed with both hands for the club, which shot away through the air but only barely dodged the grab.

"Lead it away, keep it off me," said a voice.

The levitated club moved backwards from the troll, from the terrace onto the wide-open floor beneath the ceiling; and the troll made a great prodigious leap that almost brought the club into its hands. Then the troll made another great leap as the club moved to one side; and the broomstick moved forwards and Harry jumped off and ran towards where Hermione Granger was lying in a pool of her own blood with her legs eaten away to the upper thighs.

Harry's hands tore open the healer's kit from his pouch, grabbed one of the self-tightening tourniquets, wrapped them around one ragged tooth-marked stump, his hands briefly slipping in the blood, they didn't tremble, there wasn't any allowance for his hands to tremble. As the tourniquet formed

a complete loop it tightened hard and more blood came out, but then the bleeding stopped on that thigh-stump, and Harry turned to the other. Part of his mind was screaming, screaming, screaming and even the part of him picking up the other self-tightening tourniquet heard it, but that also wasn't allowed.

The two Weasley twins were shouting spells, one after another in rapid-fire casting that would have had Harry unconscious in sixty seconds, sometimes the twins shouted two spells simultaneously in perfect coordination, but most of the spells were disrupting in harmless showers of sparks against the troll's skin. As the other tourniquet tightened itself in another pulse of blood, Harry looked up at a "Diffindo!" / "Reducto!" that made the troll's vulnerable eyes explode in twin showers of vitreous humor, but the troll only bellowed once more, its eyes already reforming.

"Fire and acid!" Harry shouted. "Use fire or acid!"

"Fuego!" / "Incendio!" Harry heard, but he wasn't looking, he was reaching for the syringe of glowing orange liquid that was the oxygenating potion, pushing it into Hermione's neck at what Harry hoped was the carotid artery, to keep her brain alive even if her lungs or heart stopped, so long as her brain stayed intact everything else could be fixed, it had to be possible for magic to fix it, it had to be possible for magic to fix it, it had to be possible for magic to fix it, and Harry pushed the plunger of the syringe all the way down, creating a faint glow beneath the pale skin of her neck. Harry then pushed down on her chest, where her heart should be, hard compressions that he hoped was moving the oxygenated blood around to where it could reach her brain, even if her heart might have stopped beating, he hadn't actually thought to check her pulse.

Then Harry stared at the other things in his medical kit, his mind going blank as he tried to figure out what else of what was there, if anything, he could use. The screaming in that distant corner of his mind was getting louder, much louder, now that his hands had stopped their frantic motions. He was suddenly aware of the liquid sensation where blood had soaked through his robes and the knees of his pants.

From behind Harry came the sound of another bellow from the troll, and he heard one of the Weasley twins shout "Deligitor prodeas!" and then, "HELP! Do something!"

Harry twisted his head back to look, and saw that one of the Weasley twins was somehow now wearing the Sorting Hat on his head, facing off

against the troll which held the huge stone club in both its hands, looking somewhat scorched now and with one or two smoking scars across its arms, but still intact.

And then the voice of the Hat bellowed in a voice so loud it seemed to shake the walls,

“GRYFFINDOR!”

A pulse of power burned the air, magic feeling almost tangible even to Harry’s young senses, the troll jumped back a pace with a snort of surprise. Fred or George, with a strange look on his face, swept the Hat off his head with a motion smooth as a magician’s trick, and reached in with one hand and drew forth a hilt whose pommel was a glowing ruby, followed by a wide crossguard of gleaming white metal, and a blade as long as a tall child. As the sword was revealed the air seemed to fill with a silent scream of fury.

Upon the blade was written in golden script, nihil supernum.

Then the Weasley twin raised the sword aloft as though the huge blade weighed nothing, and screamed and charged.

Harry’s lips opened to say something, some long sentence like, No, stop, you have no idea how to use a sword but not even a single syllable left his lips before the sword sliced off the troll’s right arm through the elbow, cutting through skin and flesh and bone like jelly; just as the already-swinging arc of the stone club smashed into the charging Weasley twin and sent him flying through the air above the marble floor, over the gap out of which they’d risen on the broomstick, until that Weasley hit the wall on the opposite side and then collapsed into an unmoving heap.

The bright sword vanished down into the opening in the floor, clattering distantly as it dropped.

“Fred!” screamed George Weasley, and then “VENTUS!”

An invisible blow caught the troll and hurled it sideways through the air.

“VENTUS!”

The troll was hit again, blown to the edge of the floor and the gap leading downwards.

“VENTUS!”

But the troll had reached down and grabbed at the floor, its remaining hand crunching through marble to gain a firm hold. The third blow sent the troll’s body over the gap; but the hand remained at the edge. And then the troll was pulling itself back up single-handedly, roaring.

George Weasley staggered, almost falling, his hand dropping to his side. "Harry –" the Weasley twin said in a strained voice, "Run –"

The remaining Weasley twin took a step sideways, slumped against the wall, and slid to the ground.

Time was fractured in Harry's mind, the world around him seemed to move slowly, distorted, or perhaps it was his own mind twisting and folding. He should have been moving, doing something, but a strange paralysis seemed to be stopping all his muscles, all his motions. Without any time for words, thoughts came in flashes of concepts: that if Harry ran away the troll would eat the Weasley twins as well as Hermione, that if Bludgers didn't kill wizards then Fred should still be alive, that the Weasley twins were more powerful spellcasters than him and they hadn't been able to hold back the troll, there was no time to Transfigure anything he didn't already possess, the troll seemed too agile to be lured over the edge of the terrace to fall off the sides of the Hogwarts castle, someone had enchanted the troll against sunlight before using it as a murder weapon and might also have strengthened it in other ways. And then a mental image of Hermione running from the troll, running for sunlight, finally reaching the bright terrace with the troll hot on her heels, only to find that someone else had thought of that possibility, too.

The screaming horror in his mind was drowned out by another emotion.

Harry stood up.

On the other side of the room, the enemy had also risen, the unregenerating stump of one sword-cut arm still bloody.

intent to kill

The troll grasped its fallen club in its remaining hand, and gave a huge bellow, smashing the club into the floor and sending marble chips flying.

think purely of killing

The troll began to lumber towards where George had fallen, a thin string of drool trailing from the side of its lips.

grasp at any means to do so

Harry took five strides forward, and the enemy gave another bellow and turned away from George, its eyes focusing squarely on him.

censors off, do not flinch

The third most perfect killing machine in nature bounded towards him in leaping steps.

KILL

Harry's left hand already held the Transfigured diamond from his ring, his right hand already held his wand.

"Wingardium Leviosa."

Harry's wand directed the tiny jewel into the troll's mouth.

"Finite Incantatem."

The troll's head blew off its spine as the rock expanded back into its old form, and Harry stepped aside as the Enemy's body crashed where he'd been standing.

The enemy's head was already beginning to regenerate, the ragged stump of the jaw and spine smoothing over, the mouth completing itself and replacing its teeth.

Harry bent down and picked up the troll's head by its left ear. His wand jammed through the troll's left eye, plunging through the jelly-like material and passing through the wide socket in the bone. Harry visualized a one-millimeter-wide cross-section through the enemy's brain, and Transfigured it into sulfuric acid.

The enemy stopped regenerating.

Harry threw the corpse over the edge of the terrace and turned back to Hermione.

Her eyes were moving, and focused on him.

Harry scrambled down beside her, ignoring the blood soaking more of his already-soaked robes. You'll be all right, his brain formed the sentence, but his lips wouldn't move. You'll be all right, we'll find some magic to fix all this, put you back to normal, just hold on, don't –

Hermione's lips were moving, just a tiny bit but they were moving.

"your... fault..."

Time froze. Harry should have told her not to talk, to save her breath, only he couldn't unblock his lips.

Hermione drew in another breath, and her lips whispered, "Not your fault."

Then she exhaled, and closed her eyes.

Harry stared at her with his mouth half-open, his breath caught in his throat.

"Don't do this," said his voice. He'd only been two minutes late.

Hermione suddenly convulsed, her arms twitching into the air as though reaching up for something, and her eyes flew open again. There was a burst of something that was magic and also more, a shout louder than an earthquake

and containing a thousand books, a thousand libraries, all spoken in a single cry that was Hermione; too vast to be understood, except that Harry suddenly knew that Hermione had whited out the pain, and was glad not to be dying alone. For a moment it seemed like the outpouring of magic might hold, take root in the castle's stone; but then the outpouring ended and the magic faded, her body stopped moving and all motion halted as Hermione Jean Granger ceased to exist –

No.

Harry stood up from the body, swaying.

No.

There was a burst of flame and Dumbledore was standing there with Fawkes, his eyes filled with horror. "I felt a student die! What –"

The old wizard's eyes saw what lay upon the ground.

"Oh, no," whispered Albus Dumbledore. Fawkes gave a sad, mournful croon.

"Bring her back."

There was silence on the terrace. Fred Weasley had risen up into the air at a gesture from Dumbledore's wand and was floating towards them, surrounded by a reassuring pink glow.

"Harry –" the old wizard began. His voice cracked. "Harry –"

"Have Fawkes cry on her or whatever. Hurry up." The voice that spoke sounded perfectly calm.

"I, I can't, Harry, it's too late, she's dead –"

"I don't want to hear about it. If it was me lying there, you'd pull some kind of amazing rabbit out of your hat and save me, right, because the hero isn't allowed to die before the story's over. Well, she's the hero too, so whatever you were saving for that extra-special occasion, just go ahead and use it now. I promise I'll pay you back."

"There isn't anything I can do! Her soul has departed, she's passed on!"

Harry opened his mouth to scream out all his fury, and then closed it again. There wasn't any point in screaming, it wouldn't accomplish anything. The unbearable pressure rising inside him couldn't be let out that way.

Harry turned away from Dumbledore and looked down at where the remains of Hermione Granger were lying in a pool of blood. Part of his mind was hammering at the world around him, trying to make it go away, wake up from the nightmare and find himself back in his Ravenclaw dorm room with the morning sun shining through the curtains. But the blood remained

and Harry didn't wake up, and another part of him already knew that this event was real, part of the same flawed world that included Azkaban and the Wizengamot chamber and

No

With a fracturing feeling, as though time was still torn to pieces around him, Harry turned away from Dumbledore and looked down at the remains of Hermione Granger lying in a pool of blood with two tourniquets tied around her thigh-stumps, and decided

No.

I do not accept this.

There isn't any reason to accept it, not when there's magic in the world.

Harry would learn whatever he had to learn, invent whatever he had to invent, rip the knowledge of Salazar Slytherin from the Dark Lord's mind, discover the secret of Atlantis, open any gates or break any seals necessary, find his way to the root of all magic and reprogram it.

He would rip apart the foundations of reality itself to get Hermione Granger back.



"The crisis is over," the Defense Professor said. "You may dismount, Madam."

Trelawney, who had been sitting behind him on the two-person broomstick that had just blazed through Hogwarts burning directly through all the walls and floors in their way, hastily pulled herself off and then sat down hard on the floor, a pace away from the red-glowing edges of a newly made gap in the wall. The woman was still breathing in gasps, bending over herself as though she were on the verge of vomiting out something larger than she was.

The Defense Professor had felt the boy's horror, through the link that existed between the two of them, the resonance in their magic; and he had realized that the boy had sought the troll and found it. The Defense Professor had tried to send an impulse to retreat, to don the Cloak of Invisibility and flee; but he'd never been able to influence the boy through the resonance, and hadn't succeeded that time either.

He'd felt the boy give himself over fully to the killing intention. That was when the Defense Professor had begun burning through the substance of Hogwarts, trying to reach the battle in time.

He'd felt the boy exterminate his enemy in seconds.

He'd felt the boy's dismay as one of his friends died.

He'd felt the fury the boy had directed at some annoyance who was likely Dumbledore; followed by an unknown resolution whose unyielding hardness even he found adequate. With any luck, the boy had just discarded his foolish little reluctances.

Unseen by anyone, the Defense Professor's lips curved up in a thin smile. Despite its little ups and downs, on the whole this had been a surprisingly good day –

“HE IS HERE. THE ONE WHO WILL TEAR APART THE VERY STARS IN HEAVEN. HE IS HERE. HE IS THE END OF THE WORLD.”

ROLES, PART I

A SIMPLE Innervate from the Headmaster had awakened Fred Weasley, followed by a preliminary healing Charm for a broken arm and cracked ribs. Harry's voice had distantly told the Headmaster about the Transfigured acid inside the troll's head (Dumbledore had looked down over the side of the terrace and made a gesture before returning) and then about the Weasley twins' minds having been tampered with, carrying on a separate conversation that Harry remembered but could not process.

Harry still stood over Hermione's body, he hadn't moved from that spot, thinking as fast as he could through the sense of dissociation and fragmented time, was there anything he should be doing now, any opportunities that were passing irrevocably. Some way to reduce the amount of magical omnipotence that would be required later. A temporal beacon effect to mark this instant for later time travel, if he someday found a way to travel back further than six hours. There were theories of time travel under General Relativity (which had seemed much less plausible before Harry had run across Time-Turners) and those theories said you couldn't go back to before the time machine was built – a relativistic time machine maintained a continuous pathway through time, it didn't teleport anything. But Harry didn't see anything helpful he could do using spells in his lexicon, Dumbledore wasn't being very cooperative, and in any case this was several minutes after the critical location within Time

"Harry," the Headmaster whispered, laying his hand on Harry's shoulder. He had vanished from where he was standing over the Weasley twins and come into existence beside Harry; George Weasley had discontinuously teleported from where he was sitting to be kneeling next to his brother's side, and Fred was now lying straight with his eyes open and wincing as he breathed. "Harry, you must go from this place."

"Hold on," said Harry's voice. "I'm trying to think if there's anything else I can do."

The old wizard's voice sounded helpless. "Harry – I know you do not believe in souls – but whether Hermione is watching you now, or no, I do not think she would wish for you to be like this."

... no, it was obvious.

Harry leveled his wand at Hermione's body –

“Harry! What are you –”

– and poured everything down his arm into his hand –

“Frigideirol!”

“– doing?”

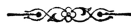
“Hypothermia,” Harry said distantly, as he staggered. It'd been one of the spells he and Hermione had experimented on, a lifetime ago, so he was able to control it precisely, though it had taken a lot of power to affect that much mass. Hermione's body should now be at almost exactly five degrees Celsius. “People have been revived from cold water after more than thirty minutes without breathing. The cold protects you from brain damage, you see, it slows everything down. There's a saying Muggle doctors have, you're not dead until you're warm and dead – I think they even cool down the patient during some surgeries, if they have to stop someone's heart for a while.”

Fred and George started sobbing.

Dumbledore's face was already streaked with tears. “I'm sorry,” he whispered. “Harry, I'm so sorry, but you have to stop this.” The Headmaster took Harry by the shoulders and pulled on him.

Harry allowed himself to be turned away from Hermione's body, walked forward as the Headmaster pushed him away from the blood. The Cooling Charm would buy him time. Hours at least, maybe days if he could manage to keep casting the spell on Hermione or if they stored her body somewhere cold.

Now there was time to think.



Minerva had seen Albus's face and she'd known something was wrong; there had been time for her to wonder what had happened, and even who had died; her mind flashing to Alastor, to Augusta, to Arthur and Molly, all the most likely targets at the start of Voldemort's second rise. She had thought that she had steeled herself, she had thought herself ready for the worst.

Then Albus spoke, and all the steel left her.

Not Hermione – no –

Albus gave her a brief space to weep; and then told her that Harry Potter, who had watched Miss Granger die, had seated himself outside the infirmary storeroom where Miss Granger's remains were being kept, refusing to move

from the spot, and telling anyone who spoke to him to go away so he could think.

The only thing that had elicited any reaction from the boy was when Fawkes had tried to sing to him; Harry Potter had shrieked at the phoenix not to do that, his feelings were real, he didn't want magic trying to heal them like they were a disease. After that Fawkes had refused to sing again.

Albus thought that she might have the best chance of reaching Harry Potter now.

So she had to pull herself together, and clean up her face; there would be time later for private grief, when her surviving children no longer needed her.

Minerva McGonagall pulled together the dislocated pieces of herself, wiped her eyes a final time, and laid her hand on the doorknob of the infirmary section whose back storeroom was now being used, for the second time this century and for the fifth time since the castle of Hogwarts had been raised, as the resting place of a promising young student.

She opened the door.

Harry Potter's eyes gazed at her. The boy was sitting on the floor in front of the door to the back storeroom, and holding his wand in his lap. If those eyes were grieving, if they were empty, if they were even broken, it couldn't be seen from looking at the boy's face. There were no dried tears on those cheeks.

"Why are you here, Professor McGonagall?" Harry Potter said. "I told the Headmaster I'd like to be left alone for a while."

She couldn't think of anything to say. To help you – you're not all right – but she didn't know what to say, there was nothing she could imagine saying that would make things better. She hadn't planned ahead before she'd walked into the room, having not been at her best.

"What are you thinking about?" Minerva said. It was the only sentence that came into her mind. Albus had told her that Harry had been saying, over and over, that he was thinking; and she had to get Harry talking, somehow.

Harry stared half at her and half past her, a tension coming into his face, as she held her breath.

It took a while before Harry spoke.

"I'm trying to think if there's anything I should be doing right now," said Harry Potter. "It's hard, though. My mind keeps on imagining ways the past

could have gone differently if I'd thought faster, and I can't rule out that there might be a key insight in there somewhere."

"Mr. Potter –" she said falteringly. "Harry, I don't think it's healthy for you to be – thinking like that –"

"I disagree. It's not thinking that gets people killed." The words were spoken in a level monotone, as though reciting lines from a book.

"Harry," she said, hardly even thinking as she said it, "there's nothing you could have done –"

Something flickered in Harry's expression. His eyes seemed to focus on her for the first time.

"Nothing I could have done?" Harry's voice rose on the last word. "Nothing I could have DONE? I've lost track of how many different ways I could've saved her! If I'd asked to have us all given communications mirrors! If I'd insisted on Hermione being taken out of Hogwarts and put in a school that isn't insane! If I'd snuck out immediately instead of trying to argue with normal people! If I'd remembered the Patronus earlier! If I'd thought through possible emergencies and trained myself to think about Patronuses earlier! Even at the very last minute it might not have been too late! I killed the troll and turned to her and she was still ALIVE and I just knelt next to her listening to her last words like an IDIOT instead of casting the Patronus again and calling Dumbledore to send Fawkes! Or if I'd just approached the whole problem from a different angle – if I'd looked for a student with a Time-Turner to send a message back in time before I found out about anything happening to her, instead of ending up with an outcome that can't be altered – I asked the Headmaster to go back and save Hermione and then fake everything, fake the dead body, edit everyone's memories, but Dumbledore said that he tried something like that once and it didn't work and he lost another friend instead. Or if I'd – if I'd only gone with – if, that night –"

Harry pressed his hands over his face, and when he removed them again, his face was calm and composed once more.

"Anyway," said Harry Potter, now in a monotone again, "I don't want to repeat that mistake, so I'm going to spend until dinnertime thinking if there's anything I should be doing. If I haven't thought of anything by then I'll go to dinner and eat. Now please go away."

She was aware now that tears were sliding down her cheeks, again. "Harry – Harry, you have to believe that this isn't your fault!"

"Of course it's my fault. There's no one else here who could be responsible

for anything.”

“No! You-Know-Who killed Hermione!” She was hardly aware of what she was saying, that she hadn’t screened the room against who might be listening. “Not you! No matter what else you could’ve done, it’s not you who killed her, it was Voldemort! If you can’t believe that you’ll go mad, Harry!”

“That’s not how responsibility works, Professor.” Harry’s voice was patient, like he was explaining things to a child who was certain not to understand. He wasn’t looking at her anymore, just staring off at the wall to her right side. “When you do a fault analysis, there’s no point in assigning fault to a part of the system you can’t change afterward, it’s like stepping off a cliff and blaming gravity. Gravity isn’t going to change next time. There’s no point in trying to allocate responsibility to people who aren’t going to alter their actions. Once you look at it from that perspective, you realize that allocating blame never helps anything unless you blame yourself, because you’re the only one whose actions you can change by putting blame there. That’s why Dumbledore has his room full of broken wands. He understands that part, at least.”

Some distant part of her mind made a note to wait until much later and then speak sharply to the Headmaster about what he was showing to impressionable young children. She might even scream at him this time. She’d been thinking about screaming at him anyway, because of Miss Granger –

“You’re not responsible,” she said, though her voice trembled. “It’s the Professors – it’s us who are responsible for student safety, not you.”

Harry’s eyes flicked back to her. “You’re responsible?” There was a tightness in the voice. “You want me to hold you responsible, Professor McGonagall?”

She raised her chin and nodded. It would be better, by far, than Harry blaming himself.

The boy pushed himself up from where he was sitting on the floor, and took a step forward. “All right, then,” Harry said in a monotone. “I tried to do the sensible thing, when I saw Hermione was missing and that none of the Professors knew. I asked for a seventh-year student to go with me on a broomstick and protect me while we looked for Hermione. I asked for help. I begged for help. And nobody helped me. Because you gave everyone an absolute order to stay in one place or they’d be expelled, no excuses. No matter what else Dumbledore gets wrong, he at least thinks of his students as people, not animals that have to be herded into a pen and kept from wandering

out. You knew you weren't any good at military thinking, your first idea was to have us walking through the hallways, you knew some students there were better than you at strategy and tactics, and you still nailed us down in one room without any discretionary judgment. So when something you didn't foresee happened and it would've made perfect sense to send out a seventh-year student on a fast broom to look for Hermione Granger, the students knew you wouldn't understand or forgive. They weren't afraid of the troll, they were afraid of you. The discipline, the conformity, the cowardice that you instilled in them delayed me just long enough for Hermione to die. Not that I should've tried asking for help from normal people, of course, and I will change and be less stupid next time. But if I were dumb enough to allocate responsibility to someone who isn't me, that's what I'd say."

Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

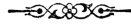
"That's what I'd tell you if I thought you could be responsible for anything. But normal people don't choose on the basis of consequences, they just play roles. There's a picture in your head of a stern disciplinarian and you do whatever that picture would do, whether or not it makes any sense. A stern disciplinarian would order the students back to their rooms, even if there was a troll roaming the hallways. A stern disciplinarian would order students not to leave the Hall on pain of expulsion. And the little picture of Professor McGonagall that you have in your head can't learn from experience or change herself, so there isn't any point to this conversation. People like you aren't responsible for anything, people like me are, and when we fail there's no one else to blame."

The boy strode forward to stand directly before her. His hand darted beneath his robes, brought forth the golden sphere that was the Ministry-issued protective shell of his Time Turner. He spoke in a dead, level voice without any emphasis. "This could've saved Hermione, if I'd been able to use it. But you thought it was your role to shut me down and get in my way. Nobody has died in Hogwarts in fifty years, you said that when you locked it, do you remember? I should've asked again after Bellatrix Black got loose from Azkaban, or after Hermione got framed for attempted murder. But I forgot because I was stupid. Please unlock it now before any of my other friends die."

Unable to speak, she brought forth her wand and did so, releasing the time-keyed enchantment she'd laced into the shell's lock.

Harry Potter flipped open the golden shell, looked at the tiny glass hour-

glass within its circles, nodded, and then snapped the case shut. "Thank you. Now go away." The boy's voice cracked again. "I have to think."



She closed the door behind her, an awful and still mostly-muffled sound escaping her throat –

Albus shimmered into existence beside her, taking on a brief garish hue as the Disillusionment wore off.

She did not jump, quite. "I've told you, stop doing that," Minerva said. Her voice sounded dull in her own ears. "That was private."

Albus flickered his fingers at the door behind her. "I was afraid Mr. Potter might do you some harm." The Headmaster paused, then said quietly, "I am very surprised that you stood there and took that."

"All I had to do was say 'Mr. Potter', and he would have stopped." Her voice had dropped almost to a whisper. "Just that, and he would have stopped. And then he would have had no one to say those awful things to, no one at all."

"I thought Mr. Potter's remarks were entirely unfair and undeserved," Albus said.

"If it had been you, Albus, you would not have threatened to expel anyone leaving the room. Can you honestly tell me otherwise?"

Albus's brows rose. "Your role in this disaster was tiny, your decisions quite sensible at the time, and it is only Harry Potter's perfect hindsight that lets him imagine otherwise. Surely you are wiser than to blame yourself for this, Minerva."

She knew perfectly well that Albus would be placing a picture of Hermione in that awful room of his, that it would occupy a place of honor. Albus would hold himself responsible, she was certain, even though he hadn't even been in Hogwarts at the time. But not her.

So you also don't think it's worth the trouble of holding me responsible...

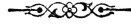
She slumped against the nearest wall, trying not to let the tears emerge again; she'd never seen Albus weep save thrice. "You have always believed in your students, as I never have. They would not have been afraid of you. They would have known you would understand."

"Minerva –"

"I am not fit to succeed you as Headmistress. We both know it."

"You are wrong," Albus said quietly. "When the time comes, you will be the forty-fifth Headmistress of Hogwarts and you will do an excellent job of it."

She shook her head. "What now, Albus? If he will not listen to me, then who?"



It was perhaps half an hour later. The boy still guarded the door to where his best friend's body lay, sitting his vigil. He was staring downward, at his wand as it lay in his hands. Sometimes his face screwed up in thought, at other times it relaxed.

Although the door did not open, and there was no sound, the boy looked up. He composed his face. His voice, when he spoke, was dull. "I don't want company."

The door opened.

The Defense Professor of Hogwarts entered into the room and shut the door behind him, taking up careful position in a corner between two walls, as far away from the boy as the room permitted. A sharp sense of catastrophe had risen in the air between the two of them, and hung there unchanging.

"Why are you here?" said the boy.

The man tilted his head slightly. Pale eyes examined the boy as though he were a specimen of life from a distant planet, and correspondingly dangerous.

"I've come to apologize, Mr. Potter," the man said quietly.

"Apologize for what?" the boy said. "Why, what could you have done to prevent Hermione's death?"

"I should have thought to check for the presence of yourself, Mr. Longbottom, and Miss Granger, all of whom were obvious next targets," the Defense Professor said without hesitation. "Mr. Hagrid was not mentally equipped to command the student contingent. I should have ignored the Deputy Headmistress's request for silence, and told her to leave behind Professor Flitwick, who would have been better able to defend the students from any threat, and who could have maintained communication via Patronus."

"Correct." The boy's voice was razor-sharp. "I'd forgotten there was someone else in Hogwarts who could be responsible for things. So why didn't you think of it, Professor? Because I don't believe that you were stupid."

There was a pause, and the boy's fingers whitened on his wand.

"You did not think of it either, Mr. Potter, at the time." There was a weariness in the Defense Professor's voice. "I am smarter than you. I think faster than you. I am more experienced than you. But the gap between the two of us is not the same as the gap between us and them. If you can miss something, then so can I." The man's lips twisted. "You see, I deduced at once that the troll was but a distraction from some other matter, and of no great importance in itself. So long as nobody sent the students wandering pointlessly through the halls, or uncaringly dispatched the young Slytherins to those very dungeons where the troll had been spotted."

The boy did not seem to relax. "I suppose that is plausible."

"In any case," said the man, "if there is anyone who can be said to be responsible for Miss Granger's death, it is myself, not you. It is I, not you, who should have –"

"I perceive that you have spoken to Professor McGonagall and that she has given you a script to follow." The boy did not bother keeping the bitterness from his voice. "If you have something to say to me, Professor, say it without the masks."

There was a pause.

"As you wish," the Defense Professor said emotionlessly. The pale eyes stayed keen and sharp. "I do regret that the girl is dead. She was a good student in my Defense class, and could have been an ally to you later. I would wish to console you for your loss, but I cannot see how to go about doing so. Naturally, if I find the ones responsible I shall kill them. You are welcome to join in should circumstances permit."

"How touching," the boy said, his voice cool. "You are not claiming to have liked Hermione, then?"

"Her charms were lost on me, I suspect. I no longer form such bonds easily."

The boy nodded. "Thank you for being honest. Is that all, Professor?"

There was a pause.

"The castle is scarred, now," said the man standing in the corner.

"What?"

"When a certain ancient device in my possession informed me that Miss Granger was on the verge of death, I cast that spell of cursed fire of which I once spoke. I burned through some walls and floors so that my broomstick could take a more direct path." The man still spoke tonelessly. "Hogwarts will not heal such wounds easily, if at all. I suppose it will be necessary to

patch over the holes with lesser conjurations. I regret that now, since I was in any case too late."

"Ah," said the boy. He closed his eyes briefly. "You did want to save her. You wanted it so strongly that you made some sort of actual effort. I suppose your mind, if not theirs, would be capable of that."

A brief, dry smile from the man.

"Thank you for that, Professor. But I would like to be left alone now until dinnertime. You of all people will understand. Is that all?"

"Not quite," the man said. A tinge of sardonic dryness now returned to his voice. "You see, based on recent experiences, I am concerned that you may now intend to do something extremely foolish."

"Such as what?" said the boy.

"I am not quite sure. Perhaps you have decided that a universe without Miss Granger is devoid of value, and should be destroyed for the insults it has dealt you."

The boy smiled without any humor. "Your own issues are showing, Professor. I don't really go in for that sort of thing. Did you, at some point?"

"Not particularly. I have no great fondness for the universe, but I do live there."

There was a pause.

"What are you planning, Mr. Potter?" said the man in the corner. "You have come to some significant resolution, though you are trying to hide it from me. What do you now intend?"

The boy shook his head. "I'm still thinking, and would like to be left alone to do it."

"I recall an offer you once made to me, some months ago," said the Defense Professor. "Do you want someone intelligent to talk to? I will understand if you are not pleasant to be around."

The boy shook his head again. "No, thank you."

"Well, then," said the Defense Professor. "What about someone who is powerful and not particularly bound by naive scruples?"

There was a hesitation, and then the boy once more shook his head.

"Someone who is knowledgeable of much secret lore, and magics that some might consider to be unnatural?"

There was a slight narrowing of the boy's eyes, so imperceptible that someone else might not have –

"I see," said the Defense Professor. "Go ahead and ask me about it, then. I give you my word that I will repeat nothing of it to the others."

The boy took a while to speak, and when he did it was in a cracked voice.

"I mean to bring Hermione back. Because there isn't an afterlife, and I'm not about to just let her – just not be –"

The boy pressed his hands over his face, and when he withdrew them, he once more seemed as dispassionate as the man standing in the corner.

The Defense Professor's eyes were abstract, and faintly puzzled.

"How?" the man said finally.

"However I have to."

There was another pause.

"Regardless of the risks," the man in the corner said. "Regardless of how dangerous the magic required to accomplish it."

"Yes."

The Defense Professor's eyes were thoughtful. "But what general approach did you have in mind? I presume that turning her corpse into an Inferius is not what you –"

"Would she be able to think?" the boy said. "Would her body still decay?"

"No, and yes."

"Then no."

"What of the Resurrection Stone of Cadmus Peverell, if it could be obtained for you?"

The boy shook his head. "I don't want an illusion of Hermione drawn from my memories. I want her to be able to live her life –" the boy's voice cracked. "I haven't decided yet on an object-level angle of attack. If I have to brute-force the problem by acquiring enough power and knowledge to just make it happen, I will."

Another pause.

"And to go about that," the man in the corner said, "you will use your favorite tool, science."

"Of course."

The Defense Professor exhaled, almost like a sigh. "I suppose that makes sense of it."

"Are you willing to help, or not?" the boy said.

"What help do you seek?"

"Magic. Where does it come from?"

"I do not know," said the man.

“And neither does anyone else?”

“Oh, the situation is far worse than that, Mr. Potter. There is hardly a scholar of the esoteric who has not unraveled the nature of magic, and every one of them believes something different.”

“Where do new spells come from? I keep reading about someone who invented a spell to do something-or-other but there’s no mention of how.”

A shrug of robed shoulders. “Where do new books come from, Mr. Potter? Those who read many books sometimes become able to write them in turn. How? No one knows.”

“There are books on how to write –”

“Reading them will not make you a famous playwright. After all such advice is accounted for, what remains is mystery. The invention of new spells is a similar mystery of purer form.” The man’s head tilted. “Such endeavors are dangerous. The saying is that one should either not have children, or else wait until after they are grown. There is a reason why so many innovators seem to hail from Gryffindor, rather than Ravenclaw as might be expected.”

“And the more powerful sorts of magics?” the boy said.

“A legendary wizard might invent one sacrificial ritual in his life, and pass on the knowledge to his heirs. To try inventing five such would be suicide. That is why wizards of true power are those who have acquired ancient lore.”

The boy nodded distantly. “So much for the direct solution, then. It would’ve been nice to just invent a spell for ‘Raise Dead’, ‘Become God’ or ‘Summon Terminal’. Do you know anything about Atlantis?”

“Only what any scholar knows,” the man said dryly. “If you would like to hear about the top eighteen standard theories – do not glare at me, Mr. Potter. If it were that simple, I would have done it many years earlier.”

“I understand. Sorry.”

There was a time of silence. The Defense Professor’s gaze rested on the boy, the boy stared off seemingly at nothing.

“There’s some magics I mean to learn. Spells I could’ve used earlier today, if I’d thought to study them beforehand.” The boy’s voice was cold. “Spells I’ll need, if this sort of thing goes on happening. Most I expect I can just look up. Some I expect I can’t.”

The Defense Professor inclined his head. “I shall teach you almost any magic you wish to know, Mr. Potter. I do have some limits, but you may always ask. But what specifically do you seek? You lack the raw power for the Killing Curse and most other spells deemed forbidden –”

"That spell of cursed fire. I don't suppose it's a sacrificial ritual that even a child could use, if he dared?"

The Defense Professor's lips twitched. "It requires the permanent sacrifice of a drop of blood; your body would be lighter by that drop of blood, from that day forward. Not the sort of thing one would wish to do often, Mr. Potter. Strength of will is demanded for the cursed fire not to turn upon you and consume you; the usual practice is to first test one's will in lesser trials. And although it is not a primary element of the ritual, I am afraid that it does require more magic than you shall possess for another few years."

"Pity," the boy said. "It would've been nice to see the look on the enemy's face the next time they tried using a troll."

The Defense Professor inclined his head, his lips twitching again.

"What about Memory Charms? The Weasley twins were acting oddly and the Headmaster said he thinks they've been Obliviated. It seems to be one of the enemy's favorite tricks."

"Rule Eight," said the Defense Professor. "Any technique which is good enough to defeat me once is good enough to learn myself."

The boy smiled humorlessly. "And I once heard about an adult casting Obliviate while she was almost completely drained, so it must not take too much magic to cast. It's not even considered Unforgiveable, though I can't imagine why not. If I could've made Mr. Hagrid remember a different set of orders –"

"It is not that straightforward," said the Defense Professor. "You are not powerful enough to use the False Memory Charm, and even a simple Obliviation will stretch the edge of your current stamina. It is a dangerous art, illegal to use without Ministry authorization, and I would caution you not to use it under circumstances where it would be inconvenient to accidentally erase ten years of someone's life. I wish I could promise you that I would obtain one of those highly guarded tomes from the Department of Mysteries, and pass it to you beneath a disguised cover. But what I must actually tell you is that you will find the standard introductory text in the north-northwest stacks of the main Hogwarts library, filed under M."

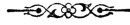
"Seriously," the boy said flatly.

"Indeed."

"Thank you for your guidance, Professor."

"Your creativity has become a great deal more practical, Mr. Potter, since I have known you."

“Thank you for the compliment.” The boy did not look up from where he was again gazing down at the wand held between his hands. “I would like to go back to thinking now. Please explain to them on my behalf what happens if I am disturbed.”



The door to the storeroom clicked open, and Professor Quirrell stepped out. His face had a dead, emotionless look to it; she would have said that it reminded her of Severus, though Severus had never looked quite like that.

Even as the door clicked shut again, Minerva had thrown up a wordless Quieting barrier. The words spilled forth from her rapidly: “How did it go – you were in there for a while – is Harry talking now?”

Professor Quirrell paced swiftly across the room to the far wall near the entrance, looked back at her. The emotionlessness slid off his face, as though he were taking off a mask, leaving behind someone very grim. “I spoke to Mr. Potter as he expected me to speak, and avoided saying things that would annoy him. I do not think it consoled him. I do not think I have the knack.”

“Thank you – it is good that he spoke at all –” She hesitated. “What did Mr. Potter say?”

“I am afraid that I promised him not to speak of it. And now... I think that I must visit the Hogwarts library.”

“The library?”

“Yes,” Professor Quirrell said. An uncharacteristic tension had come into his voice. “I intend to strengthen the security upon the Restricted Section with certain precautions of my own devising. The current wards are a joke. And Mr. Potter must be kept out of the Restricted Section at all costs.”

She stared at the Defense Professor, her heart suddenly in her throat.

Professor Quirrell continued speaking. “You will not tell the boy that I have said this much to you. You will confirm to Flitwick and Vector that the boy is to be diverted by the usual evasions if he asks precocious questions about spell creation. And though it is not my own area of expertise, Deputy Headmistress, if there is any way you can imagine to convince the boy to stop sinking further into his grief and madness – any way at all to undo the resolutions he is coming to – then I suggest you resort to it immediately.”

ROLES, PART II

SHORTLY after, there was another knock upon the storeroom door. “If you actually care about my mental health,” the boy said without looking up, “you will go away, leave me alone, and wait for me to come down to dinner. This isn’t helping.”

The door opened, and the one who had waited outside stepped in.

“Seriously?” the boy said flatly.

The door closed and clicked behind Severus Snape.

The Potions Master of Hogwarts wore none of his customary arrogance, or even the dispassionate guise that he ordinarily took in the Headmaster’s office; his gaze was strange, as he looked down upon the boy guarding that door; his thoughts unfathomable.

“I also cannot imagine what the Deputy Headmistress is thinking,” said the Potions Master of Hogwarts. “Unless I am meant to serve as a warning of where it will lead you, if you decide to take the blame for her death upon yourself.”

The boy’s lips pressed together. “Fine. Let’s just skip ahead to the end of this conversation. You win, Professor Snape. I concede that you were more responsible for Lily Potter’s death than I was responsible for Hermione Granger’s death, and that my guilt can’t stack up to your guilt. And then I ask you to go, and you tell them that it would probably be best to let me alone for a while. Are we done?”

“Almost,” the Potions Master said. “I am the one who put the notes under Miss Granger’s pillow, telling her where to find the fights in which she intervened.”

The boy did not react to this at all. Finally he spoke. “Because you dislike bullying.”

“Not that alone.” There was a note of pain in the Potions Master’s voice that sounded alien to it; it was hard to imagine it being the same acid voice that instructed children not to stir one more time or they’d blow off their wrists. “I should have realized it... very much earlier, I suppose, and yet I did not see it at all, being entirely absorbed in myself. For me to be placed as

Head of Slytherin... it means that Albus Dumbledore has entirely lost hope that Slytherin House can be helped. I am certain that Dumbledore must have tried, I cannot imagine that he did not try, when he first took trust of Hogwarts. It must have been a severe blow to him, when after that so much of Slytherin answered to the Dark Lord's call... he would not have placed me in authority over that House, acting as I did, unless he had lost all hope." The Potions Master's shoulders fell, beneath his spotted and stained cloak. "But you and Miss Granger were trying to do something, and the two of you had even managed to bring over Mr. Malfoy and Miss Greengrass, and perhaps those two could have set a different example... I suppose it was foolish for me to believe. The Headmaster does not know of what I have done, and I ask you not to tell him."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Matters have become far too serious not to tell someone." Severus Snape's lips twisted. "I have seen enough disastrous plotting, in my tenure as Head of Slytherin, to know how that sometimes goes. If, in the future, all should come to light – then at least I have told you, and you may say as much."

"Lovely," the boy said. "Thank you for clearing that up. Is that all?"

"Do you intend to declare that your life is now a ruin and that there is nothing left for you but vengeance?"

"No. I still have –" The boy cut himself off.

"Then there is very little advice that I can give you," said Severus Snape.

The boy nodded distantly. "On Hermione's behalf, thank you for helping her with the bullies. She would tell you that it was the right thing to do. And now I would be much obliged if you could tell them to leave me alone."

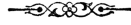
The Potions Master turned to the door, and when his face was unseen, his voice came in a whisper. "I truly am sorry for your loss."

Severus Snape departed.

The boy stared after him, trying to remember, as best as he could at this distance, words which had been spoken some time earlier.

Your books betrayed you, Potter. They did not tell you the one thing you needed to know. You cannot learn from books what it is like to lose the one you love. That is something you could never know without experiencing it for yourself.

It had gone something like that, the boy thought, if he was remembering correctly.



Hours had passed now, in the infirmary section with its closed door and a body lying in state behind it.

Harry went on staring at his wand, as it lay in his lap. At the tiny scratches and smudges on the eleven inches of holly, flaws he'd never looked closely enough to notice before. A quick mental calculation said there was no reason to worry since if this was six or seven months' accumulation of damage, then a standard lifetime wouldn't wear away the wand entirely. At the time, he probably would've worried about his own Time-Turner being taken away if he'd just openly yelled out 'Does anyone have a Time-Turner?' into the Great Hall, but it would have been easy enough to precommit to, after lunch, finding someone to send Professor Flitwick a message two hours earlier and then Professor Flitwick could've just gone straight to Hermione, or sent her his raven Patronus, long before the troll was anywhere near her. Or might that alternate Harry have already learned it was too late – heard about Hermione's death after lunch and before he could buy any messages sent backwards in time? Maybe a basic guideline of working with time-travel was to make sure you never risked learning you were too late, if you hadn't yet gone backwards. There was a tiny chemical burn now on the end of his wand, presumably from contacting the acid he'd partially Transfigured the troll's brain into, but the wand seemed robust against losses of small amounts of wood. Really the concept of a 'magic wand' being required just got stranger the more you thought about it. Though if spells were always being invented in some mysterious way, new rituals being carved as new levers upon the unknown machine, it might just be that people just kept inventing rituals that involved wands, just like they invented phrases like 'Wingardium Leviosa'. It really seemed like magic ought to be, in some sense, almost arbitrarily powerful, and it certainly would be convenient if Harry could just bypass whatever conceptual limitation prevented people from inventing spells like 'Just Fix Everything Forever', but somehow nothing was ever that easy where magic was concerned. Harry looked at his mechanical watch again, but it still wasn't time.

He'd attempted to cast the Patronus Charm, meaning to tell his Patronus to go to Hermione Granger. Just in case it was all a lie, a False Memory Charm or one of the who-knew-how-many-ways that wizards could be made to close their eyes and dream. Just in case the real Hermione was alive and being

held somewhere, despite his feeling her life as it left her. Just in case there was an afterlife and the True Patronus could reach it.

The spell hadn't worked though, so that particular test had failed to provide any evidence, leaving him with the previous, unfavorable prior.

Time passed, and yet more time. From the outside you would've just seen a boy, sitting, staring at his wand with an abstracted gaze, looking at his watch every two minutes or so.

The door to the infirmary section opened once again.

The boy sitting there looked up with a deadly, chilling glare.

Then the boy's face cracked in dismay, and he scrambled to his feet.

"Harry," said the man in the button-down formal shirt and a black vest thrown over it. His voice was hoarse. "Harry, what's happening? The Headmaster of your school – he showed up in those ridiculous robes at my office and told me that Hermione Granger was dead!"

A moment later a woman followed the man into the room; she seemed less confused than the man, less bewildered and more frightened.

"Dad," the boy said thinly. "Mum. Yes, she's dead. They didn't tell you anything else?"

"No! Harry, what's happening?"

There was a pause.

The boy slumped back against the wall. "I c-can't, I can't, I can't do this."

"What?"

"I can't pretend to be a little boy, I j-just don't have the energy right now."

"Harry," the woman said falteringly. "Harry –"

"Dad, you know those fantasy books where the hero has to hide everything from his parents because they, they wouldn't understand, they'd react stupidly and get in the hero's way? It's a plot device, right, so that the hero has to solve everything himself instead of telling his parents. P-please don't be that plot device, Dad, or you either, Mum. Just... just don't play that role. Don't be the parents who won't understand. D-don't yell at me and give me parental demands I can't follow. Because I've wandered into a bloody stupid fantasy novel and now Hermione's – I j-just don't have the energy to deal with it."

Slowly, as though his limbs were only half-animated, the man in the black vest knelt down to where Harry was standing, so that his eyes were level with his son's. "Harry," the man said. "I need you to tell me everything that has happened, right now."

The boy took a deep breath, swallowed. “They t-tell me the Dark Lord I defeated may still be alive. Like that’s not the p-plot of a hundred sod-ding books, right? So, it could also be that the Headmaster of my school, who’s the most powerful wizard in the world, has gone insane. And, and Hermione was framed for an attempted murder just before this, not that anyone would’ve told her parents about it or anything. The student she was framed for attempted-murdering was the son of Lucius Malfoy, who’s the most powerful politician in magical Britain, and used to be the Dark Lord’s number two. The Defense Professor position at this school has a curse on it, nobody ever lasts more than a year, they have a saying that the Defense Professor is always a suspect. This year the Defense Professor is secretly a mysterious wizard who opposed the Dark Lord during the last war and may or may not be evil himself. Also the Potions Master has been pining after Lily Potter for years and might be behind this whole thing for some twisted psychological reason.” The boy’s lips pressed together bitterly. “I think that’s most of the bloody stupid plot.”

The man, who had listened to all this quietly, stood up. He put a gentle hand on the boy’s shoulder. “That’s enough, Harry,” he said. “I’ve heard enough. We’re leaving this school right now and taking you with us.”

The woman was looking at the boy, her face asking a question.

The boy gazed back at her and nodded.

The woman’s voice was thin when she spoke. “They won’t let us, Michael.”

“They have no legal right to stop us –”

“Right? You’re Muggles,” said the boy. He smiled twistedly. “You have as much standing in the magical British legal system as mice. No wizard is going to care about any arguments you make about rights, about fairness, they won’t even take the time to listen. You don’t have any power, see, so they don’t have to bother. No, Mum, I’m not smiling like this because I agree with their Muggle policies, I’m smiling because I disagree with your children policies.”

“Then,” Professor Michael Verres-Evans said firmly, “we shall see what the real government has to say about that. I know an MP or three –”

“They’ll say, you’re crazy, have a nice stay in this asylum. That’s assuming the Ministry Obliviators don’t get to you first and erase your memories. They do that to Muggles a lot, I hear. I figure the real higher-ups in our government have formed some cozy accommodations of their own. Maybe they get a few healing Charms now and then, if someone important manages to get cancer.”

The boy gave that twisted smile again. "And that's the situation, Dad, as Mum already knows. They'd never have brought you here or told you anything, if there was a single thing you could do about it."

The man's mouth opened but no words came out, as though he had been reading from a script which described what a concerned parent ought to do in this sort of situation, and this script had suddenly arrived at a blank spot.

"Harry," the woman said falteringly.

The boy looked at her.

"Harry, did something happen to you? You seem... different..."

"Petunia!" the man said, his tongue apparently working once more. "Don't say such things! He's under stress, that's all."

"Well, Mum, you see –" The boy's voice cracked. "Are you sure you want this all at once, Mum?"

The woman nodded, though she didn't speak.

"I've got... you know how that school psychiatrist thought I had anger management problems? Well –" The boy stopped, and swallowed. "I don't know how to explain this to you, Mum. It's something magical instead. Probably something to do with whatever happened on the night my parents died. I have... well, I was calling it a mysterious dark side and I know it sounds like a joke and I did check with... with an ancient telepathic magical hat to make sure my scar wasn't actually inhabited by the Dark Lord's spirit and it said that there was only one person under its brim and I don't think wizards have actual souls anyway since they can still suffer from brain damage, only –"

"Harry, slow down!" said the man.

"– only, only whatever it is, it's still real, there's something inside me, it gave me willpower when things were bad, I could face down anything so long as I was angry, Snape, Dumbledore, the entire Wizengamot, my dark side wasn't afraid of anything but Dementors. And I wasn't stupid, I knew that there might be a price for using my dark side and I kept on looking to see what the price might be. It didn't change my magic, it didn't seem to cause permanent alignment shift, it didn't try to take me away from my friends or anything like that, so I kept on using it whenever I had to and I only figured out too late what the price really was –" The boy's voice had become almost a whisper. "I only figured out today... every time I call on it... it uses up my childhood. I killed the thing that got Hermione. And it wasn't my dark side that did it, it was me. Oh, Mum, Dad, I'm sorry."

There was a long silence filled with the sound of broken masks.

“Harry,” the man said, kneeling down again, “I need you to start over from the beginning and explain that much more slowly.”

The boy spoke.

The parents listened.

Some time later, the father stood up.

The boy looked up at him, grimacing in bitter anticipation.

“Harry,” the man said, “Petunia and I are going to get you out of here as quickly as possible –”

“Don’t,” the boy said warningly. “I mean it, Dad. The Ministry of Magic isn’t something you can stand up to. Pretend they’re the tax office or the dean or something else that won’t brook any challenge to their dominance. In magical Britain you’re only allowed to remember what the government thinks you should remember, and remembering the existence of magic or that you have a son named Harry is a privilege, not a right. And if they did that I’d crack and turn the Ministry into a giant flaming crater. Mum, you know the score, you absolutely have to stop Dad from trying anything stupid.”

“And son –” The man rubbed at his temples. “Maybe I shouldn’t say this now... but are you sure that what you’re talking about is really a magical dark side, and not something normal for a boy your age?”

“Normal,” the boy said with elaborate patience. “Normal how, exactly? I could check again, but I’m reasonably sure there wasn’t anything about this in *Childcraft: A Guide For Parents*. My dark side isn’t just an emotional state, it makes me smarter. In some ways, anyhow. You can’t just pretend yourself smarter.”

The man rubbed at his head again. “Well... there’s a certain well-known phenomenon wherein children undergo a biological process which can sometimes make them angry and dark and grim, and this process also significantly increases their intelligence and their height –”

The boy slumped back against the wall. “No, Dad, it’s not that I’m turning into a teenager. I checked with my brain and it still thinks that girls are icky. But if that’s what you want to pretend, then fine. Maybe I’m better off with you not believing me. I just –” The boy’s voice choked. “I just couldn’t stand lying about it.”

“Adolescence doesn’t necessarily work like that, Harry. It may still take a while for you to notice girls. If, in fact, you haven’t noticed one already” and the man abruptly stopped.

"I didn't like Hermione in that way," the boy whispered. "Why does everyone keep thinking it has to be about that? It's disrespectful to her, to think someone could only like her in that way."

The man swallowed visibly. "Anyway, son, you keep yourself safe while we work on getting you out of here, is that understood? Don't you go actually thinking that you've turned to the dark side. I know you've had, ah, what I used to call your Ender Wiggin moments –"

"I think we are now well past Ender and on to Ender after the buggers kill Valentine."

"Language!" said the woman, and then her hand flew to cover her mouth.

The boy spoke wearily. "Not that kind of bugger, Mum. They're insectoid aliens – never mind."

"Harry, that's exactly what I'm saying you shouldn't think," Professor Verres-Evans said firmly. "You're not to go believing that you're turning evil. You are not to hurt anyone, place yourself in harm's way, or mess around with any sort of black magic whatsoever, while your Mum and I work on extracting you from this situation. Is that clear, son?"

The boy closed his eyes. "That'd be wonderful advice, Dad, if only I were in a comic book."

"Harry –" the man began.

"Police can't do that. Soldiers can't do that. The most powerful wizard in the world couldn't do that, and he tried. It's not fair to the innocent bystanders to play at being Batman if you can't actually protect everyone under that code. And I've just proven that I can't."

Beads of sweat were glistening on Professor Michael Verres-Evans's forehead. "Now you listen to me. No matter what you've read in books, you aren't supposed to be protecting anyone! Or involving yourself in anything dangerous! Absolutely anything dangerous whatsoever! Just stay out of the way of everything, every bit of craziness going on in this madhouse, while we get you out of here the first instant we possibly can!"

The boy looked searchingly at his father, then his mother. Then he looked at his wristwatch again.

"Excellent point," said the boy.

The boy marched over to the door leading outward, and flung it open.



The door flew open with a crack that caused Minerva to startle where she stood, and before she had time to think, Harry Potter marched out of the room, glaring directly at her.

"You brought my parents here," the Boy-Who-Lived said. "To Hogwarts. Where You-Know-Who or someone is lurking around, targeting my friends. What exactly were you thinking?"

She did not reply that she had been thinking about Harry sitting in front of the door to the storeroom containing Hermione's body, refusing to move.

"Who else knows about this?" Harry Potter demanded. "Did anyone see them with you?"

"The Headmaster brought them here –"

"I want them out of here immediately before anyone else notices, especially You-Know-Who, but also including Professor Quirrell or Professor Snape. Please send your Patronus to the Headmaster and tell him that he needs to bring it back at once. Do not mention my parents by name, or as people, in case somebody else is listening."

"Indeed," said Professor Verres-Evans, nodding sternly along with this from where he stood directly behind the boy, Petunia a step behind him. His hand rested firmly on Harry's shoulder. "We'll finish talking to our son at home."

"A moment, please," Minerva said in reflexive politeness. Her first try at casting the Patronus failed, a disadvantage of that Charm under certain circumstances. It wasn't the first time she'd done it so, but she seemed to have lost some of the knack –

Minerva shut the thought down and concentrated.

When the message was sent, she turned back to Professor Verres-Evans. "Sir," she said, "I'm afraid that Mr. Potter must not leave the Hogwarts School –"

By the time Albus finally arrived, there was shouting, the Muggle man having given up on dignity. At least there was shouting on one side of the argument. Minerva's heart wasn't in it. The truth was that she couldn't believe the words coming out of her mouth.

When the Professor turned to argue with the Headmaster, Harry Potter, who had remained silent through this, spoke up. "Not here," said Harry. "You can argue with him anywhere but Hogwarts, Dad. Mum, please, please make sure that Dad doesn't try anything that will get him in trouble with the Ministry."

Michael Verres-Evans's face screwed up. He turned, looked at Harry Potter. When his voice came out it was hoarse, accompanied by water in his eyes. "Son – what are you doing?"

"You know perfectly well what I'm doing," Harry Potter said. "You read those comic books long before you gave them to me. I've been through a bunch of crap, matured a bit, and now I'm protecting my relatives. Actually, it's simpler than that, you know what I'm doing because you tried to do the same thing. I'm having my loved ones taken out of Hogwarts immediately, that's what I'm doing. Headmaster, please get them out of here before You-Know-Who discovers their presence and marks them for death."

Michael Verres-Evans began a frantic dash toward Harry, and then all motion stopped with the Muggle man leaning forward in his flight.

"I am sorry," the Headmaster said quietly. "We shall speak more soon. Minerva, I was with the others when you called, they are waiting in your office."

The Headmaster passed forwards like he was gliding, until he stood in the midst of where the man and woman stood frozen; and there was another flash of flame.

Motion resumed.

Minerva looked at Harry.

Words did not come to her.

"Clever move, bringing them here," Harry Potter said. "Probably damaged our relationship permanently. All I wanted was to be bloody left alone until bloody dinnertime. Which," the boy looked at his wristwatch, "it now is anyway. I'm going to go say goodbye to Hermione by myself, which I promise will take less than two minutes, and then after that I'll come out and go eat something like I would have done regardless. Do not disturb me for those two bloody minutes or I will snap and try to kill someone, I mean it, Professor."

The boy turned and strode into the small room, opened the rear door to where Hermione Granger's body was being kept, and strode inside before she could think to speak. Through the doorway she saw a flash of a sight she knew no child ought to see –

The door slammed shut.

She started forwards, unthinking.

Halfway to the door, she stopped herself.

Her mind was still slow, and hurting, and the part of her that Harry Potter would have called the picture of a stern disciplinarian was lifelessly mouthing

words about inappropriate behavior from children. The rest of her didn't think it was a good idea to leave any child, even Harry Potter, alone in a room with the bloody corpse of his best friend. But the act of opening the door, or asserting any sort of authority, did not seem to her wise. There was no right thing to do, and no right thing to say; or if there was any right path, she did not know it.

Very slowly, a minute and a half passed.



When the door opened again, Harry seemed to have changed, as though that minute and a half had passed over the course of lifetimes.

"Seal up the room," Harry said quietly, "and let's go, Professor McGonagall."

She walked over to the storeroom door. She wasn't quite able to stop herself from looking in, and saw the dried blood, the sheet covering the lower half, the upper body waxy and doll-like, and a glimpse of Hermione Granger's closed eyes. Something inside her began its weeping all over again.

She closed the door.

Her fingers moved upon her wand, her mouth spoke words without thought, Charms and wards to seal the room against entry.

"Professor McGonagall," Harry said in a strange voice, as if by rote, "do you have the rock? The rock that the Headmaster gave me? I should Transfigure it into a jewel again, since it did prove useful."

Automatically her eyes went to the ring on Harry's left pinky finger, noting the emptiness of the setting where the jewel should have been. "I shall mention it to the Headmaster," her tongue replied.

"Is that a usual tactic, by the way?" Harry said, voice still odd. "Carrying something large Transfigured into something small to use as a weapon? Or is that a usual exercise for Transfiguration practice?"

Distantly, she shook her head.

"Well, let's go, then."

"I have –" her voice stopped. "I'm afraid I have something else which I must do, now. Will you be all right on your own, and will you promise to go to the Great Hall directly and eat something, Mr. Potter?"

The boy promised (barring exceptional and unforeseen circumstances, a clause with which she did not argue) and then walked out of the room.

What lay ahead of her... would be no easier, certainly, and might well be harder.



Minerva walked to her office at a swift pace; not slowly, for that would have been a discourtesy.

Professor McGonagall opened the door to her office.

“Madam Granger,” her voice said, “Mr. Granger, I am so terribly sorry for –”

ROLES, PART III

THERE was nothing left to do.

There was nothing left to plan.

There was nothing left to think.

Into that emptiness rose the new worst memory –

The Boy-Who-Lived-Unlike-His-Best-Friend trudged the long, echoing corridors toward the Great Hall. With all his energies of thought exhausted, his mind was starting to throw out thoughts like an image of Hermione walking beside him and wordless concepts like That will never happen again until another part yelled No and shouted it down with determination to bring her back, only that part's voice was getting tired and the other part seemed tireless. Another part of his mind insisted on reviewing what he'd said to Professor McGonagall and Dad and Mum, even though he'd only been trying to get them out of there as quickly as possible and had been running on limited mental energy. As though somehow he could have done better, by an act of his defective will. What would be left of his relationship with his parents now, Harry couldn't guess.

He came finally to a junction where there waited a older boy in green-fringed black robes, silently reading a textbook, on the path that anyone would pick if they wanted to intercept someone going from the healer's chambers to the Great Hall.

Harry was wearing the Cloak of Invisibility, of course, he'd put it on after leaving the office, rendering himself immune to almost all forms of magical detection. There was no point in making it easy for anyone trying to find him and kill him. And Harry was almost set to continue past without bothering to find out what was going on, when he recognized the Slytherin boy's face.

Realization dawned on Harry then. Of course, one of the students who had stayed in school over the Easter holiday would naturally have been –

"You were waiting for me," Harry said out loud, without removing the Cloak.

The Slytherin boy jerked back, hitting his head against the wall, his fifth-year Charms textbook dropping from his hands, before he looked up

with wide eyes.

"You're –"

"Invisible. Yes. Say what you mean to say."

Lesath Lestrange scrambled to his feet, a position of attention, then blurted out, "My lord, did I do the right thing – I thought you would not wish me to step forward before all those others, that they might suspect our connection – I thought, surely if you wished my help you would call on me –"

It was amazing how many different ways there were to kill your best friend by being stupid.

"I –" Lesath hesitated, then said in a small voice, "I was wrong, wasn't I?"

"You acted exactly as you should have, under the circumstances. It is I who was a fool."

"I'm sorry, my lord," whispered Lesath.

"If you had come with me, would you have been able to kill the troll?" It wasn't even the correct question, the correct question was whether Harry himself would have considered Lesath as sufficient and flown out sixty seconds earlier, but still...

"I... I'm not sure, my lord... I am not much welcome to duelling practices in Slytherin, I have not learned the gestures to the Killing Curse – should I study those arts to better serve you, my lord?"

"I continue to insist that I am not your lord," Harry said.

"Yes, my lord."

"Although," Harry said, "and this is not any kind of order, just a remark, anyone ought to know how to defend themselves, especially you. I'm sure the Defense Professor would help you with that on general principles, if you asked."

Lesath Lestrange bowed and said, "Yes, my lord, I will follow your orders if I can, my lord."

Harry would have complained about being misunderstood, if he hadn't been understood perfectly.

Lesath left.

Harry stared at the wall.

He'd honestly thought that he'd already figured out all the different ways that he'd been stupid, after spending half a day thinking about it.

Apparently this had just been more overconfidence on his part.

Do we understand what we did wrong? his Slytherin side said coldly.

Yes, Harry thought.

Your ethical qualms don't even make sense. You're not tricking Lesath. You did exactly what Lesath thinks you did. You wouldn't have to make excuses for why Lesath was helping you, you could just say you were calling in the debt from rescuing him from bullies, there were six witnesses to that. Hermione died because you forgot about an extremely valuable resource, and you forgot about Lesath because... why?

Because having Lesath Lestrange for a minion seemed sort of Dark-Lordish? Hufflepuff said in a small mental voice. I mean... that decision was probably mostly me...

Harry's Slytherin side didn't answer that in words, just radiated contempt and flashed an image of Hermione's corpse.

Stop it! Harry screamed internally.

Next time, Slytherin said icily, I suggest that we spend more time worrying about what is efficient and effective, and less time worrying about what seems sort of Dark-Lordish.

Point made, Harry thought, I will.

No, you won't, said Slytherin. You'll come up with more rationalisations for your petty qualms. You'll start listening to me after your next friend dies.

Harry was starting to worry that he was going insane. The conversations he had with the voices in his head weren't usually like this.

The Boy-Who-Lived

pain

Harry Verres trudged on alone

hurts

Harry walked on through the silent corridors.



"How is Mr. Potter doing?" demanded Professor Quirrell. There was a tension about the man, you could not quite call it concern, more like an ambusher measuring the time to strike. The Grangers had hardly left with Madam Pomfrey before the Defense Professor had knocked upon the door to her office and then entered without waiting for her answer, and spoken before she could say a word. Part of Minerva wondered distantly whether Harry Potter had picked up that habit from his Defense Professor, being unaware of others' pain when there was something else on his mind, or if it was only a childish flaw which this man had somehow failed to grow out of.

“Mr. Potter has ceased guarding Miss Granger’s body,” she said, putting some of the chill she felt into her voice. She felt certain that the Defense Professor was not experiencing as much grief as she was, the man had spoken not a single word of Hermione Granger. For him to put demands on her – “I believe he has gone down to dinner.”

“I am not asking after the boy’s physical state! Have you – has he –” Professor Quirrell made a sharp gesture, as though to indicate a concept for which he had no words.

“Not particularly,” she said. She was around thirty seconds away from ordering the Defense Professor out of her office.

Professor Quirrell began to pace within the small confines of her office. “Miss Granger was the only one whose worries he truly heeded – with her gone – all checks on the boy’s recklessness are removed. I see it now. Who else is there? Mr. Longbottom? Mr. Potter does not pretend that they are peers. Flitwick? His goblin blood would only cry for vengeance. Mr. Malfoy, if he were returned? To what end? Snape? A walking disaster. Dumbledore? Pfah. Events are already set for catastrophe, they must be steered along some course they would not naturally go. Who might Mr. Potter heed, who would not ordinarily speak to him? Cedric Diggory has taught him, but what would Mr. Diggory say in advice? An unknown. Mr. Potter spent long in speech with Remus Lupin. To him I have paid little heed. Would Lupin know the words to speak, the act which must be done, the sacrifice which must be made to change the boy’s course?” Professor Quirrell whirled on her. “Did Remus Lupin comfort those in grief or stay those moved to rash deeds, during his time with the Order of the Phoenix?”

“It is not a poor thought,” she said slowly. “I believe that Mr. Lupin was often a voice of restraint to James Potter in his Hogwarts days.”

“James Potter,” said Professor Quirrell, his eyes narrowing. “The boy is not much like James Potter. Are you confident in the success of this plan? No, that is the wrong question, we are not limited to a single plan. Are you certain that this plan will be enough, that we need essay no others? Asked in such fashion, the question answers itself. The path leading to disaster must be averted along every possible point of intervention.” The Defense Professor had resumed pacing the confines of her office, reaching one wall, turning on his heel, pacing to the other.

“My apologies, Professor,” she did not bother keeping the sharpness from her voice, “but I have quite reached my limits for the day. You may go.”

"You." Professor Quirrell spun, and she found herself gazing directly into eyes of icy blue. "You would be the first one I would think of after Miss Granger, to stay the boy from a folly. Have you already done your utmost? Of course you have not."

How dare he suggest that. "If you have nothing more to say, Professor, then you will go."

"Has your confederacy deduced who I really am?" The words were spoken with deceptive mildness.

"Yes, in fact. Now –"

Pure magic, pure power crashed into the room like a flash of lightning, like a thunderclap echoing about her ears that deafened her other senses, the papers on her desk blown aside not by any conjured wind but by the sheer raw force of arcane might.

Then the power subsided, leaving only Hermione Granger's death certificates drifting down through the air to the floor.

"I am David Monroe, who fought Voldemort," the man said, still in mild tones. "Heed my words. The boy cannot be allowed to continue in this state of mind. He will become dangerous. It is possible that you have already done everything you can. Yet I find this a very rare event indeed, and more often said than done. I suspect rather that you have only done what you customarily do. I cannot truly comprehend what drives others to break their bounds, since I never had them. People remain surprisingly passive when faced with the prospect of death. Fear of public ridicule or losing one's livelihood is more likely to drive men to extremes and the breaking of their customary habits. On the other side of the war, the Dark Lord had excellent results from the Cruciatus Curse, judiciously used on Marked servants who cannot escape punishment except by success, with no reasonable efforts accepted. Imagine their state of mind within yourself, and ask yourself whether you have truly done all that you can to wrench Harry Potter from his course."

"I am a Gryffindor and not much given to being moved by fear," she snapped back. "You will exercise courtesy within my office!"

"I find fear an excellent motivation, and indeed it is fear that moves me now. You-Know-Who, for all his horror, still abided by certain boundaries. It is my professional judgment, speaking as a learned wizard almost on par with Dumbledore or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, that the boy could join the ranks of those whose rituals are inscribed upon the tombstones of countries. This is not an idle worry, McGonagall, I have already heard words to produce

the gravest apprehensions.”

“Are you mad? You think that Mr. Potter could – this is ridiculous. Mr. Potter cannot possibly –”

A wordless image crossed her mind of a patch of glass on a steel ball.

“– Mr. Potter would not do such a thing!”

“His deliberate choice is not required. Wizards rarely set out to invoke their own dooms. Mr. Potter may not strike you as malicious. Does he strike you as reckless once he is resolved upon a goal? I say again that I have specific reason for the gravest possible concerns!”

“Have you spoken to the Headmaster of this?” she said slowly.

“That would be worse than pointless. Dumbledore cannot reach the boy. At best he is wise enough to know this and make things no worse. I lack the requisite frame of mind. You are the one who – but I see that you still look for others to save you.” The Defense Professor turned from her, and strode to the door. “I think I shall consult with Severus Snape. The man may be a walking disaster, but he knows the fact, and he may possess a greater understanding of that boy’s mood. As for you, madam, imagine yourself at the end of your life, knowing that Britain – but no, Britain is not your true country, is it? Imagine yourself at the end of your life as the darkness eats through the fading walls of Hogwarts, knowing that your students will die with you, remembering this day and realizing there was something else you could have done.”

ROLES, PART IV

HARRY had walked into the Great Hall, looked around only once, grabbed enough calories to sustain himself, walked out, put on his Cloak again and found a small random corner in which to eat. Seeing the students at their tables –

Feeling revulsion when you look at other humans is not a good sign, Hufflepuff said. It's not reasonable to blame them for having not had your opportunities to learn what you've learned. Inaction in emergencies has nothing to do with people being selfish. Normalcy bias, like that plane crash in Tener-something where a few people ran out and escaped but most people just sat in their seats not moving while their plane was literally on fire. Look at how long you took to really start moving.

It serves no useful purpose to hate, said Gryffindor. It's just going to damage your altruism.

Try to figure out a training method you could use to prevent this from happening next time, said Ravenclaw.

I'll go ahead and register the experimental prediction, said Slytherin, that we'll always observe exactly what would be predicted on the hypothesis that people cannot be saved, cannot be taught, and will never help us with anything important. Also, we need some way of keeping track of all the times I'm right.

Harry ignored the voices in his head and just ate slices of toast as fast as he could. It wasn't proper nutrition as a general policy, but one-time exceptions wouldn't hurt so long as he made them up the next day.

In mid-bite, the blazing silver silhouette of a phoenix flew in from nowhere and said, in the voice of a tired old man, "Please remove your Cloak, Harry, I have a letter to deliver to you."

Harry coughed for a bit, swallowed some toast which had gone down the wrong way, stood up, took off the Cloak of Invisibility, said aloud "Tell Dumbledore I said fine," and then sat down and continued to eat his toast.

The toast had all gone by the time Albus Dumbledore walked up to Harry's nook, carrying folded sheets of paper in his hand; real paper, with lines, not

wizard's parchment.

"Is that –" Harry said.

"From your father, and from your mother," said the old wizard. Wordlessly, Dumbledore handed over the folded sheets, and wordlessly Harry accepted them. The old wizard hesitated, then said quietly, "The Defense Professor has told me to restrain my counsel, and I thought the same thing myself when given time to think. I have always taken too long to learn the virtues of silence. But if I am mistaken, you need only say the word –"

"You're not mistaken," Harry said. He looked down at the folded, lined papers, feeling the sickness in his gut that was how his body indicated a strong pessimistic prediction. His parents wouldn't actually disown him, and there wasn't much they could do to him (some part of himself was still afraid in a very visceral way of television privileges being taken away, no matter how little sense that made now). But he had stepped outside the role that parents would expect of children who, in their internal beliefs, were lower on the pecking order. It would be stupid to expect anything except complete indignant fury, all-out righteous rage, when you acted like that to someone who thought they were dominant over you.

"After you read it," the Headmaster said, "I believe that you should come to the Great Hall at once, Harry. There is an announcement which you will wish to hear."

"I'm not interested in funerals –"

"No. Not that. Please, Harry, come as soon as you are done reading, and do so without your Cloak. Will you?"

"Yes."

The old wizard left.

Harry had to force himself to open up the letter. The important thing was keeping your vulnerable friends and relations out of harm's way, it might be a cliché but so far as Harry could tell the logic was valid. Damaged relationships could be repaired later.

The first letter said, in script handwriting that required a careful focus for Harry to read,

Son,

No matter what you've read in books, keeping us out of harm's way is not as important as having adults who can help when you're in trouble. You decided without giving us a word in

edgewise that we'd abandon you because of your 'dark side'. The ghost of Shakespeare knows that I've seen things in this last year that were not dreamt of in my philosophy – sometimes I wonder if your Mum isn't just humoring me and the authorities took you away when I started thinking you were a magic-user – so I can't deny that it's possible you've managed to develop some... I'm not quite sure what to call it, but 'dark side' seems premature if we don't know what's happening. Are you sure it's not a burgeoning telepathic talent and you're just picking up on the minds of other wizards around you? Their thoughts might seem evil to a child who grew up in a saner civilization. These are ungrounded speculations, I admit, but you shouldn't jump to conclusions either.

The two most important things I have to tell you are this. First, son, I have every confidence in your ability to stay on the Light Side of the Force so long as you choose to, and I have every confidence that you will choose to. If there's some evil spirit whispering horrible suggestions in your ears, just ignore the suggestions. I do feel the need to emphasize that you should exercise special caution to ignore this evil spirit even if it is suggesting what seem like wonderful creative ideas and I hope I do not need to remind you about the Incident with the Science Project which would, I admit, make a deal more sense if you were struggling with demonic possession.

The second thing I have to say is that you do not need to fear that Mum or I are going to abandon you because of your 'dark side'. We may not have expected you to gain magical powers or develop an affinity for black magic, but we did expect you to become a teenager. Which, if you think about it from your poor father's perspective, is already a sufficiently worrying prospect regarding a child who, by the age of nine, had been party to the summoning of a total of five fire engines. Children grow up. I won't lie to you and say that you will feel as close to us at 20 as you do now. But your Mum and I will feel just as close to you when we are old and grey and bothering the nursing-home robots. Children always grow up and away from their parents, and the parents always follow them from behind, offering help-

ful advice. Children grow up, and their personalities change, and they do things that their parents wish they would not do, and they act disrespectfully toward their parents and have them hauled out of their magical schools, and the parents go on loving them anyway. It is Nature's way. Though in the event that you have not yet hit puberty and your teenage years are proportionately worse than this, we reserve the right to reconsider this sentiment.

No matter what is happening, remember that we love you and will always love you no matter what. I don't know if our love has any magical power under your rules, but if it does, don't hesitate to call on it.

With all of this said... Harry, what you did there is not acceptable. I think you know that. And I also know that it is not the time to lecture you on it. But you must write and tell us what is happening. I can understand very well why you'd want us taken out of your school at once, and I know we can't force you to do anything, but please, Harry, be reasonable and realize how terrified we must be.

I would like to tell you that you are absolutely forbidden to mess around with any magic that the adults around you consider the least bit unsafe, but for all I know, the teachers at your school are giving everyone lessons in advanced necromancy every Monday. Please, please exercise as much caution as your situation permits, whatever your situation may be. Despite your very hurried summary we don't have the slightest idea what is happening and I hope that you will write us as much as you can. It is clear that you are, at least in some ways, growing up, and I will try not to act like the children's-book parent who only makes things worse – though I hope you appreciate how hard this is – and your Mum has said a number of frightening things to me about how wizardry stays secret and how I might get you into trouble by making waves. I cannot tell you to avoid anything unsafe, because your school is unsafe and your Headmaster will not let you leave. I can't tell you that you shouldn't take responsibility for anything happening around you, because for all I know

there are other children in trouble. But remember that it is not your moral responsibility to protect any adults, their place is to protect you, and every good adult would agree with that. Please write and tell us more as soon as you can.

Both of us are desperate to help. If there is anything at all that we can do, please let us know at once. There is nothing which can happen to us which would be worse than learning that something had happened to you.

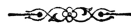
Love,
Dad.

The last page said only,

You promised me that you wouldn't let magic take you away from me. I didn't raise you to be a boy who would break a promise to his Mum. You must come back safely, because you promised.

Love,
Mum.

Slowly, Harry lowered the letters and began to walk towards the Great Hall. His hands were shaking, his whole body was shaking, and it seemed to be taking a very great deal of effort not to cry; which he knew wordlessly that he must not do. He hadn't cried through all of the day. And he wouldn't cry. Crying was the same as admitting defeat. And this wasn't over. So he wouldn't cry.



The food served in the Great Hall that evening was plain that night, toast and butter and jam, water and orange juice, oatmeal and other simple fare, without dessert. Some students had worn simple black robes without their House colors. Others had still worn theirs. It should have been cause for argument, but there was instead a quietness, the sound of people eating without talking. It took two sides to make a debate, and one of the sides, this night, was not much interested in debating.

Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall sat at the Head Table and did not eat. She should have. Perhaps she would in a short while. But she could not force herself to do it now.

For a Gryffindor there was only one path. It had taken Minerva only a short time to remember that, when after the Defense Professor's urgings her mind had stayed empty of clever plots to try. That was not a Gryffindor's way; or perhaps she ought to say only that it was not her way, Albus did seem to try his hand at plotting... and yet when she thought back on their history, there were no plots at the moment of crisis, no cleverness and games in the last resort. For Albus Dumbledore, as for her, the rule in extremis was to decide what was the right thing to do, and do it no matter the cost to yourself. Even if it meant breaking your bounds, or changing your role, or letting go of your picture of yourself. That was the last resort of Gryffindor.

Through a side entrance of the Great Hall she saw Harry Potter quietly slip in.

It was time.

Professor Minerva McGonagall rose from her chair, straightened the worn point on her hat, walked slowly to the lectern before the Head Table.

The sounds in the Great Hall, already muted, fell away entirely as all students turned to look at her.

"By now you have all heard," she said, her voice not quite steady. That Hermione Granger is dead. She didn't say those words aloud, since they had all heard. "Somehow, a troll was infiltrated into the castle Hogwarts without alarm from our ancient wards. Somehow this troll succeeded in injuring a student, without alarm from the wards until the point of her death. Investigations are underway to determine how this has occurred. The Board of Governors is meeting to determine how Hogwarts will respond. In due time justice shall be served. Meanwhile there is another matter of justice, which must be handled at once. George Weasley, Fred Weasley, please come forward to stand before us all."

The Weasley twins exchanged glances where they sat at the Gryffindor table, and then stood up and walked toward her, slowly, reluctantly; and Minerva realized then that the Weasley twins thought that they were to be expelled.

They honestly thought that she would expel them.

That was what the picture of Professor McGonagall who lived in her head had wrought.

The Weasley twins walked over to the lectern, looking up at her with faces that were frightened, but resolute; and she felt something in her heart break a little further.

"I am not going to expel you," she said, and was saddened further by the surprised look on their faces. "Fred Weasley, George Weasley, turn and face your classmates, let them see you."

Still looking surprised, the Weasley twins did so.

She drew up all the steel in her heart, and said what was right.

"I am ashamed," said Minerva McGonagall, "of the events of this day. I am ashamed that there were only two of you. Ashamed of what I have done to Gryffindor. Of all the Houses, it should have been Gryffindor to help when Hermione Granger was in need, when Harry Potter called for the brave to aid him. It was true, a seventh-year could have held back a mountain troll while searching for Miss Granger. And you should have believed that the Head of House Gryffindor," her voice broke, "would have believed in you. If you disobeyed her to do what was right, in events she had not foreseen. And the reason you did not believe this, is that I have never shown it to you. I did not believe in you. I did not believe in the virtues of Gryffindor itself. I tried to stamp out your defiance, instead of training your courage to wisdom. Whatever the Sorting Hat saw in me that led it to place me in Gryffindor, I have betrayed it. I have offered my resignation to the Headmaster as Deputy Headmistress and as the Head of House Gryffindor."



There were cries of shock and dismay, and not only from the Gryffindor Table, as Harry's heart froze within his chest. Harry needed to run forward, say something, he hadn't meant for this to –



Minerva took another breath, and continued. "However, the Headmaster has declined to accept my resignation," she said. "So I will continue to serve, and try to undo what I have wrought. Somehow I must find a way to teach my students how to do what is right. Not what is safe, not what is easy, not what we are told to do. If all I can teach you is to turn in your essays on time, there might as well not be a House Gryffindor. This road will be more difficult for me, and maybe for all of us. But I know now that before I was only taking the easy path."

She stepped down from the lectern, moved down to where the Weasley twins stood.

“Fred Weasley, George Weasley,” she said. “The two of you have not always done what is right. The path of wisdom does not lie in flagrant and needless defiance of authority. And yet today you proved to be the last of our House to survive my mistakes. Because it was the right thing to do, you defied a threat of expulsion and risked your lives to face a mountain troll. For your astounding courage that honors your House to have you, I award each of you two hundred points for Gryffindor.”

Again the look of shock on their faces, again the pain like a knife through her heart.

She turned to face the other students.

“I will not award any points to Ravenclaw,” she said. “I suspect that Mr. Potter would not want them. If I am wrong, he may correct me and take as many House points as he pleases. But for whatever it is worth, Mr. Potter, I am,” her voice faltered, “I am sorry –”



“Stop!” Harry screamed, and then, again, “Stop.” The word sticking in his throat. “You don’t have to, Professor.” Something inside him was twisting, threatening to split him open, like a giant’s hands wrenching at him to tear him in half. “And, and you shouldn’t forget Susan Bones, and Ron Weasley – they also helped, they should get House points too –”

“Miss Bones and the young Weasley?” said Professor McGonagall. “Rubeus said nothing of that – what did they do?”

“Miss Bones tried to stun Mr. Hagrid when he tried to stop me, and Mr. Weasley shot Neville when Neville tried to stop me. They should both get points, and, and so should Neville,” Harry hadn’t thought to imagine it before, the way Neville must be feeling now, but the instant he’d thought, he knew, “because Neville tried to do something, even if it wasn’t the right thing, doing what’s right is the second lesson, you can start practicing that after you learn to do anything at all –”

“Ten points to Hufflepuff, Miss Bones,” Professor McGonagall said, her voice breaking in the middle. “Ten points to Gryffindor, Ron Weasley, your family has done itself exceeding proud, this day. And ten points to Hufflepuff for Neville Longbottom, for standing up to Mr. Potter and doing what he thought was right –”

“You shouldn’t!” screamed a young voice from the Hufflepuff table, followed by a single choking sound.

Harry looked there, and then quickly looked back at Professor McGonagall and said, as steadily as he could, "Neville's right, actually, you can't award literally zero points for the part where you get the action correct, that sends the wrong message too, but he was halfway there so it could be five points instead."

Professor McGonagall looked, for a moment, like she couldn't think of what to say; but then her eyes went to Neville's place at the table, and she said, "As you wish, Mr. Potter. What is it, Miss Bones?"

Harry looked and saw that Susan Bones had stepped forward, wiping at her own eyes, and the Hufflepuff girl said, "Actually – Professor McGonagall – General Potter didn't see it – but Captain Weasley and I weren't the only ones who tried to get in Mr. Hagrid's way, after he ran out. Before some of the older students stopped us. But we managed to slow Mr. Hagrid down a minute, so General Potter could get away."

"You've got to give them points too," said Ron Weasley from the Gryffindor table. "Or I won't take any."

"Who else?" said Professor McGonagall, her voice a bit unsteady.

Seven other children stood up.

What was that our Slytherin side was saying about predicting nothing would ever work? said Hufflepuff.

Something in Harry cracked, so that he had to exert all his force to hold himself together.



When all had been said, and all had been done, Minerva went to where Harry Potter stood. Though it was not her greatest skill she cast a ward about them to blur vision, and muffled sounds with another thought.

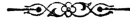
"You, you didn't have to –" said Harry Potter. "You shouldn't have said –" He sounded like he was choking. "P-Professor, everything I said to you was hurtful, and hateful, and wrong –"

"I already knew that, Harry," she said. "Even so, I wished to do better." There was a feeling of lightness in her chest, much as one might experience after stepping off a cliff, when your legs no longer had to hold your body upright. She wasn't sure she could do this, she did not know the way; and yet for the first time it seemed possible that Hogwarts wouldn't become a sad ghost of its former self, when she became its Headmistress.

Harry stared at her, then made a odd noise that sounded like it had been forced from his throat, and covered his face in his hands.

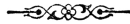
So she knelt down, and hugged him. It might go wrong, but it might also go right, and she would not let that uncertainty stop her; it was time she began to learn a Gryffindor's courage, so that she could teach it in turn.

"I had a sister once," she whispered. Just that, and nothing more.

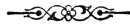


Just to make sure, said some part of Harry, while the rest of him sobbed into Professor McGonagall's arms, this doesn't mean we've accepted Hermione's death, right?

No said all the rest of him, every part of his mind in unanimous agreement, warmth and cold and a hidden place of steel. Never, ever, forever.



And an ancient wizard to whom that ward meant nothing gazed upon them both, the witch and the weeping young wizard. Albus Dumbledore was smiling with a strange sad look in his eyes, like someone who has taken one more step toward a foreseen destination.



The Defense Professor watched them both, the woman and the crying boy. His eyes were very cold, and very calculating.

He did not think that this would be enough.



It wasn't until the next morning that it was discovered that Hermione Granger's body was missing.

ROLES, PART V

The first meeting:

AT 6:07 AM on April 17th, 1992 the Sun was just rising above the horizon as seen from the castle Hogwarts, filtering in through drawn curtains in the Ravenclaw first-year boys' dorm to provide a gentle light, red-orange for dawn and little-changed by the white fabric covering the windows, not yet waking boys more accustomed to winter's schedule.

In one bed among many, Harry Potter slept the sleep of the just exhausted.

Quietly the door opened.

Quietly a figure walked across the floor.

That figure came to Harry Potter's bed.

The figure laid a hand on the shoulder of the sleeping boy, who started and shrieked.

No others heard.

"Mr. Potter," the small man squeaked, "the Headmaster has requested your presence immediately."

Slowly the boy sat up in bed, his hands momentarily fiddling beneath the covers. He'd expected to feel much worse, waking up this morning. It felt... wrong, that his brain functioned now, that his thoughts still moved, that he wasn't incapacitated with weeping for at least a week. The boy knew that it wouldn't have been an adaptive response, for brains to evolve to do that. His dark side, certainly, would not do that. Even so, it still felt wrong to be alive and lucid, this morning.

But his resolution to revive Hermione Granger felt – sufficient, like he was already doing the right thing, bent on the right path, and she would be brought back, and that was all there was to it; grief would have been giving up. There was nothing left to decide, no ambiguity, no conflict to tear at him, and no need to remember what he'd seen –

"I'll get dressed," Harry said.

Professor Flitwick looked rather reluctant, but said in his high voice, "The Headmaster specified you were to be brought to his office directly and

without pause, Mr. Potter. I'm sorry."

Less than a minute later – Professor Flitwick had sent him straight to the Headmaster's office through the Hogwarts internal Floo – Harry found himself, still in his pajamas, facing Albus Dumbledore. The Deputy Headmistress was also sitting in another chair, and the Potions Master lurked nearby amid the weird devices, caught in a gaping yawn just as Harry had entered through the fireplace.

"Harry," the Headmaster said without preamble, "before I say what I must say next, I tell you that Hermione Granger did truly die. The wards recorded it and informed me. The very stones spoke that a witch had died. I tested her body where it lay and those were Hermione Granger's true mortal remains, not any doll or likeness. There is no way known to wizardry by which death may be undone. All this being said, Hermione Granger's remains are now missing from the storeroom where they were placed, and where you guarded them. Did you take them, Harry Potter?"

"No," Harry said, narrowing his eyes. A glance showed him that Severus was watching him intently.

Dumbledore's gaze was also keen, though not unfriendly. "Is Hermione Granger's body in your possession?"

"No."

"Do you know where it is?"

"No."

"Do you know who took it?"

"No," Harry said, then hesitated. "Besides the obvious probabilistic speculations which are not based upon any specific knowledge of mine."

The old wizard nodded. "Do you know why it was taken?"

"No. Besides the obvious speculations etcetera."

"What would those be?" Sharp the ancient eyes.

"If the enemy can notice you running off to consult the Weasley twins during class after Hermione was arrested, and find out about that magic map you said was stolen, then the enemy can wonder why I was guarding Hermione Granger's body. My turn. Did you arrange for Hermione's death in hopes of getting the money back from Lucius?"

"What?" said Professor McGonagall.

"No," said the old wizard.

"Did you know or suspect that Hermione Granger would die?"

"I did not know. As for suspicions, I placed her in the most strongly defended position I could, against Voldemort. I did not will her death, nor allow it, nor plan to benefit from it, Harry Potter. Now show me your pouch."

"It's in my trunk –" Harry began.

"Severus," said the old wizard, and the Potions Master moved forward. "Check his trunk as well, every compartment."

"My trunk has wards."

Severus Snape grinned mirthlessly and strode into the green flame.

Dumbledore took out his long dark-grey wand and began to wave it close around Harry's hair, looking like a Muggle using a metal-detector. Before he had reached as far as Harry's neck, Dumbledore stopped.

"The gem upon your ring," Dumbledore said. "It is no longer a clear diamond. It is brown, the color of Hermione Granger's eyes, and the color of her hair."

A sudden tension filled the room.

"That's my father's rock," Harry said. "Transfigured the same as before. I just did it to remember Hermione –"

"I must be sure. Take off that ring, Harry, and place it upon my desk."

Slowly, Harry did so, removing the gem and setting the ring off to the other side of the desk.

Dumbledore pointed his wand at the gem and –

A large, undistinguished grey rock jumped into the air from the force of its sudden expansion, hit some invisible barrier in the air above, and then fell with a loud crack upon the Headmaster's desk,

"There's another half-hour of work for me, Transfiguring it again," Harry said evenly.

Dumbledore resumed his examination. Harry had to remove his left shoe, and take off the toe-ring that was his emergency portkey if someone kidnapped him and took him outside the wards of Hogwarts (and didn't put up anti-Apparition, anti-portkey, anti-phoenix, and anti-time-looping wards, which Severus had warned Harry that any inner-circle Death Eater would certainly do). It was verified that the magic radiating from the toe-ring was indeed the magic of a portkey, and not the magic of a Transfiguration. The rest of Harry was deemed clear.

Not long after, the Potions Master returned, bearing Harry's pouch, and several other magical things which had been in Harry's trunk, which the

Headmaster also examined, one by one, even to all the items remaining within the healer's kit.

"Can I go now?" Harry said when it was all done, putting as much cold as he could into his voice. He took up his pouch, and began the process of feeding the grey rock into it. The empty ring went back on his finger.

The old wizard breathed out, slipping his wand back into his sleeve. "I am sorry," he said. "I had to know. Harry... the Dark Lord has taken Hermione Granger's remains, it seems. I cannot think of anything he would gain thereby, except to send her corpse against you as an Inferius. Severus shall give you certain potions to keep about your person. Be warned now, and be prepared for when you must do what must be done."

"Will the Inferius have Hermione's mind?"

"No –"

"Then it's not her. Can I go? At least to change out of my pyjamas."

"There is other news, but I shall be brief. The wards of Hogwarts record that no foreign creature has entered, and that it was the Defense Professor who killed Hermione Granger."

"Um," Harry said.

Thought 1: But I saw the troll kill Hermione.

Thought 2: Professor Quirrell Memory-Charmed me and set up the scene that Dumbledore saw when he arrived.

Thought 3: Professor Quirrell can't do that, his magic can't touch mine. I saw that in Azkaban –

Thought 4: Can I trust those memories?

Thought 5: There was clearly some sort of debacle at Azkaban, we wouldn't have needed a rocket if Professor Quirrell hadn't fallen unconscious, and why'd he be unconscious if not –

Thought 6: Did I ever actually go to Azkaban at all?

Thought 7: I clearly practiced controlling Dementors at some point before I scared that Dementor in the Wizengamot. And that was in the newspapers.

Thought 8: Am I accurately remembering the newspapers?

"Um," Harry said again. "That spell seriously ought to be Unforgiveable. You think Professor Quirrell could have Memory-Charmed –"

"No. I went back through time and placed certain instruments to record Hermione's last battle, which I could not quite bear to watch in my own person." The old wizard looked very grim indeed. "Your guess was right,

Harry Potter. Voldemort sabotaged everything we gave Hermione to protect her. Her broomstick lay dead in her hands. Her invisibility cloak did not conceal her. The troll walked in the sunlight unharmed; it was no stray creature, but a weapon pure and aimed. And it was indeed the troll who killed her, with strength alone, so that my wards and webs to detect hostile magics went for naught. The Defense Professor never crossed her path.”

Harry swallowed, shut his eyes, and thought. “So this was an attempted frame on Professor Quirrell. Somehow. It does seem to be the enemy’s *modus operandi*. Troll eats Hermione Granger, check the wards, oh look actually the Defense Professor did it, same as last year... no. No, that can’t be right.”

“Why not, Mr. Potter?” said the Potions Master. “It seems obvious enough to me –”

“That’s the problem.”

The enemy is smart.

Slowly the fog of sleep was drifting out of Harry’s mind, and after a full night’s sleep his brain could see the things which hadn’t been obvious the day before.

Under standard literary convention... the enemy wasn’t supposed to look over what you’d done, sabotage the magic items you’d handed out, and then send out a troll rendered undetectable by some means the heroes couldn’t figure out even after the fact, so that you might as well have not defended yourself at all. In a book, the point-of-view usually stayed on the main characters. Having the enemy just bypass all the protagonists’ work, as a result of planning and actions taken out of literary sight, would be a *diabolus ex machina*, and dramatically unsatisfying.

But in real life the enemy would think that they were the main character, and they would also be clever, and think things through in advance, even if you didn’t see them do it. That was why everything about this felt so disjointed, with parts unexplained and seemingly inexplicable. How had Lucius felt, when Harry had threatened Dumbledore with breaking Azkaban? How had the Aurors above Azkaban felt, seeing the broomstick rise up on a torch of fire?

The enemy is smart.

“The enemy knew perfectly well that you’d turn back time to check what really happened to Hermione, especially since the troll getting into Hogwarts at all tells us that somebody can fool the wards.” Harry shut his

eyes, thinking harder, trying to put himself into the enemy's shoes. Why would he, or his dark side, have done something like – “We're meant to conclude that the enemy has control of what the wards tell us. But that's actually something the enemy can only do with difficulty, or under special conditions; they're trying to create a false appearance of omnipotence.” Like I would. “Later, hypothetically, the wards show Professor Sinistra killing someone. We think the wards are just being fooled again, but really, Professor Sinistra was Legilimized and she did do it.”

“Unless that is precisely what the Dark Lord expects us to think,” said Severus Snape, his brow furrowed in concentration. “In which case he does have control of the wards, and Professor Sinistra will be innocent.”

“Does the Dark Lord really use plots with that many levels of meta –”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore and Severus.

Harry nodded distantly. “Then this could be a setup to either make us think the wards are telling the truth when they're lying, or a setup to make us think the wards are lying when they're telling the truth, depending on what level the enemy expects us to reason at. But if the enemy is planning to make us trust the wards – we would have trusted the wards anyway, if we'd been given no reason to distrust them. So there's no need to go to all the work of framing Professor Quirrell in a way that we would realize we were intended to discover, just to trick us into going meta –”

“Not so,” said Dumbledore. “If Voldemort has not fully mastered the wards, then the wards had to believe that some Professor's hand was at work. Else they would have cried out at Miss Granger's injury, and not only upon her death.”

Harry reached up a hand and rubbed at his brow, just beneath his hair.

Okay, serious question. If the enemy is that smart, why the heck am I still alive? Is it seriously that hard to poison someone, are there Charms and Potions and bezoars which can cure me of literally anything that could be slipped into my breakfast? Would the wards record it, trace the magic of the murderer?

Could my scar contain the fragment of soul that's keeping the Dark Lord anchored to the world, so he doesn't want to kill me? Instead he's trying to drive off all my friends to weaken my spirit so he can take over my body? It'd explain the Parselmouth thing. The Sorting Hat might not be able to detect a lich-phylactery-thingy. Obvious problem 1, the Dark Lord is supposed to have made his lich-phylactery-thingy in 1943 by killing whatshername and

framing Mr. Hagrid. Obvious problem 2, there's no such thing as souls.

Though Dumbledore also thought that my blood was a key ingredient in a ritual to restore the Dark Lord's full strength, which would require keeping me alive until then... now there's a cheery thought.

"Well..." Harry said. "I'm sure of one thing."

"And that is?"

"Neville needs to be taken out of Hogwarts now. He's the obvious next target and no first-year student can survive this level of offence. We're lucky Neville wasn't assassinated yesterday evening, the enemy doesn't have to wait until we're finished mourning to make their next move." Why didn't the enemy strike while we were distracted?

Dumbledore exchanged glances with Severus, and then with the suddenly tight expression of Professor McGonagall. "Harry," said the old wizard, "if you send all your friends away yourself, that is just the same as if Voldemort –"

"I will be fine I can do without Neville for a couple of extra months it's not like you were planning to make my friends stay here over the summer and that is just plain not sufficient justification to let him get killed! Professor McGonagall –"

"I quite agree," said the Scottish witch. She frowned. "I extremely agree. I agree to the point where... I'm having some trouble figuring out how to express this, Albus..."

"To the point where you're going to haul him out of there yourself, regardless of what anyone else says, because it's no excuse to say you were only following orders if Neville gets killed?" Harry said.

Professor McGonagall closed her eyes briefly. "Yes, but surely there ought to be some way to be responsible without threats of unilateral action."

The Headmaster sighed. "No need. Go, Minerva."

"Wait," the Potions Master said, just as Professor McGonagall, moving rather swiftly, was taking a pinch of green dust from the Floo-vase. "We should not call attention to the boy, as the Headmaster called attention to the Weasley twins. It would be wiser, I think, if Mr. Longbottom's grandmother took him from Hogwarts. Let him stay in his Common Room for now; the Dark Lord does not seem able to act so openly."

There was another long exchange of glances among the four, and finally Harry nodded, followed by Professor McGonagall.

"In that case," said Harry, "I'm sure of one other thing."

"And that is?" said Dumbledore.

"I very much need to visit the washroom, and I would also like to change out of these pyjamas."



"By the way," Harry said as he and the Headmaster emerged from Floo into the empty office of the Ravenclaw Head of House. "One last quick question I wanted to ask just you. That sword the Weasley twins pulled out of the Sorting Hat. That was the Sword of Gryffindor, wasn't it?"

The old wizard turned, face neutral. "What makes you think that, Harry?"

"The Sorting Hat yelled Gryffindor! just before handing it out, the sword had a ruby pommel and gold letters on the blade, and the Latin script said Nothing better. Just a hunch."

"Nihil supernum," said the old wizard. "That is not quite what it means."

Harry nodded. "Mmhm. What'd you do with it?"

"I retrieved it from where it fell, and placed it in a secure place," the old wizard said. He gave Harry a stern look. "I hope you are not greedy for it yourself, young Ravenclaw."

"Not at all, just want to make sure you're not keeping it permanently from its rightful wielders. So the Weasley twins are the Heir of Gryffindor, then?"

"The Heir of Gryffindor?" Dumbledore said, looking surprised. Then the old wizard smiled, blue eyes twinkling brightly. "Ah, Harry, Salazar Slytherin may have built a Chamber of Secrets into Hogwarts, but Godric Gryffindor was not much given to such extravagances. We have seen only that Godric left his Sword to the defence of Hogwarts, if a worthy student ever faced a foe they could not defeat alone."

"That's not the same as saying no. Don't think I didn't notice that you didn't actually say no."

"I did not live in those years, Harry, and I do not know all that Godric Gryffindor may or may not have done –"

"Do you in fact assign greater than fifty percent subjective probability that there is something like a Heir of Gryffindor and one or both Weasley twins are it. Yes or no, evasion means yes. You're not going to succeed in distracting me, no matter how much I have to go to the bathroom."

The old wizard sighed. "Yes, Fred and George Weasley are the Heir of Gryffindor. I beg you not to speak of it to them, not yet."

Harry nodded, and turned to go. "I'm surprised," Harry said. "I read a little about Godric Gryffindor's historical life. The Weasley twins are... well, they're awesome in various ways, but they don't seem much like the Godric in the history books."

"Only a man exceedingly proud and vain," Dumbledore said quietly, as he turned back to the Floo roaring up again with green flames, "would believe that his heir should be like himself, rather than like who he wished that he could be."

The Headmaster stepped into green fire, and was gone.



The second meeting (in a small cubby off the Hufflepuff Common Room):

Neville Longbottom's face was drawn up in anguish, as he spoke with no one to hear, to the empty air.

"Seriously," the empty air said back to him. "I'm wearing an invisibility cloak with extra anti-detection charms just to walk through the hallways because I don't want to be killed. My parents would have me out of Hogwarts in an instant if the Headmaster allowed it. Neville, your getting the heck out of Hogwarts is common sense, it has nothing to do with –"

"I betrayed you, General," Neville said, his voice around as hollow as any normal eleven-year-old boy could reasonably manage. "I didn't even do it the Chaotic way. I conformed to authority and tried to make you conform to authority too. What's that you always say, about how in the Chaos Legion, a soldier who can only obey orders is useless?"

"Neville," the empty air said firmly. The pressure of two hands, beneath thin cloth, came firmly to bear on Neville's shoulders; and the voice moved closer to him. "You weren't blindly obeying authority, you were trying to protect me. It's true that in this chaotic world, soldiers who can only follow rules and regulations are worthless. However, soldiers who follow rules for the sake of protecting their friends are –"

"Slightly better than worthless?" Neville said bitterly.

"Significantly better than worthless. Neville, you made an error of judgment. It cost me around six seconds. Now it could be that Hermione's injuries were just barely fatal, but even then, I don't think six seconds was actually enough time for the troll to take an extra bite of Hermione. In the counter-factual world where you didn't step in front of me, Hermione still

died. Now, I could stand here listing out the first dozen ways that Hermione would be alive if I hadn't been stupid –"

"You? You ran right out after her. I'm the one who tried to stop you. It's my fault if it's anyone's," Neville said bitterly.

The empty air went silent at this for a while.

"Wow," the empty air finally said. "Wow. That puts a pretty different perspective on things, I have to say. I'm going to remember this the next time I feel an impulse to blame myself for something. Neville, the term in the literature for this is 'egocentric bias', it means that you experience everything about your own life but you don't get to experience everything else that happens in the world. There was way, way more going on than you running in front of me. You're going to spend weeks remembering that thing you did there for six seconds, I can tell, but nobody else is going to bother thinking about it. Other people spend a lot less time thinking about your past mistakes than you do, just because you're not the centre of their worlds. I guarantee to you that nobody except you has even considered blaming Neville Longbottom for what happened to Hermione. Not for a fraction of a second. You are being, if you will pardon the phrase, a silly-dilly. Now shut up and say goodbye."

"I don't want to say goodbye," Neville said. His voice was trembling, but he managed not to cry. "I want to stay here and fight with you against – against whatever's happening."

The empty air moved closer to him, and embraced him in a hug, and Harry Potter's voice whispered, "Tough luck."

ROLES, PART VI

The third meeting
(10:31 am, April 17th 1992)

SPRING had begun, the late-morning air still crisp with the leavings of winter. Daffodils had bloomed amid the sprouting grass of the forest, the gentle yellow petals with their golden hearts dangling limply from their dead, grayed stems, wounded or killed by one of the sudden frosts that you often saw in April. In the Forbidden Forest there would be stranger lifeforms, centaurs and unicorns at the least, and Harry had heard allegations of werewolves. Though from what Harry had read of real-life werewolves, that did not make the slightest bit of sense.

Harry didn't venture anywhere near the border of the Forbidden Forest, since there was no reason to take the risk. He walked invisibly among the more ordinary life-forms of the permitted woods, wand in hand, a broomstick strapped to his back for easier access, just in case. He was not actually afraid; Harry thought it odd that he didn't feel afraid. The state of constant vigilance, readiness for fight or flight, failed to feel burdensome or even abnormal.

On the edges of the permitted woods Harry walked, his feet never straying near the beaten path where he might be more easily found, never leaving sight of Hogwarts's windows. Harry had set the alarm upon his mechanical watch to tell him when it was lunchtime, since he couldn't actually look at his wrist, being invisible and all that. It raised the question of how his eyeglasses worked while he was wearing the Cloak. For that matter the Law of the Excluded Middle seemed to imply that either the rhodopsin complexes in his retina were absorbing photons and transducing them to neural spikes, or alternatively, those photons were going straight through his body and out the other side, but not both. It really did seem increasingly likely that invisibility cloaks let you see outward while being invisible yourself because, on some fundamental level, that was how the caster had – not wanted – but implicitly believed – that invisibility should work.

Whereupon you had to wonder whether anyone had tried Confunding

or Legitimizing someone into implicitly and matter-of-factly believing that Fixus Everythingus ought to be an easy first-year Charm, and then trying to invent it.

Or maybe find a worthy Muggleborn in a country that didn't identify Muggleborn children, and tell them some extensive lies, fake up a surrounding story and corresponding evidence, so that, from the very beginning, they'd have a different idea of what magic could do. Though apparently they'd still have to learn a number of previous Charms before they became capable of inventing their own...

It might not work. Surely there'd been some organically insane wizards who'd truly believed in their own possibility of godhood, and yet had failed to become god. But even the insane had probably believed the ascension spell ought to be some grandiose dramatic ritual and not something you did with a carefully composed twitch of your wand and the incantation *Becomus Goddus*.

Harry was already pretty sure it wouldn't be that easy. But then the question was, why not? What pattern had his brain learned? Could the reason be predicted in advance?

A slight fringe of apprehension crept through Harry then, a tinge of worry, as he contemplated this question. The nameless concern sharpened, grew greater –

Professor Quirrell?

"Mr. Potter," a soft voice called from behind him.

Harry spun, his hand going to the Time-Turner beneath his cloak; again the principle of being ready to flee upon an instant's notice felt only ordinary.

Slowly, palms empty and turned outward, Professor Quirrell was walking towards him within the forests' outskirts, coming from the general direction of the Hogwarts castle.

"Mr. Potter," Professor Quirrell said again. "I know that you're here. You know that I know that you're here. I must speak to you."

Still Harry said nothing. Professor Quirrell hadn't actually said what this was about, and Harry's sunlit morning walk about the forest edge had produced a mood of silence within him.

Professor Quirrell took a small step to the left, a step forward, another to the right. He tilted his head with a look of calculation, and then he walked almost directly towards where Harry stood, halted a few paces off with the sense of doom enflamed to the height of bearability.

"Are you still resolved upon your course?" Professor Quirrell said. "The same course you spoke of yesterday?"

Again Harry did not reply.

Professor Quirrell sighed. "There is much I have done for you," the man said. "Whatever else you may wonder of me, you cannot deny that. I am calling in some of the debt. Talk to me, Mr. Potter."

I don't feel like doing this right now, Harry thought; then: Oh, right.



Two hours later, after Harry had spun the Time-Turner once, noted down the exact time and memorized his exact location, spent another hour walking, went inside and told Professor McGonagall that he was currently talking to the Defense Professor in the woods outside Hogwarts (just in case anything happened to him), walked for a further hour, then returned to his original location exactly one hour after he'd left and spun the Time-Turner again –



"What was that?" Professor Quirrell said, blinking. "Did you just –"

"Nothing important," Harry said without pulling back the hood of his invisibility cloak, or taking his hand from his Time-Turner. "Yes, I'm still resolved. To be honest, I'm thinking I shouldn't have said anything."

Professor Quirrell inclined his head. "A sentiment which shall serve you well in life. Is there anything which is liable to change your mind?"

"Professor, if I already knew about the existence of an argument which would change my decision –"

"True, for the likes of us. But you would be surprised how often someone knows what they are waiting to hear, yet must wait to hear it said." Professor Quirrell shook his head. "To put this in your terms... there is a true fact, known to me but not to you, of which I would like to convince you, Mr. Potter."

Harry's eyebrows rose, though he realized in the next moment that Professor Quirrell couldn't see it. "That's in my terms, all right. Go ahead."

"The intention you have formed is far more dangerous than you realize."

Replying to this surprising statement did not take much thought on Harry's part. "Define dangerous, and tell me what you think you know and how you think you know it."

"Sometimes," said Professor Quirrell, "telling someone about a danger can cause them to walk directly into it. I have no intention of having that happen this time. Do you expect me to tell you exactly what you must not do? Exactly why I am afraid?" The man shook his head. "If you were wizardborn, Mr. Potter, you would know to take it seriously, when a powerful magus tells you only to beware."

It would have been a lie to say that Harry was not annoyed, but he also wasn't an idiot; so Harry said merely, "Is there anything you can tell me?"

Carefully, Professor Quirrell seated himself upon the grass, and took out his wand, his hand assuming a position that Harry recognized. Harry's breath caught.

"This is the last time that I shall be able to do this for you," Professor Quirrell said quietly. Then the man began to speak words that were strange, of no language Harry could recognize, intonation that seemed not quite human, words which seemed to slip from Harry's memory even as he tried to grasp them, exiting from his mind as quickly as they entered.

The spell took effect more slowly, this time. The trees seemed to darken, branches and leaves staining, as though seen through perfect sunglasses that faded and attenuated light without distorting it. The blue bowl of the sky receded, the horizon which Harry's brain falsely assigned a finite distance pulling back as it turned gray, and darker gray. The clouds became translucent, transparent, wisping away to let the darkness shine through.

The forest shaded, faded, abated into blackness.

The great sky river became visible once again, as Harry's eyes adjusted, became able to see the largest object which human eyes could ever behold as more than a point, the surrounding Milky Way.

And the stars, piercingly bright and yet remote, out of a great depth.

Professor Quirrell breathed deeply. Then he raised his wand again (just barely visible, in the starlight without sun or moon) and tapped himself on the head with a sound like an egg cracking.

The Defense Professor also faded away, became likewise invisible.

A tiny disk of grass, illuminated by not much light at all, drifted unoccupied within empty space.

Neither of them spoke for a time. Harry was content to look at the stars, undistracted even by his own body. Whatever Professor Quirrell had called him here to say, it would be said in due time.

In due time, a voice spoke.

“There is no war here,” said a soft voice emanating from within the emptiness. “No conflict and battle, no politics and betrayal, no death and no life. That is all for the folly of men. The stars are above such foolishness, untouched by it. Here there is peace, and silence eternal. So I once thought.”

Harry turned to look at where the voice originated, and saw only stars.

“So you once thought?” Harry said, when no other words seemed to be forthcoming.

“There is nothing above the folly of men,” whispered the voice from the emptiness. “There is nothing beyond the destructive powers of sufficiently intelligent idiocy, not even the stars themselves. I went to a great deal of trouble to make a certain golden plaque last forever. I would not like to see it destroyed by human folly.”

Again Harry’s eyes reflexively darted toward where the voice should have been, again saw only emptiness. “I think I can reassure you on that score, Professor. Nuclear weapons don’t have a fireball extending out for... how far away is Pioneer 11? Somewhere around a billion kilometres, maybe? Muggles talk about nuclear weapons destroying the world, but what they actually mean is lightly warming up some of Earth’s surface. The Sun is a giant fusion reaction and it doesn’t vaporize distant space probes. The worst-case scenario for nuclear war wouldn’t even come close to destroying the Solar System, not that this is much of a consolation.”

“True while we speak of Muggles,” said the soft voice amid starlight. “But what do Muggles know of true power? It is not they who frighten me now. It is you.”

“Professor,” Harry said carefully, “while I have to admit I’ve rolled a few critical failures in my life, there’s a bit of distance between that and missing a saving throw so hard that the Pioneer 11 probe gets caught in the blast radius. There’s no realistic way to do that without blowing up the Sun. And before you ask, our Sun is a main-sequence G-type star, it can’t explode. Any energy input would just increase the volume of the hydrogen plasma, the Sun doesn’t have a degenerate core that could be detonated. The Sun doesn’t have enough mass to go supernova, even at the end of its lifespan.”

“Such amazing things the Muggles have learned,” the other voice murmured. “How stars live, how they are preserved from death, how they die. And they never wonder if such knowledge might be dangerous.”

“In all frankness, Professor, that particular thought has never occurred to me either.”

“You are Muggleborn. I speak not of blood, I speak of how you spent your childhood years. There is a freedom of thought in that, true. But there is also wisdom in the caution of wizardkind. It has been three hundred and twenty-three years since the magical territories of Sicily were ruined by one man’s folly. Such incidents were more common in the years when Hogwarts was raised. Commoner still, in the aftertime of Merlin. Of the time before Merlin, little remains to study.”

“There’s around thirty orders of magnitude of difference between that and blowing up the Sun,” Harry observed, then caught himself. “But that’s a pointless quibble, sorry, blowing up a country would also be bad, I agree. In any case, Professor, I don’t plan on doing anything like that.”

“Your choice is not required, Mr. Potter. If you had read more wizardborn novels and fewer Muggle stories, you would know. In serious literature the wizard whose foolishness threatens to unleash the Shambling Bone-Men will not be deliberately bent on such a goal, that is for children’s books. This truly dangerous wizard shall perhaps be bent on some project of which he anticipates great renown, and the certain prospect of losing that renown and living out his life in obscurity will seem to him more vivid than the unknown prospect of destroying his country. Or he shall have promised success to one he cannot bear to disappoint. Perhaps he has children in debt. There is much literary wisdom in those stories. It is born of harsh experience and cities of ash. The most likely prospect for disaster is a powerful wizard who, for whatever reason, cannot bring himself to halt as warning signs appear. Though he may speak much and loudly of caution, he will not be able to bring himself actually to halt. I wonder, Mr. Potter, have you thought of trying anything which Hermione Granger herself would have told you not to do?”

“All right, point taken,” said Harry. “Professor, I am well aware that if I save Hermione at the price of two other people’s lives, I’ve lost on total points from a utilitarian standpoint. I am extremely aware that Hermione would not want me to risk destroying a whole country just to save her. That’s just common sense.”

“Child who destroys Dementors,” said that soft voice, “if it were only one country I feared you might ruin, I would be less concerned. I did not at first credit that your knowledge of Muggle science and Muggle practices would be a source of great power. I now credit it more. I am, in complete sincerity, concerned for the safety of that golden plaque.”

“Well, if science fiction has taught me anything,” said Harry, “it’s taught

me that destroying the Solar System is not morally acceptable, especially if you do it before humanity has colonized any other star systems.”

“Then will you give up this –”

“No,” Harry said without even thinking before he opened his mouth. After a moment, he added, “But I do understand what you’re trying to tell me.”

Silence. The stars had not shifted, not even as they would have in an Earthly night sky, over time.

A very slight rustle, as of someone shifting their body. Harry realized that he had been standing for a while in the same position, and dropped down to the almost unseeable circle of grass that still stayed beneath him, careful not to touch the edges of the spell.

“Tell me this,” said the soft voice. “Why does that girl matter to you so much?”

“Because she is my friend.”

“In the English language as it is customarily used, Mr. Potter, the word ‘friend’ is not associated with a desperate effort to raise the dead. Are you under the impression that she is your true love, or some such?”

“Oh, not you too,” Harry said wearily. “Not you of all people, Professor. Fine, we’re best friends, but that’s all, okay? That’s enough. Friends don’t let friends stay dead.”

“Ordinary folk do not do as much, for those they call friends.” The voice sounded more distant now, abstracted. “Not even for those they say they love. Their companions die, and they do not go in search of power to resurrect them.”

Harry couldn’t help himself. He looked over again, despite knowing it would be futile, and saw only more stars. “Let me guess, from this you deduce that... people don’t actually care as much about their friends as they pretend.”

A brief laugh. “They would scarcely pretend to care less.”

“They care, Professor, and not just for their true loves. Soldiers throw themselves on grenades to save their friends, mothers run into burning houses to save their children. But if you’re a Muggle you don’t think there’s any such thing as magic to bring someone back to life. And normal wizards don’t... think outside the box like that. I mean, most wizards aren’t searching for power to make themselves immortal. Does that prove they don’t care about their own lives?”

“As you say, Mr. Potter. Certainly I myself would consider their lives pointless and without a shred of value. Perhaps, somewhere in their hidden hearts, they also believe that my opinion of them is the correct one.”

Harry shook his head, and then, in annoyance, cast back the hood of his Cloak, and shook his head again. “That seems like a rather contrived view of the world, Professor,” said the dim-lit head of a boy, floating unsupported on a circle of dark grass amid stars. “Trying to invent a resurrection spell just isn’t something normal people would think of, so you can’t deduce anything from their not taking the option.”

A moment later, the dim-lit outline of a man sitting on the circle of grass was visible as well.

“If they truly cared about their supposed loved ones,” the Defense Professor said softly, “they would think of it, would they not?”

“Brains don’t work that way. They don’t suddenly supercharge when the stakes go up – or when they do, it’s within hard limits. I couldn’t calculate the thousandth digit of pi if someone’s life depended on it.”

The dim-lit head inclined. “But there is another possible explanation, Mr. Potter. It is that people play the role of friendship. They do just as much as that role requires of them, and no more. The thought occurs to me that perhaps the difference between you and them is not that you care more than they do. Why would you have been born with such unusually strong emotions of friendship, that you alone among wizardkind are driven to resurrect Hermione Granger after her death? No, the most likely difference is not that you care more. It is that, being a more logical creature than they, you alone have thought that playing the role of Friend would require this of you.”

Harry stared out at the stars. He would have been lying if he’d claimed not to be shaken. “That... can’t be true, Professor. I could name a dozen examples in Muggle novels of people driven to resurrect their dead friends. The authors of those stories clearly understood exactly how I feel about Hermione. Though you wouldn’t have read them, I guess... maybe Orpheus and Eurydice? I didn’t actually read that one but I know what’s in it.”

“Such tales are also told among wizardkind. There is the story of the Elric brothers. The tale of Dora Kent, who was protected by her son Saul. There is Ronald Mallett and his doomed challenge to Time. In Italy before its fall, the drama of Precia Testarossa. In Nippon they tell of Akemi Homura and her lost love. What these stories have in common, Mr. Potter, is that

they are all fiction. Real-life wizards do not attempt the same, even though the notion is clearly not beyond their imagination.”

“Because they don’t think they can!” Harry’s voice rose.

“Shall we go and tell the good Professor McGonagall about your intention to find a way to resurrect Miss Granger, and see what she thinks of it? Perhaps it has simply never occurred to her to consider that option... Ah, but you hesitate. You already know her answer, Mr. Potter. Do you know why you know it?” You could hear the cold smile in the voice. “A lovely technique, that. Thank you for teaching it to me.”

Harry was aware of the tension that had developed in his face, his words came out as though bitten off. “Professor McGonagall has not grown up with the Muggle concept of the increasing power of science, and nobody’s ever told her that when a friend’s life is at stake is a time when you need to think very rationally –”

The Defense Professor’s voice was also rising. “The Transfiguration Professor is reading from a script, Mr. Potter! That script calls for her to mourn and grieve, that all may know how much she cared. Ordinary people react poorly if you suggest that they go off-script. As you already knew!”

“That’s funny, I could have sworn I saw Professor McGonagall going off-script at dinner yesterday. If I saw her go off-script another ten times I might actually try to talk to her about resurrecting Hermione, but right now she’s new to that and needs practice. In the end, Professor, what you’re trying to explain away by calling love and friendship and everything else a lie is just human beings not knowing any better.”

The Defense Professor’s voice rose in pitch. “If it were you who had been killed by that troll, it would not even occur to Hermione Granger to do as you are doing for her! It would not occur to Draco Malfoy, nor to Neville Longbottom, nor to McGonagall or any of your precious friends! There is not one person in this world who would return to you the care that you are showing her! So why? Why do it, Mr. Potter?” There was a strange, wild desperation in that voice. “Why be the only one in the world who goes to such lengths to keep up the pretence, when none of them will ever do the same for you?”

“I believe you are factually mistaken, Professor,” Harry returned evenly. “About a number of things, in fact. At the very least, your model of my emotions is flawed. Because you don’t understand me the tiniest bit, if you think that it would stop me if everything you said was true. Everything in

the world has to start somewhere, every event has to happen for a first time. Life on Earth had to start with some little self-replicating molecule in a pool of mud. And if I were the first person in the world, no –”

Harry’s hand swept out, to indicate the terribly distant points of light.

“– if I were the first person in the universe who ever really cared about someone else, which I’m not by the way, then I’d be honoured to be that person, and I’d try to do it justice.”

There was a long silence.

“You truly do care about that girl,” the man’s dim outline said softly. “You care about her in the way that none of them are capable of caring for their own lives, let alone each other.” The Defense Professor’s voice had become strange, filled with some indecipherable emotion. “I do not understand it, but I know the lengths you will go to because of it. You will challenge death itself, for her. Nothing will sway you from that.”

“I care enough to make an actual effort,” Harry said quietly. “Yes, that is correct.”

The starlight slowly began to fracture, the world shining through the cracks; slashes through the night showing tree-trunks and leaves glowing in the sunlight. Harry raised a hand, blinking hard, as the returning brightness smashed into his dark-adjusted eyes; and his eyes automatically went to the Defense Professor, just in case an attack occurred while he was blinded.

When all the stars had gone and only daylight remained, Professor Quirrell was still sitting on the grass. “Well, Mr. Potter,” he said in his normal voice, “if that is so, then I shall give you what help I can, while I can.”

“You’ll what?” Harry said involuntarily.

“My offer as I made it yesterday still stands. Ask and I will answer. Show me the same science books you deemed suitable for Mr. Malfoy, and I shall look them over and tell you what comes to mind. Don’t look so surprised, Mr. Potter, I would hardly leave you to your own devices.”

Harry stared, tear ducts still watering from the sudden light.

Professor Quirrell looked back at him. Something strange glinted in the pale eyes. “I have done what I can, and now I fear I must take my leave of you. Good –” and the Defense Professor hesitated. “Good day, Mr. Potter.”

“Good –” Harry began.

The man sitting on the grass fell over, his head impacting the ground with a light thud. At the same time the sense of doom diminished so sharply that Harry leapt to his feet, his heart suddenly in his throat.

But the figure on the ground slowly pushed back up to a crawling position. Turned to look at Harry, eyes empty, mouth slack. Tried to stand, fell back to the ground.

Harry took a step forward, sheer instinct telling him to offer a hand, although that was incorrect; the apprehension that rose up in him, however faint, spoke of continued danger.

But the fallen figure flinched away from Harry, and then slowly began crawl to away from him, in the general direction of the distant castle.

The boy standing amid the forest gazed after.

ROLES, PART VII

The fourth meeting
(4:38 pm, April 17th 1992)

THE man wearing the worn, warm coat, with three faint scars etched forever into his cheek, observed Harry Potter as closely as he could while the boy looked around politely at the rows of cottages. For someone whose best friend had died yesterday, Harry Potter seemed strangely composed, though not in any way reminiscent of unfeelingness, or normality. I don't wish to talk about that, the boy had said, with you or anyone. Saying 'wish' and not 'want', as though to emphasize that he was able to use grownup words and make grownup decisions. There had been only one thing Remus Lupin had thought of that might help, after he'd received the owls from Professor McGonagall and that strange man Quirinus Quirrell.

"There's a lot of empty houses," the boy said, glancing around again.

Godric's Hollow had changed, in the decade since Remus Lupin had been a frequent visitor. Many of the old, peaked cottages looked deserted, with green leafy vines growing across their windows and their doors. Britain had contracted noticeably, in the aftermath of the Wizarding War, having lost not only the dead but the fled. Godric's Hollow had been hard-hit. And afterward still more families had moved elsewhere, to Hogsmeade or magical London, the deserted houses too uncomfortable a reminder.

Others had remained. Godric's Hollow was older than Hogwarts, older than Godric Gryffindor whose name it had taken, and there were families which would reside here until the end of the world and its magic.

The Potters had been one such family, and would be again, if the last Potter so chose.

Remus Lupin tried to explain all that, simplifying it as best he could for the young boy. The Ravenclaw nodded thoughtfully and said nothing, as though he had understood it all without need of questions. Perhaps that was so; the child of James Potter and Lily Evans, the Head Boy and Head Girl of Hogwarts, would hardly be stupid. The child had certainly seemed highly

intelligent, for the little time that they had spoken in January, though at that time Remus had done most of the talking.

(There was also that business with the Wizengamot which Remus had heard rumours about, but Remus didn't believe a single word of that, any more than he'd believed it about James betrothing his son to Molly's youngest.)

"There's the monument," Remus said, pointing ahead of them.



Harry walked beside Mr. Lupin toward the black marble obelisk, thinking silently. It seemed to Harry that this adventure was essentially misguided; he had no use for grief counselling, that was not Harry's chosen path. So far as Harry was concerned, the five stages of grief were Rage, Remorse, Resolve, Research, and Resurrection. (Not that the usual 'five stages of grief' had any experimental evidence whatsoever that Harry had ever heard about.) But Mr. Lupin had seemed too sincere to refuse; and visiting James and Lily's home was something Harry felt he ought not to turn down. So Harry walked, feeling oddly detached; walking silently through a play whose script he was not interested in reading.

Harry had been told that he wasn't to wear the Cloak of Invisibility for this journey, so that Mr. Lupin could keep track of him.

Harry was morally certain that Dumbledore, or both Dumbledore and Mad-Eye Moody, were following them invisibly to see if anyone tried for the bait. There was no way Harry would have been let out of Hogwarts with only Remus Lupin for a guard. Harry didn't expect anything to happen, though. He'd seen nothing to contradict the hypothesis that all the danger centred on Hogwarts and only Hogwarts.

As the two of them walked closer toward the centre of town, the marble obelisk transformed into –

Harry drew in a breath. He'd been expecting a heroic pose of James Potter with wand levelled against Lord Voldemort, and Lily Potter with arms outstretched in front of the crib.

Instead there was a man with untidy hair and glasses, and a woman with her hair let down and a baby in her arms, and that was all.

"It looks very... normal," Harry said, feeling an odd catch in his throat.

"Madam Longbottom and Professor Dumbledore put their foot down hard," said Mr. Lupin, who was looking more at Harry than at the monument.

“They said that the Potters should be remembered as they had lived, not as they had died.”

Harry looked at the statue, thinking. Very strange, to see himself as a baby of stone, with no scar upon his forehead. It was a glimpse at an alternate universe, one where Harry James Potter (no Evans-Verres to his name) became an intelligent but ordinary wizarding scholar, maybe Sorted into Gryffindor like his parents. A Harry Potter who grew up a proper young wizard, knowing little of science for all that his mother was Muggleborn. Ultimately changing... not much. James and Lily wouldn't have raised their son with what Professor Quirrell would have called ambition and what Professor Verres-Evans would have called the common endeavour. His birth parents would have loved him very much, and that would not have been much help to anyone in the world except Harry. If someone had undone their death –

“You were their friend,” Harry said, turning to look at Lupin. “For a long time, since you were children.”

Mr. Lupin nodded silently.

Professor Quirrell's voice resounded in Harry's approximate memory: The most likely difference is not that you care more. Rather it is that, being a more logical creature than they, only you are aware that the role of Friend ought to require this of you...

“When Lily and James died,” Harry said, “did you think at all of whether there might be some magical way to get them back? Like Orpheus and Eurydice? Or the, what was it, Elrin brothers?”

“There is no magic which can undo death,” Mr. Lupin said quietly. “There are some mysteries which wizardry cannot touch.”

“Did you do a mental check of what you thought you knew, how you thought you knew it, and how high the probability was of that conclusion?”

“What?” said Mr. Lupin. “Could you repeat that, Harry?”

“I'm saying, did you think about it anyway?”

Mr. Lupin shook his head.

“Why not?”

“Because it was already done, and over,” Remus Lupin said gently. “Because wherever James and Lily are now, they would wish me to act for the sake of the living, not the dead.”

Harry nodded silently. He'd been pretty sure of the answer to that question before he'd asked. He'd already read that script. But he'd asked anyway,

just in case Mr. Lupin had spent a week obsessing about it, because Harry could have been wrong.

The soft voice of the Defense Professor seemed to speak in Harry's mind. Surely, if Lupin truly cared, he would not need special instruction for something as simple as thinking for five minutes before giving up...

Yes, he would, Harry answered the mental voice. Human beings wouldn't suddenly obtain a skill like that just because they cared. I learned about it because I'd read library books, produced by a huge scientific edifice –

And that other part of Harry said, in that soft voice, But there is also another hypothesis, Mr. Potter, and it fits the data in a much less complicated way.

No it doesn't! How would people even know what to pretend, if nobody had ever cared?

They don't know. That is what you observe.

The two of them walked onward toward a certain house, past a long row of occupied wizard cottages and other cottages overgrown with vines.

Coming finally to the house with half its top blown off, and green leaves growing over into the inside; behind a shoulder-high wild-growing hedge lining the side-walk, and a narrow metal gate (Mr. Hagrid had probably stepped right over it, being unable to fit through). The gap in the roof was like a giant mouth had taken a circular bite from the house, leaving spines of wood, what had maybe been support beams, sticking out. To the right side a single chimney still stood upright, uneaten by the giant bite, but leaning dangerously without its former support. Windows were shattered. Where there should have been a front door were only splinters of wood.

To this place Lord Voldemort had come, silently, making less noise than the dead leaves slithering along the pavement...

Remus Lupin put a hand upon Harry's shoulder. "Touch the gate," Mr. Lupin urged.

Harry reached out a hand and did so.

Like a fast-growing flower a sign burst from the tangled weeds in the ground behind the gate, a wooden sign with golden letters, and it said:

On this spot, on the night of 31 October 1981,
Lily and James Potter lost their lives.

They were survived by their son, Harry Potter,
the only wizard ever to withstand the Killing Curse,

the Boy-Who-Lived, who broke You-Know-Who's power.

This house has been left in its ruined state,
as a monument to the Potters,
as a reminder of their sacrifice.

In a blank space below the golden letters were written other messages, dozens of them, magical ink that rose to the surface and gleamed brightly enough to be read before fading and giving way to other messages.

So my Gideon is avenged.

Thank you, Harry Potter. Fare well wherever you are.

We will always be in the Potters' debt.

Oh James, oh Lily, I am sorry.

I hope you're alive, Harry Potter.

There is always a price.

I wish our last words had been kinder, James. I'm sorry.

There is always a dawn after the night.

Rest well, Lily.

Bless you, Boy-Who-Lived. You were our miracle.

"I guess –" Harry said. "I guess that's what people do – instead of trying to make it better –" Harry stopped. The thought seemed unworthy of this place. He looked up, and saw Remus Lupin gazing at him with a look so gentle that Harry wrenched his eyes away to the blasted and broken roof.

You were our miracle. Harry had always heard the word 'miracle' in the context of how, in the natural universe, there was no such thing. And yet

looking at the ruined house, he suddenly knew exactly what the word meant, the note of grace all unexplained, the blessing inexplicable. The Dark Lord had almost won, and then in one night all the darkness and terror had ended, salvation without justification, a sudden dawn from out of the darkness and even now nobody knew why –

If Lily Potter had lived beyond her confrontation with Lord Voldemort, she would have felt that way when she saw her baby alive, afterwards.

“Let’s go,” whispered the baby boy, ten years later.

They went.

The graveyard’s entrance was guarded by a lockless gate of the sort that kept out animals, with a place to stand while you moved the door from one side of the standing-place to the other. Remus took out his wand (Harry was already holding his) and there was a brief blur as they stepped through.

Some of the stones rising up from the ground looked as old as the wall in Oxford that his father had said was around a thousand years old.

Hallie Fleming, said the first stone that Harry saw, in a carving almost invisibly faded with the erosion of time. Vienna Wood, said another.

It had been a long time since Harry had visited a graveyard. His mind had still been childlike the last time he’d come to one, long before he’d seen within Death’s shadow. Coming here now was... strange, and sad, and puzzling, and this has been happening for so long, why haven’t wizards tried to stop it, why aren’t they putting all their strength into that like Muggles do with medical research, only more so, wizards have more reason to hope...

“The Dumbledores lived in Godric’s Hollow too?” Harry said, as they walked past a pair of relatively new stones saying Kendra Dumbledore and Ariana Dumbledore.

“For a long, long time,” Mr. Lupin said.

They walked further into the graveyard, far toward the end, past many deaths that had been mourned.

Then Mr. Lupin pointed at a linked double headstone, of marble still white and unaged.

“Are there going to be messages there?” Harry said. He didn’t want to deal any more with the way that other people dealt with death.

Mr. Lupin shook his head.

They walked toward the linked white stones.

And stood before –

“What is this?” Harry whispered. “Who... who wrote this?”

JAMES POTTER
BORN 27 MARCH 1960
DIED 31 OCTOBER 1981

“Wrote what?” said Mr. Lupin, puzzled.

LILY POTTER
BORN 30 JANUARY 1960
DIED 31 OCTOBER 1981

“This!” Harry cried. “The inscription!” There were tears welling up in Harry’s eyes, at the brightness out of place and unexplained, the touch of grace where no grace should have been, the mysterious blessing, tears welling up at

THE LAST ENEMY THAT SHALL BE DESTROYED IS DEATH

“That?” Mr. Lupin said. “That’s the... motto, I suppose you could call it, of the Potters. Though I don’t think it was ever something as formal as that. Just a saying handed down from long, long ago...”

“This – that –” Harry scrambled down to kneel beside the grave, touched the inscription with a trembling hand. “How? Things like that can’t just be, be genetic –”

Then Harry saw what tears had blurred, the faint carving of a line, within a circle, within a triangle.

The symbol of the Deathly Hallows.

And Harry understood.

“They tried,” Harry whispered.

The three Peverell brothers.

Had they lost someone precious to them, was that where it had begun?

“With all their lives, they tried, and they made progress –”

The Cloak of Invisibility, that could defeat the Dementors’ sight.

“– but their research wasn’t finished –”

Hiding from Death’s shadow is not defeating Death itself. The Resurrection Stone couldn’t really bring anyone back. The Elder Wand couldn’t protect you from old age.

“– so they passed on the mission to their children, and their children’s children.”

Generation after generation.

Until it came to me.

Could Time echo like that, rhyming, between this far into the future, and that far in the past? It couldn't be coincidence, could it? Not this message, not in this place.

My family.

You really were, my mother and my father.

"It doesn't mean resurrecting the dead, Harry," Mr. Lupin said. "It means accepting death, and so being beyond death, mastering it."

"Did James tell you that?" Harry said, his voice strange.

"No," said Mr. Lupin, "but –"

"Good."

Harry rose up slowly from where he had been kneeling, feeling as though he were pushing up a sun upon his shoulders, raising the dawn above the horizon.

Of course other wizards have tried. I am not unique. I was never alone. These feelings in my heart, they're not so special, not in the wizard world or the Muggle one.

"Harry, your wand!" There was a sudden excitement in Mr. Lupin's voice, and when Harry raised his wand to look at it closely, he saw that it was gleaming ever so faintly with a silver light, welling out of the wood.

"Cast the Patronus Charm!" urged Mr. Lupin. "Try casting it again, Harry!"

Oh, right. So far as Mr. Lupin knows, I can't –

Harry smiled, and even laughed a little. "I'd better not," Harry said. "If I tried to cast the spell in this state of mind, it'd probably kill me."

"What?" said Mr. Lupin. "The Patronus Charm doesn't do that!"

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres raised his left hand, still laughing, and wiped away some more tears.

"You know, Mr. Lupin," Harry said, "it really takes a baroque interpretation to think that somebody would be walking around, pondering how death is just something we all have to accept, and communicate their state of mind by saying, 'The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.' Maybe someone else thought it sounded poetic and picked up the phrase and tried to interpret it differently, but whoever said it first didn't like death much." Sometimes it puzzled Harry how most people didn't seem to even notice when they were twisting something around to the 180-degree opposite of its first obvious

reading. It couldn't be a raw brainpower thing, people could see the obvious reading of most other English sentences. "Also 'shall be destroyed' refers to a change of future state, so it can't be about the way things are now."

Remus Lupin was staring at him with wide eyes. "You certainly are James and Lily's child," the man said, sounding rather shocked.

"Yes, I am," Harry said. But that wasn't enough, he had to do something more, so Harry raised his wand in the air and said, his voice as steady as he could make it, "I am Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, the son of Lily and James, of the house of Potter, and I accept my family's quest. Death is my enemy, and I will defeat it."

Thrayen beyn Peverlas soona ahnd thrih heera toal thissoom Dath bey yewoonen.

"What?" Harry said aloud. The words had popped up into his stream of consciousness as though from his own thoughts, unexplained.

"What was that?" said Remus Lupin at the same time.

Harry turned, scanning the graveyard, but he didn't see anything. Beside him, Mr. Lupin was doing the same.

Neither of them noticed the tall stone worn as though from a thousand years of age, upon it a line within a circle within a triangle glowing ever so faintly silver, like the light which had shone from Harry's wand, invisible at that distance beneath the still-bright Sun.



Some time later:

"Thank you again, Mr. Lupin," Harry said, the tall, faintly scarred man was about to depart once more. "Though I really wish you hadn't –"

"Professor Dumbledore said that I was to portkey us back to Hogwarts if anything unusual happened, whether or not it seemed like an attack," Mr. Lupin said firmly. "Which is eminently sensible."

Harry nodded. And then, having carefully saved this question for last, "Do you have any idea of what the words meant?"

"If I did, I wouldn't tell you," Mr. Lupin said, looking rather severe. "Certainly not without Professor Dumbledore's permission. I can understand your eagerness, but you should not go trying to uncover any ancestral secrets of the Potters until you are an adult. That means after you've passed your

NEWTs, Harry, or at least your OWLS. And I still think you've picked up entirely the wrong idea of what your family motto is meant to say!"

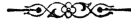
Harry nodded, sighing internally, and bid Mr. Lupin farewell.



Harry went back through Hogwarts, to the Ravenclaw Tower, feeling strange, and strengthened. He would not have expected any of that, but it had been all to the good.

He was passing through the Ravenclaw common room, on the way to his dorm.

That was when the shining creature came to him, gleaming soft white beneath the candle-fires of the Ravenclaw common room, as it slithered out from nowhere, the silver snake.



þregen béon Pefearles suna and þrie hira tól þissum Déað bео gewunен.

Three shall be Peverell's sons and three their devices by which Death shall be defeated.

— Spoken in the presence of the three Peverell brothers,
in a small tavern on the outskirts of what would later be called Godric's
Hollow.

ROLES, PART VIII

FOR the second time that day, Harry's eyes filled with tears. Heedless of the puzzled eyes of the Ravenclaws in the common room, he reached out to the silver creature which Draco Malfoy had sent, cradling it in his arms like a live thing; and stumbled off in the direction of his dorm room, heading half-blindly for the bottom of his trunk, as the silver snake waited silently in his arms.



The fifth meeting: 10:12 am, Sunday, April 19th.

The debtor's meeting which Lord Malfoy had demanded from Harry Potter, who owed Lucius Malfoy a debt of some 58,203 Galleons, was held within the Gringotts Central Bank, in accordance with the laws of Britain.

There had been some pushback from Chief Warlock Dumbledore, trying to prevent Harry Potter from leaving the security of Hogwarts (a phrase that caused Harry Potter to raise his fingers and silently make quote marks in the air). For his own part, the Boy-Who-Lived had seemingly pondered quietly, and then assented to the meeting, strangely compliant in the face of his enemy's demand.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts, who acted as Harry Potter's legal guardian in the eyes of magical Britain, had overruled his ward's assent.

The Debts Committee of the Wizengamot had overruled the Headmaster of Hogwarts.

The Chief Warlock had overruled the Debts Committee.

The Wizengamot had overruled the Chief Warlock.

And so the Boy-Who-Lived had departed under the heavy guard of Mad-Eye Moody and an Auror trio for the Gringotts Central Bank; with Moody's bright-blue eye rotating wildly in every direction, as though to signal to any possible attacker that he was On Guard and Constantly Vigilant and would cheerfully incinerate the kidneys of anyone who sneezed in the general direction of the Boy-Who-Lived.

Harry Potter watched more keenly than before, as they marched through the wide-open front doors of Gringotts, beneath the motto *Fortius Quo Fidelius*. On Harry's last three visits to Gringotts he had merely admired the marble pillars, the gold-burning torchlights, the architecture not quite like the human parts of magical Britain. Since then had come the Incident at Azkaban and other things; and now, on his fourth visit, Harry was thinking about the Goblin Rebellions and goblins' ongoing resentment at not being allowed to own wands and certain facts which hadn't been in the first-year History textbook, which Harry had guessed at by pattern-matching and which Professor Flitwick had confirmed in a very quiet voice. Lord Voldemort had killed goblins as well as wizards – an incredibly stupid move on Lord Voldemort's part, unless Harry was really missing something – but what goblins thought of the Boy-Who-Lived, Harry had no idea. Goblins had a reputation for paying what they owed and taking what they thought owed them, along with a reputation for interpreting those accounts in a somewhat prejudiced fashion.

Today, the guards standing upright in armor at regular intervals around the bank were staring at the Boy-Who-Lived with blank faces, and glaring at Moody and the Aurors with flashes of bitter contempt. At the stands and counters of the bank's foyer, goblin tellers stared with equal contempt at the wizards whose hands they were filling with Galleons; one teller smiled a sharp-toothed grin at a witch who was looking angry and desperate.

If I understand human nature correctly – and if I'm right that all the humanoid magical species are genetically human plus a heritable magical effect – then you're not likely to become friends with a wizard just because I'm polite to you, or say that I'm sympathetic. But I wonder if you would back the Boy-Who-Lived in a bid to overthrow the Ministry, if I promised to revoke the Wand Law afterward... or if I quietly gave you wands, and spellbooks, in exchange for your support... is that why the secret of wand-making is restricted to people like Ollivander? Though if you really are human, just plain human, then the goblin nation probably has its own internal horrors, its own Azkabans, for that is also human nature; in which case sooner or later I must overthrow or reform your own government as well. Hm.

An aged goblin appeared before them, and Harry inclined his head with careful courtesy, a gesture that the aged goblin returned with an abrupt half-nod. There was no wild train ride; instead the aged goblin ushered them into a short hallway that terminated in a small waiting room, with three

goblin-sized benches and one wizard-sized chair, within which nobody sat.

“Do not sign anything that Lucius Malfoy gives you,” Mad-Eye Moody said. “Nothing, do you understand me, lad? If Malfoy hands you a copy of *The Wonderful Adventures of the Boy-Who-Lived* and asks you for an autograph, tell him that you’ve sprained a finger. Don’t pick up a quill for a single second while you’re in Gringotts. If someone hands you a quill, break the quill and then break your own fingers. Do I need to explain further, son?”

“Not particularly,” Harry said. “We also have lawyers in Muggle Britain, and they’d think your lawyers are cute.”

A short time later Harry Potter handed his wand over to an armored goblin guard who frisked him with all manner of interesting-looking probes, and gave his pouch to Moody to keep.

And then Harry stepped through another door, and a brief waterfall of Thief’s Downfall, which evaporated from his skin as soon as he stepped out.

On the other side of the door was a larger room, richly paneled and appointed, with a great golden table stretching across it; two huge leather chairs on one side of the table, and a small wooden stool on the other, the debtor’s perch. Two goblins in full armor, wearing ornate earpieces and glasses, stood watch around the room. Neither side would have wands or any other device of magic, and the goblin guards would attack immediately if anyone dared to use wandless magic within this peaceable meeting supervised by Gringotts Bank. The ornate earpieces would prevent the goblin guards from hearing the conversation unless directly addressed, the eyepieces would leave the wizards’ faces as blurs. It was, in short, something along the lines of actual security, at least if you were an Occlumens.

Harry climbed up onto his uncomfortable wooden stool, thinking Subtle in a tone of some mental sarcasm, and awaited his creditors.

It was only a brief interval later, much shorter than the time a debtor could legally be made to wait, when Lucius Malfoy entered into the room, taking up his leather chair with motions worn smooth by practice. His snake-headed cane was missing from his hands, his long white mane drifted behind him the same as ever, his face could not be read.

Quietly following behind him was a young boy with white-blond hair, now wearing black robes far finer than any Hogwarts uniform, who followed in his father’s footsteps with a controlled face. A boy who was also Harry’s creditor to the tune of forty Galleons, and also of House Malfoy, and therefore, technically, covered by the Wizengamot resolution enabling this meeting.

Draco. Harry didn't say it aloud, didn't let his own expression change. He could not think of what to say. Not even I'm sorry seemed appropriate. Harry hadn't dared say any of that to Draco's Patronus either, when they had set up this meeting in a few brief exchanges; and not only because Lucius might be listening. It had been enough to know that Draco's happy thought was still happy, and that he had still been able to want Harry to know it.

Lucius Malfoy spoke first, his voice level, his face set. "I do not understand what is happening at Hogwarts, Harry Potter. Would you care to explain it to me?"

"I don't know," Harry said. "If I understood these events I would not have let them happen, Lord Malfoy."

"Then answer me this question. Who are you?"

Harry gazed evenly at the face of his creditor. "I'm not You-Know-Who, like you thought I was," Harry said. Not being a complete idiot, he'd eventually worked out who Lucius Malfoy had thought he was talking to in front of the Wizengamot. "Obviously I'm not a normal boy. Equally obviously, that probably has something to do with the Boy-Who-Lived business. But I don't know what, or why, any more than you do. I asked the Sorting Hat and it didn't know either."

Lucius Malfoy nodded distantly. "I could not think of any reason why you would pay a hundred thousand Galleons to save a mudblood's life. No reason save one, which would account for her power and bloodthirst alike; but then she died at the hands of a troll, and yet you lived. And also my son has told me much of you, Harry Potter, which did not make the tiniest bit of sense, I have heard the ravings of the mad in St. Mungo's and they were more sensible by far than the events which my son told me under Veritaserum that you enacted, and that portion of this raving lunacy, which you personally carried out, I would have you explain to me, and now."

Harry turned to look at Draco, who looked back at him with a face that was screwing up, being controlled, and then tensing up again.

"I'd also," Draco Malfoy said in a high and wavering voice, "like, to know, why, Potter."

Harry closed his eyes, and spoke without looking. "A boy raised by Muggles who thought he was clever. You saw me, Draco, and you thought of how very useful it would be if the Boy-Who-Lived, out of all the other children in your year, could be shown the truth of things, if we could be friends. And I thought the same thing about you. Only, you and I believed

different things were true. Not that I'm saying that there are different truths, I mean, there's different beliefs but there's only one reality, only one universe that can make those beliefs true or false –"

"You lied to me."

Harry opened his eyes and looked at Draco. "I would prefer to say," Harry said, not quite with a steady voice, "that the things I told you were true from a certain point of view."

"A certain point of view?" Draco Malfoy looked every bit as angry as Luke Skywalker'd had the right to be, and not in a mood to accept Kenobi's excuses, either. "There's a word for things that are true from a certain point of view. They're called lies!"

"Or tricks," Harry said evenly. "Statements which are technically true but which deceive the listener into forming further beliefs which are false. I think it's worth making that distinction. What I told you was a self-fulfilling prophecy; you believed that you couldn't deceive yourself, so you didn't try. The skills you've learned are real, and it would have been very bad for you to start fighting against them internally. People can't make themselves believe that blue is green by an act of will, but they think they can, and that can be almost as bad."

"You used me," said Draco Malfoy.

"I only used you in ways that made you stronger. That's what it means to be used by a friend."

"Even I know that's not what friendship is!"

Now Lucius Malfoy spoke again. "For what purpose? To what end?" Even the elder Malfoy's voice was not quite steady. "Why?"

Harry regarded him for a moment, and then turned to Draco. "Your father's probably not going to believe this," Harry said. "But you, Draco, should be able to see that everything which has happened is compatible with this hypothesis. And that any more cynical hypothesis wouldn't explain why I didn't press you harder when you thought I had leverage, or why I taught you so much. I thought that the heir of House Malfoy, who'd been publicly seen to grab a Muggleborn girl to stop her falling off the roof of Hogwarts, would be a good compromise candidate to lead magical Britain after the reformation."

"So you would have me believe," Lucius Malfoy said in a thin voice, "that you are claiming to be mad. Well, let us leave all that aside. Tell me who set that troll on Hogwarts."

"I don't know," Harry said.

"Tell me who you suspect, Harry Potter."

"I have four suspects. One of them is Professor Snape –"

"Snape?" Draco burst out.

"The second, of course, is the Defense Professor of Hogwarts, just because he's the Defense Professor." Harry would have left him out, not wanting to bring Professor Quirrell to the Malfoys' attention if he was innocent, but Draco might have called him on that. "The third, you wouldn't believe me about. The fourth is a catchall category called Everything Else." And the fifth, Lord Voldemort, I do not think I should name to you.

Lucius Malfoy's face contorted in a snarl. "Do you think I cannot recognize bait upon your hook? Tell me about this third possibility, Potter, the one you wish me to believe is the true answer, and leave aside games."

Harry regarded Lord Malfoy steadily. "I once read a book I wasn't supposed to read, and it told me this: Communication is an event that takes place between equals. Employees lie to their bosses, who, in turn, expect to be lied to. I'm not playing coy, I'm observing that it's simply not possible, in our present situation, for me to tell you about the third suspect, and have you believe that my story was anything but a lure."

Draco spoke then. "It's Father, isn't it?"

Harry gave Draco a startled look.

Draco spoke evenly. "You suspect that Father sent the troll into Hogwarts to get at Granger, don't you? That's what you're thinking, isn't it!"

Harry opened his mouth to say, Actually, no, and then managed to think ahead and stop himself for once in his life.

"I see..." Harry said slowly. "That's what this is about. Lucius Malfoy publicly says that Hermione won't get away with what she's done, and lo and behold, a troll kills her." Harry smiled then, in a way that bared his teeth. "And if I deny that here, then Draco, who isn't an Occlumens, can then testify under Veritaserum that the Boy-Who-Lived does not suspect Lucius Malfoy of having sent a troll into Hogwarts to kill Hermione Granger, sworn to the Noble House of Potter, whose blood debt was recently purchased for a hundred thousand Galleons et cetera." Harry leaned back slightly, though his wooden stool had no back with which to do it properly. "But now that it's been pointed out, I see that it's very reasonable. Obviously you killed Hermione Granger, just like you threatened to do in front of the whole Wizengamot."

"I did not," Lucius Malfoy said, expressionless once more.

Harry bared his teeth again in that non-smile. "Well then, in that case, there must be someone else out there who killed Hermione and messed with the Hogwarts wards, the same person who earlier tried to frame Hermione for Draco Malfoy's murder. Either you killed Hermione Granger after being paid for her life, or you blamed your son's attempted murder on an innocent girl and took all my family's money under false pretenses, one of those two things must be true."

"Perhaps you killed her in hopes of your money being returned." Lucius Malfoy had leaned forward, and was staring hard at Harry.

"Then I would not have given away my money for her in the first place. As you already know. Don't insult my intelligence, Lord Malfoy – no, wait, sorry, you just had to say that in case Draco had to testify to it, never mind."

Lucius Malfoy sat back in his chair and stared.

"I tried to tell you, Father," Draco said under his breath, "but nobody can imagine Harry Potter until they've actually met him..."

Harry tapped a finger on his cheek. "So people are starting to figure out the blatantly obvious? I'm surprised, actually. I wouldn't have predicted that would happen." Harry had by now caught the general rhythm of Professor Quirrell's cynicism and was able to generate it independently. "I wouldn't think a newspaper would be able to report on a concept like 'Either X or Y must be true, but we don't know which.' I would only expect journalists to report stories consisting of series of atomic propositions, like 'X is true', 'Y is false', or 'X is true and Y is false'. Not more complex logical connectors like 'If X is true then Y is true, but we don't know whether X is true'. And all your supporters ought to be rapidly switching between 'You can't prove that Lord Malfoy killed Granger, it could've been someone else' and 'You can't prove there was someone else to frame Granger', so long as it's uncertain they should be trying to have it both ways at once... wait, don't you own the Daily Prophet?"

"The Daily Prophet," Lucius Malfoy said thinly, "which I certainly do not own, is far too respectable to publish any such scurrilous nonsense. Unfortunately, not all wizards of influence are so reasonable."

"Ah. Got it." Harry nodded.

Lucius glanced at Draco. "The rest of what he said – was any of it important?"

"No, Father, it was not."

"Thank you, son." Lucius returned his gaze to Harry. His voice, when he spoke, was something closer to his usual drawl, cool and confident. "It is possible that I could be persuaded to show you some favor, if you admitted before the Wizengamot what you clearly know, that I was not responsible for this deed. I would be willing to reduce your remaining debt to House Malfoy quite significantly, or even adjust the terms to allow later repayment."

Harry regarded Lucius Malfoy steadily. "Lucius Malfoy. You are now perfectly aware that Hermione Granger was, in fact, framed using your son as bait, that she was False-Memory-Charmed or worse, and that House Potter held nothing against you before that. My counterproposal is that you return my family's money, I announce before the Wizengamot that House Potter holds House Malfoy no animus, and we present a united front against whoever's doing this. We decide to screw the roles we're supposed to play, and ally with each other instead of fighting. It could be the one thing the enemy doesn't expect us to do."

There was a brief silence in the room, except for the two goblin guards who went on breathing regardless.

"You are mad," Lucius Malfoy said coldly.

"It's called justice, Lord Malfoy. You cannot possibly expect me to cooperate with you while you are holding the wealth of House Potter under what you now know to be false pretenses. I understand how it looked to you at the time, but you know better now."

"You have nothing to offer me worth a hundred thousand Galleons."

"Don't I?" Harry said distantly. "I wonder. I think it quite probable that you care more about the long-term welfare of House Malfoy than about whichever political issue the last generation's failed Dark Lord made his personal hobbyhorse." Harry glanced significantly at Draco. "The next generation is drawing its own battle lines and forming new alliances. Your son can be frozen out of that, or he can go straight to the top. Is that worth more to you than forty thousand Galleons you weren't particularly expecting and don't particularly need?" Harry smiled thinly. "Forty thousand Galleons. Two million Muggle pounds sterling. Your son knows some things about the size of the Muggle economy that might surprise you. They'd find it amusing, that the fate of a country was revolving around two million pounds sterling. They'd think it was cute. And I think much the same, Lord Malfoy. This isn't about me being desperate. This is about you getting a fair chance to be fair."

"Oh?" said Lord Malfoy. "And if I refuse your fair chance, what then?"

Harry shrugged. “Depends what sort of coalition government gets put together without the Malfoys. If the government can be reformed peacefully and it would disturb the peace to do otherwise, I’ll pay you the money out of petty cash. Or maybe the Death Eaters will be retried for past crimes and executed as a matter of justice, as a result of due legal process, of course.”

“You truly are mad,” Lucius Malfoy said quietly. “You have no power, no wealth, and yet you say such things to me.”

“Yes, it’s silly to think I could scare you. After all, you’re not a Dementor.”

And Harry went on smiling. He’d looked it up, and apparently a bezoar would heal almost any poison if you shoved it into someone’s mouth fast enough. Maybe that wouldn’t repair radiation damage from Transfigured polonium, but then again, maybe it would. So Harry had looked up the freezing points of various acids, and it turned out that sulfuric acid would freeze at just ten degrees Celsius, which meant Harry could buy a liter of acid on the Muggle market, freeze it solid, and Transfigure it down to a tiny little unnoticeable water-ice chip to be flipped into someone’s mouth and ingested. No bezoar would compensate for that, once the Transfiguration wore off. Harry had no intention of saying it out loud, of course, but now that he’d failed decisively to prevent any deaths during his quest, he had no further intention of being restrained by the law or even the code of Batman.

Last chance to live, Lucius. Ethically speaking, your life was bought and paid for the day you committed your first atrocity for the Death Eaters. You’re still human and your life still has intrinsic value, but you no longer have the deontological protection of an innocent. Any good person is licensed to kill you now, if they think it’ll save net lives in the long run; and I will conclude as much of you, if you begin to get in my way. Whoever sent the troll after Granger must have targeted you too and hit you with some curse that makes former Death Eaters melt into a pile of goo. Very sad.

“Father,” Draco said in a small voice. “I think you should consider it, father.”

Lucius Malfoy looked at his son. “You jest.”

“It’s true. I don’t think Potter just made up his books, nobody could have written all that and there were things in them that I could check for myself. And if even half of all that is true, he’s right, a hundred thousand Galleons won’t mean much. If we give it to him he really will be friends with House Malfoy again – the way he thinks of being friends, anyway. And if we don’t, he’ll be your enemy, whether it’s in his own interests or not, he’ll just go after

you. Harry Potter really does think like that. It's not about money to him, it's about what he thinks is honor."

Harry Potter inclined his head, still smiling.

"But let's get one part of it straight," Draco said, now staring directly at him. There was a fierce light in his eyes. "You wronged me. And you owe me."

"Acknowledged," Harry said quietly. "Conditional on the rest of it, of course."

Lucius Malfoy opened his mouth to say who-knew-what and then closed it again. "Mad," he said again.

There was a long father-and-son argument during which Harry managed to keep his mouth shut.

When it seemed that even Draco wouldn't be able to persuade his father, Harry spoke up again, and proposed his intended next steps, if the Houses of Potter and Malfoy could cooperate.

Then came more argument between Lucius and Draco, during which Harry again stayed silent.

Finally Lucius Malfoy's eyes turned to gaze at Harry. "And you believe," Lucius Malfoy said, "that you can persuade Longbottom and Bones to go along with this notion, even if Dumbledore opposes it."

Harry nodded. "They'll be suspicious of your involvement, of course. But I'll tell them that it was my plan to start with, and that should help."

"I suppose," Lucius Malfoy said after a pause, "that I could have a contract drawn up, absolving you of almost all the remaining debt, if by some chance I do go along with this mad idea. It shall need more guarantees, of course –"

Harry promptly reached into his robes and drew out a parchment, unfolding it and spreading it across the golden table. "I've taken the liberty myself, actually," Harry said. He'd spent some careful hours in the Hogwarts library with the law books available. Thankfully, so far as Harry could tell, the laws of magical Britain were charmingly simple by Muggle standards. Writing that the original blood debt and payment was cancelled, the Potters' wealth and all other vault items would be returned, and the remaining debt annulled, all with no fault to the Malfoys, was only a few more lines than it took to say out loud. "I had to promise my keepers not to sign anything you gave me. So I made sure to compose this myself, and sign it before I left."

Draco emitted a choked laugh.

Lucius read through the contract, smiling humorlessly. "How charmingly straightforward."

"I also promised not to touch a quill while I was in Gringotts," Harry said. He reached into his robes again and drew out a Muggle pen, along with a sheet of normal paper. "Will this wording be all right?" Harry rapidly scribbled down a legal-sounding statement to the effect that House Potter didn't hold House Malfoy responsible in any way for Hermione Granger's murder and didn't believe they had anything to do with it, then held up the paper in the air for Lord Malfoy's inspection.

Lord Malfoy looked at the paper, rolled his eyes slightly, and said, "Good enough, I suppose. Though to have the proper meaning, you should use the legal term indemnify rather than exonerate –"

"Nice try, but no. I know exactly what that word means, Lord Malfoy." Harry took his parchment and began copying down his original wording more carefully.

When Harry was done, Lord Malfoy reached across the golden table and took the pen, looking at it thoughtfully. "One of your Muggle artifacts, I suppose? What does this do, son?"

"It writes without needing an inkwell," Draco answered.

"I can see that. I suppose some might find it an amusing trinket." Lucius smoothed the parchment contract over the table, then set his hand by the line for signatures, tapping the pen thoughtfully on the starting spot.

Harry wrenched his eyes away, up to Lucius Malfoy's face, forcing himself to breathe regularly, not quite able to stop his muscles from tensing.

"Our good friend, Severus Snape," said Lucius Malfoy, still tapping the pen on the line awaiting his signature. "The Defense Professor, calling himself Quirrell. Now I ask again, who is your third suspect, Harry Potter?"

"I would strongly advise that you sign first, Lord Malfoy, if you're going to do so anyway. You will benefit from this information more if you do not think I am trying to persuade you of something."

Another humorless smile. "I shall take my chances. Speak, if you wish this to continue."

Harry hesitated, then said evenly, "My third suspect is Albus Dumbledore."

The tapping pen stilled on the parchment. "A strange allegation," Lucius drawled. "Dumbledore lost much face when a Hogwarts student died within

his tenure. Do you suppose that I will believe anything of him, only because he is my enemy?"

"He is one suspect among several, Lord Malfoy, and not necessarily the most plausible. But the reason I was able to kill a full-grown mountain troll was that I had a weapon which Dumbledore gave to me, at the start of the school year. It's not strong evidence, but it's suspicious. And if you're thinking that murdering one of his students is not Dumbledore's style, well, the same thought had occurred to me."

"It's not his style?" Draco Malfoy said.

Lucius Malfoy shook his head in a measured, careful movement. "Not quite, my son. Dumbledore is particular in his evils." Lord Malfoy leaned back into his chair, and then sat quite still. "Tell me of this weapon."

"I am not yet certain I should go into details about that in your presence, Lord Malfoy." Harry took a breath. "Let me be clear on this. I am not trying to sell you on the idea that Dumbledore is behind this, just raising the possibility –"

Then Draco Malfoy spoke. "The device Dumbledore gave you – was it something to kill trolls? I mean, just trolls? Can you tell us that?"

Lucius turned his head to look at his son with some surprise.

"No..." Harry said slowly. "It wasn't specifically a sword of anti-troll slaying, or anything like that."

Draco's eyes were intent. "Would the device have worked against an assassin?"

Not if they had shields raised. "No."

"A fight in school?"

An expanding rock in the throat is inherently lethal. "No. I don't think it was meant for use against humans."

Draco nodded. "So just magical creatures. Would it have been a good weapon against an angry Hippogriff, or something like that?"

"Does the Stunning Hex work on Hippogriffs?" Harry said slowly.

"I don't know," said Draco.

"Yes," said Lucius Malfoy.

Compared to trying to target a Wingardium Leviosa and Finite Incantatem – "Then a Stunning Hex would be a better way of dealing with a Hippogriff." Put that way, it did seem increasingly like a Transfigured rock was an optimal weapon only against a flesh-and-blood magical creature with spell-resistant skin. "But... I mean, it might not have been intended

as a weapon at all, I used it in a strange way, it could have just been a crazy whim –”

“No,” Lucius Malfoy said lowly. “Not a whim. Not coincidence. Not Dumbledore.”

“Then it’s him,” Draco said. Slowly Draco’s eyes narrowed, and he gave a vicious nod. “It’s been him since the beginning. The court Legilimens said that someone had used Legilimency on Granger. Dumbledore admitted that it was him. And I bet the wards did go off when Granger cursed me and Dumbledore just ignored them.”

“But –” Harry said. He looked at Lucius, wondering if it was really to his advantage to question this idea. “What would be his motive? Are we going to say he’s evil and leave it at that?”

Draco Malfoy jumped out of his chair and began pacing around the room, black robes swishing behind the young boy, the goblin guards staring at him in some surprise through their enchanted goggles. “To figure out a strange plot, look at what happens, then ask who benefits. Except that Dumbledore didn’t plan on you trying to save Granger at her trial, he tried to stop you from doing that. What would’ve happened if Granger had gone to Azkaban? House Malfoy and House Potter would’ve hated each other forever. Of all the suspects, the only one who wants that is Dumbledore. So it fits. It all fits. The one who really committed the murder is – Albus Dumbledore!”

“Um,” Harry said. “But why give me an anti-troll weapon? I said it was suspicious, I didn’t say that it made any sense.”

Draco nodded thoughtfully. “Maybe Dumbledore thought you’d stop the troll before it got Granger and then he could blame Father for sending it. A lot of people would be very angry if they thought Father had even tried to do something like that, in Hogwarts. Like Father said, Dumbledore must’ve lost face when people found out that a student had actually died in Hogwarts, being safe is what Hogwarts is famous for. So that part probably wasn’t supposed to happen.”

Harry’s mind involuntarily flashed back to the horror in Dumbledore’s eyes when he’d seen Hermione Granger’s body.

Would I have gotten there in time, if the Weasley twins hadn’t had their magic map stolen? Could that have been the plan? And then, though Dumbledore didn’t know it, somebody stole their map, and I was too late... but no, that doesn’t make much sense, I found out too late, how could Dumbledore have guessed that I’d use a broomstick... well, he did know I had one...

There was no way a plan like that could work.

And it hadn't.

But someone going a little bit senile might expect it to work, and a phoenix might not know the difference.

"Or," Draco Malfoy continued, still pacing energetically, "maybe Dumbledore had an enchanted troll around, and he expected you to defeat it some other time, for some other plot, and then he used the troll on Granger instead. I can't imagine Dumbledore had this all planned since the first week of lessons –"

"I can imagine," Lucius Malfoy said in low tones. "I have seen such, from Dumbledore."

Draco nodded decisively. "Then I was never supposed to die in the first plot. Dumbledore knew Professor Quirrell was checking on me, or Dumbledore planned to have someone else find me in time – I couldn't have testified against Granger if I was dead, and he'd have lost face if I'd died. But my leaving Hogwarts and not being around to lead Slytherin would be just right for him. And then the next time Harry was supposed to stop the troll before it got Granger and everyone was supposed to blame you, Father, only that time it didn't go the way Dumbledore planned."

Lucius Malfoy lifted his grey eyes, from where he'd been gazing with open surprise at his son. "If this is true – but I wonder if Harry Potter is only playing at being reluctant to believe it."

"Maybe," Draco said. "But I'm pretty sure he isn't."

"Then, if it is true..." Lucius Malfoy's voice trailed off. A slow fury was lighting in his eyes.

"What would we do, exactly?" Harry said.

"That, too, is clear to me," Draco said. He whirled on them and raised a finger high in the air. "We shall find the proof to convict Dumbledore of this crime, and bring him to justice!"

Harry Potter and Lucius Malfoy looked at each other.

Neither of them quite knew what to say.

"My son," Lucius Malfoy said after a time, "truly, you have done very well this day."

"Thank you, Father!"

"However, this is not a play, we are not Aurors, and we do not put our trust in trials."

Some of the light went out of Draco's eyes. "Oh."

"I, ah, do have a sentimental fondness for trials," Harry interjected. I cannot believe I am having this conversation. He needed to go home and take a sheet of paper and a pencil and try to figure out whether Draco's reasoning actually made sense. "And evidence."

Lucius Malfoy turned his gaze to Harry Potter then, and his eyes simmered in pure grey fury.

"If you have deceived me," Lucius Malfoy said in tones of low anger, "if all this is a lie, then I will not forgive. But if this is not deception... Bring me the proof to convict Dumbledore of this murder before the Wizengamot, or evidence enough to have him cast down, and there is nothing that House Malfoy will not do for you, Harry Potter. Nothing."

Harry took a deep breath. He needed to sort all this out and figure out the actual probabilities, but he didn't have time. "If it is Dumbledore, then removing him from the gameboard leaves a huge hole in Britain's power structure."

"So it does," Lucius Malfoy said with a grim smile. "Did you have ambitions of filling it yourself, Harry Potter?"

"Some of your opposition might not like that. They could fight."

"They will lose," Lucius Malfoy said, now with a face hard like iron.

"So this is what I'd want House Malfoy to do for me, Lord Malfoy, if Dumbledore gets removed because of me. When the opposition is most frightened – that's when they'll be offered a last-minute arrangement to avoid a civil war. Some of your allies might not prefer it, but there'll be a lot of neutrals who'll be glad to see stability. The bargain will be that instead of you taking over right away, Draco Malfoy will take power when he comes of age."

"What?" Draco said.

"Draco has testified under Veritaserum that he tried to help Hermione Granger. I bet there'd be a lot of people in the opposition who'd take a chance on him rather than fight. I'm not sure how exactly you'd enforce it – Unbreakable Vows or Gringotts contracts or what – but there'll be some sort of enforceable compact about power going to Draco after he graduates Hogwarts. I'll throw any support the Boy-Who-Lived has behind that bargain. Try to persuade Longbottom and Bones and so on. Our first plan paves the way for that later, if you're careful to act honorable when you deal with Longbottom and Bones this time around."

"Father, I swear I didn't –"

Lucius's face twisted into a grim smile. "I know you didn't, son. Well." The white-haired man stared across the mighty golden table at Harry Potter. "Those terms are acceptable to me. But fail in any part of our agreement, whether our first bargain, or the second, and there shall be consequences for you, Harry Potter. Clever words will not halt that."

And Lucius Malfoy signed the parchment.



Mad-Eye Moody had been staring at the bronze door of the Gringotts meeting room for what seemed like hours, insofar as a man could stare at any one thing when his gaze always saw in all directions.

The trouble with trying to be suspicious of a man like Lucius Malfoy, Moody thought, was that you could spend an entire day thinking of everything he might be up to, and still not have finished.

The door cracked open and Harry Potter trudged out, small beads of sweat still on his forehead.

"Did you sign anything?" Mad-Eye demanded upon the instant.

Harry Potter looked at him silently, then reached into his robes and drew out a folded parchment. "The goblins are already executing this," said Harry Potter. "They made three copies before I left."

"MERLIN DAMN IT SON –" Moody paused as his Eye caught sight of the second half of the document as Harry Potter slowly, as though reluctantly, began to unfold the top upward. A glance sufficed to take in the paragraphs drawn in careful handwriting, Lucius Malfoy's elegant signature below Harry Potter's. And then Moody exploded, even as the top half of the document also began to enter his Sight. "You exonerate House Malfoy of any involvement in Hermione Granger's death? Do you have any idea what you've done, you little fool? Why in Merlin's name would you do something like WHAT –"

ROLES, FINAL

Sunday, April 19th, 6:34 pm.

DAPHNE Greengrass walked quietly toward the Greengrass room below the Slytherin dungeons, the privilege of an Ancient House; on her way to drop off her trunk from the Hogwarts Express, before she joined the other students for dinner. The whole private area had been hers alone ever since Malfoy had gone. Her hand, held behind her, made repeated come-along gestures at her huge emerald-studded trunk, which seemed hesitant to follow. Maybe the enchantments on the sturdy old family device needed to be reapplied; or maybe her trunk was reluctant to follow her into Hogwarts, which was no longer safe.

There'd been a long talk between Mother and Father, after they'd been told about Hermione; with Daphne hiding around a doorway to listen, choking back her tears and trying not to make sounds.

Mother had said that the sad fact was that if only one student died every year, well, that still made Hogwarts safer than Beauxbatons, let alone Durmstrang. There were more ways for a young witch to die than being murdered. Beauxbatons's Transfiguration Master just wasn't on the same level as McGonagall, Mother had said.

Father had soberly remarked how important it was for the Greengrass heir to stay at Hogwarts where all the other Noble families sent their children to school (it was the reason for the old tradition of the Noble families synchronizing the birth of their heirs, to put them in the same year of Hogwarts, if they could). And Father had said that being heiress to a Most Ancient House meant you couldn't always stay away from trouble.

She could have done without hearing that last part.

Daphne gulped hard, as she turned the doorknob, and opened the door.

"Miss Greengrass –" whispered a shadowy, silvery-robed figure.

Daphne screamed and slammed the door and drew her wand and turned to run.

"Wait!" cried the voice, now higher and louder.

Daphne paused. That couldn't possibly be who it had sounded like.

Slowly, Daphne turned, and opened the door again.

"You!" Daphne said in astonishment, as she saw the face beneath the hood.

"I thought you were –"

"I come back to you now," the silvery-robed figure said in a strong voice, "at the turn of the –"

"What are you doing in my bedroom?" shrieked Daphne.

"I heard you can cast the mist form of the Patronus Charm. Can I see?"

Daphne stared, and then her blood began to burn. "Why?" she said, keeping her wand level. "So you can kill everyone in Slytherin who casts un-Slytherin spells? We all know who it was had Hermione killed!"

The figure's voice rose. "I testified under Veritaserum that I tried to help Miss Granger! I really was trying to help her, when I grabbed her hand on the roof, when I helped her off the floor –"

Daphne kept her wand level. "Like your father couldn't tamper with the Aurors' record, if he wanted to! I wasn't born yesterday, Mister Malfoy!"

Slowly, as if not to cause alarm, the silver-robed figure drew a wand from his robes. Daphne's hand tightened on her own wand, but then she recognized the position of the fingers on the wand, the stance the figure was assuming, and she drew a shocked breath –

"Expecto Patronum!"

Silver light leapt from the end of the other's wand – and condensed, forming a shining serpent that seemed to coil in the air as though nesting there.

She just gaped.

"I did try to help Hermione Granger," Draco Malfoy said with a level voice. "Because I know the sickness at the heart of Slytherin's House, the reason why so many of us can't cast the Patronus Charm any more, is hate. Hate of Muggleborns, or just anyone really. People think that's all Slytherin is about now, not cunning or ambition or honorable nobility. And I even know, because it's obvious if you just look, that Hermione Granger wasn't weak at magic."

Daphne's mind had gone completely blank. Her eyes darted around nervously, just to check that there wasn't blood coming from under the doors, like the last time Something had Broken.

"And I've also figured out," Draco Malfoy said quietly, as the silver snake went on shining with unmistakeable light and warmth, "that Hermione

Granger never really tried to kill me. Maybe she was False-Memory-Charmed, maybe she was Legilimized, but now that she's been murdered, it's obvious that Miss Granger was the target in the first place, when somebody tried to set her up for murdering me –"

"D-do-do you know what you're saying?" Daphne's voice broke. If Lucius Malfoy heard his heir saying that – he'd skin Draco and turn him into trousers!

Draco Malfoy smiled, metallic robes gleaming in the light of his full corporeal Patronus; it was a smile both arrogant and dangerous, like being turned into a pair of leather pants was beneath his concerns. "Yes," said Draco, "but it doesn't matter now. House Malfoy is returning House Potter's money and cancelling the debt."

Daphne walked over to her bed and then fell on it, hoping she could wake up from the dream once she was in bed.

"I'd like you to join a conspiracy," said the figure in the shining robes. "Everyone in Slytherin who can cast the Patronus Charm, and everyone who can learn. That's how we'll know to trust each other, when the Silvery Slytherins meet." With a dramatic gesture, Draco Malfoy cast back his hood. "But it won't work without you, Daphne Greengrass. You and your family. Your mother will negotiate it with Father, but I'd like the Greengrasses to hear the proposal from you, first." Draco Malfoy's voice lowered grimly. "There is much we must speak of, before we eat dinner."



Harry Potter had, apparently, taken to being invisible; they'd glimpsed his hand only briefly, when he was handing them the list, written on strange not-parchment. Harry had explained that, all things considered, he didn't really think it was smart for him to be findable except on special occasions, so he was just going to deal with people as a disembodied floating voice from now on, or as a brilliant silver light that hid behind corners where nobody could see it, and which could always find his friends no matter where they tried to hide. It was, in all honesty, one of the creepiest things which Fred and George had ever heard, over a lifetime which had included filling the shoes of every student in second-year Slytherin with Transfigured live millipedes. Fred and George didn't think this could possibly be good for anyone's sanity, but they didn't know what to say. It couldn't be denied, they'd seen with their own four eyes, that Hogwarts...

... wasn't safe...

"I don't know who you went to for the False Memory Charm on Rita Skeeter," said the sourceless voice of Harry Potter. "Whoever it is... probably won't be able to fill this order directly, but they may know someone who can get things from the Muggle world. And – I know it may cost extra, but as few people as possible should know that Harry Potter is related to this." Another flash of a small boy's hand, and a bag hit the ground with the clinking noise. "Some of these items are expensive even in the Muggle world, and your contact may have to go outside Britain; but one hundred Galleons will be enough to pay for it all, I hope. I'd tell you where the Galleons came from, but I don't want to spoil tomorrow's surprise."

"What is this stuff?" said Fred or George, as they looked over the list. "Our father is a Muggle expert –"

– and we don't recognize half this stuff –"

– why, we don't recognize any of it –"

– just what are you planning to do?"

"Things have become serious," Harry's voice said softly. "I don't know what I'll have to do. I may need the power of the Muggles, not just the wizards, before this is done – and I might need it right away, with no time to prepare. I'm not planning to use any of this. I just want it around in case of... contingencies." Harry's voice paused. "Obviously I owe you more than I can ever repay and you won't let me give you any of what you deserve, I don't even know how to say thank you properly, and all I can do is hope that someday when you grow up you'll be more sensible about this whole thing and would you please take a ten percent commission –"

"Shut up, you," said George or Fred.

"For God's sake, you went after a troll for me and Fred had his ribs broken!"

They both just shook their heads. Harry had stayed behind when they'd told him to run, and stepped forward to distract the troll from eating George. Harry was the kind of person, they knew, who'd think that something like that didn't cancel out what he owed the Weasley twins, that his own deed wasn't properly commensurate. But what the Weasleys knew, and Harry wouldn't understand until he was older, was that it meant that nothing was owed, or ever could be owed between them. It was a strange kind of selfishness, they thought, that Harry could understand kindness within himself – never dreaming of asking of money from anyone he'd helped more than they'd helped him, or calling that a debt – while being apparently unable to conceive

that others might want to act the same way toward him.

“Remind me to buy you a copy of the Muggle novel *Atlas Shrugged*,” the sourceless voice said. “I’m starting to understand what sort of person can benefit from reading it.”



Monday, April 20th, 7:00 pm.

It happened without any intervention or sign from the Head Table, as the students had finished their subdued dinner; it happened with no permission or forgiveness asked from the Professors or the Headmaster.

Shortly after the dessert dishes had appeared, a student stood up from the Slytherin Table and calmly made his way, not to the front of the Head Table, but toward the opposite side of the Four Tables of Hogwarts. A few whispers broke out at the sight of the white-blond short-cropped hair, as Draco Malfoy stood there, silently regarding all of Hogwarts. Draco Malfoy had said almost nothing since his surprise return. The Slytherin had condescended neither to confirm nor deny that he had returned because, with Hermione Granger dead at his family’s hand, he no longer had anything to fear.

Then Draco Malfoy took up a spoon in one hand, and a glass of water in the other, and began tapping, producing a clear ringing sound.

Ting.

Ting.

Ting.

It produced more excited babble at first. At the Head Table, the various Professors looked in puzzlement toward the Headmaster in his great chair, but the Headmaster gave no sign, and so the faculty did nothing.

Draco Malfoy continued tapping the spoon upon his glass, until the room fell silent, waiting.

Then another student arose from the Ravenclaw table, and made his way to where Draco Malfoy was standing, turning to face Hogwarts at his side. Breaths were drawn in surprise; those two should have been the bitterest of enemies, now –

“I, and my Father, the Lord of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy,” Draco Malfoy said in a clear voice, “have come to realize that there are ill forces at work in Hogwarts. That these ill forces, did wish Hermione Granger harm. That Hermione Granger was perhaps compelled, against her

will, to raise her hand against our House; or perhaps she and I were both Memory-Charmed. We now say that whoever dared use the heir of Malfoy so, is the enemy of House Malfoy, upon whom we shall have our vengeance. And that honor be served, we have returned all moneys taken from House Potter, and canceled all debt."

Then Harry Potter spoke. "House Potter acknowledges that it was an honest mistake, and holds House Malfoy no ill will. We believe and publicly say that House Malfoy was not at fault in Hermione Granger's death. Whoever harmed Hermione Granger is the enemy of House Potter, upon whom we shall have our vengeance. Both of us."

Then Harry Potter began to walk back to the Ravenclaw table, and the babble of sheer, utter, reality-crashing bewilderment began to explode –

Draco Malfoy resumed tapping his spoon against his waterglass, creating a clear ringing chime.

Ting.

Ting.

Ting.

And other students arose, from other tables, making their way to where Draco Malfoy stood, arranging themselves at his side, or behind him, or before him.

There was a dread silence in the Great Hall, a sense of the world shifting, of realigning Powers, almost tangible in the air.

"My father, Owen Greengrass, with the consent and full backing of my mother, the Lady of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Greengrass," Daphne Greengrass spoke.

"And my forefather, Charles, of the House of Nott," said the former Lieutenant Nott, once Theodore of Chaos, now standing behind Draco Malfoy.

"And my grand-aunt, Amelia, of the House of Bones, also Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement," said Susan Bones, who stood beside and next to Daphne Greengrass, beside whom she had fought.

"And my grandmother, Augusta, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Longbottom," said Neville Longbottom, who had returned for this one night.

"And my father, Lucius, the Lord Malfoy, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy!"

"Together with Alanna Howe constituting a majority of the Hogwarts Board of Governors!" Daphne Greengrass said clearly. "Have, to ensure

the safety of all students, including their own children, passed the following Educational Decrees upon the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!"



"First!" Daphne said. Daphne was trying to keep her trembling under control, as she faced the Four Houses at the forefront of the five. There was only so far her parents' lessons in speech-making could take her. Daphne's eyes darted down quickly to her hand, upon which, written with a quill in faint red ink, cues to her lines had been written. "Students are not to go anywhere alone, not even to the toilets! You will travel in groups of at least three, and every group must have a sixth-year or seventh-year student!"

"Second!" Susan Bones said from behind her, voice almost firm. "To further ensure the students' safety, nine Aurors have been dispatched to Hogwarts to form an Auxiliary Protective Force!" Susan took a small, round glass object from within her robes, one of the communicators that the DML used, which they'd all been given. Susan raised it to her mouth and said, her voice now higher, "Auror Brodski, this is Susan Bones. Enter!"

The doors to the Hall slammed open, and in marched nine Aurors in the reinforced leather gear they used when on duty. At once they spread out, two Aurors taking up station by each of the four tables, and the last took up watch at the Head Table. There were more gasps.

"Third!" said Draco Malfoy, his voice commanding. Malfoy had apparently memorized his own lines, since there was nothing written on his hand that Daphne could see. "In the face of a common enemy who does not balk at killing students from any House, the four Houses of Hogwarts must come together and act as one! To emphasize this, the House Points system is temporarily suspended! All Professors will encourage solidarity between Houses, by decree of the Hogwarts Board of Governors!"

"Fourth!" recited Neville Longbottom. "All students not already in the Defense Professor's after-school classes, will receive special training in self-defense by Auror instructors!"

"Fifth!" Theodore Nott yelled in a menacing tone. "All fighting in the corridors or anywhere outside of Defense lessons will be dealt with extremely severely! Fight together or don't fight at all!"

"Sixth!" said Daphne Greengrass, and took a deep breath. When she'd found out what was planned, she'd made her own little extra request to Mother through the Floo. Even with Lucius Malfoy going along with Amelia

Bones – a thought her mind was still having trouble grasping – the Greengrass swing vote had still been vital, since Jugson and his own faction had refused to back Malfoy. Not to mention that Bones didn't trust Malfoy, and Malfoy didn't trust Bones. So Mother had demanded, and the Greengrasses had received – “Since Memory Charms have been used on students without setting off wards, it is possible that someone on the Hogwarts faculty may be implicated. Therefore! The Auxiliary Protective force reports directly to my father, Lord Greengrass!” And this part was only symbolic, she knew, there'd be no reason anyone wouldn't just contact the Aurors directly; but it might turn into more, someday, which was why she'd asked Mother to demand it – “And if anyone wants to report something to the Auxiliary Protectors, they can talk to the Aurors, or go through me –” Daphne's arm swept behind her to indicate the gathered students. “The duly appointed President of the Auxiliary Protective Special Committee!”

And Daphne paused dramatically. They'd all rehearsed this part.

“We don't know who the enemy is,” said Neville, whose voice did not squeak.

“We don't know what the enemy wants,” said Theodore, still looking menacing.

“But we know who the enemy is attacking,” said Susan, as fierce as when she'd taken on three seventh-year students.

“The enemy is attacking Hogwarts students,” said Draco Malfoy, clear and commanding, like all this was his natural element.

“And Hogwarts,” spoke Daphne of Greengrass, feeling her blood burn like it never had before in her life, “is going to fight back.”

CHAPTER NINETY-NINE

ROLES, AFTERMATH

TEN days later, the first dead unicorn was found in the Forbidden Forest.

Arc Set Six

PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES, PART I

May 13th, 1992.

ARGUS Filch's face appeared twisted in the light of the oil lamp he held, shadows dancing over his face. Behind them the doors of Hogwarts quickly receded, and the dark grounds moved closer. The track they now walked was muddy and indistinct.

The trees, branches formerly bare with winter, were not yet fully clad with spring; their branches stretched up toward the sky like lean fingers, skeletons visible amid the thin foliage. The moon was bright, but clouds scudding across it often threw them into darkness, lit only by the dim flames of Filch's lamp.

Draco kept a firm grip on his wand.

"Where are you taking us?" said Tracey Davis. She'd been caught along with Draco by Filch, on their way to an attempted meeting of the Silvery Slytherins after curfew hours, and likewise given a detention.

"You just follow me," said Argus Filch.

Draco was feeling rather annoyed with the whole affair. The Silvery Slytherins ought to be recognized school business. There was no reason why a secret conspiracy shouldn't have permission to meet after curfew, if it was for the greater good of Hogwarts. If this happened one more time he'd talk to Daphne Greengrass and Daphne would talk to her father and then Filch would learn the wisdom of looking the other way where Malfoys were concerned.

The lights of the Hogwarts castle had diminished in the distance when Filch spoke again. "I bet you'll think twice about breaking a school rule again, won't you, eh?" Filch turned his head, away from the lamp, so that he could leer at the four students following him. "Oh yes... hard work and pain are the best teachers if you ask me... It's just a pity they let the old punishments die out... hang you by your wrists from the ceiling for a few days, I've got the chains still in my office, keep 'em well oiled in case they're ever needed..."

"Hey!" Tracey said, a touch of indignation entering her voice. "I'm too

young to hear about that – that sort of – you know! Especially if the chains are well-oiled!”

Draco wasn't paying attention. Filch simply wasn't in Amycus Carrow's league.

Behind them, one of the two older Slytherins following them snickered, though she didn't say anything. Beside her was the other, a tall boy with an Slavic cast to his face, and who still spoke with an accent. They'd been caught for some unrelated offense, having to do with the type of thing Tracey went on about, and looked to be in their third or fourth year. “Pfeh,” said the taller boy. “In Durmstrang they hang you upside-down by your toes. By one toe, if you are insolent. Hogwarts was soft even in the old days.”

Argus Filch was silent for around half a minute, as though trying to think of a proper rejoinder, and then gave a chuckle. “We'll see what you say about that... when you learn what you'll be doing tonight! Ha!”

“I said, I'm too young for that sort of thing!” said Tracey Davis. “It has to wait until I'm older!”

Ahead of them was a cottage with lighted windows, though the proportions seemed wrong.

Filch whistled, a high sharp sound, and a dog began barking.

From the cottage stepped forth a figure, making the trees seem too short around it. The figure was followed by a dog that seemed like a puppy by comparison, until you looked at it apart from the taller silhouette and realized the dog was huge, more like a wolf.

Draco's eyes narrowed, before he caught himself. As a Silvery Slytherin he wasn't supposed to be Prejudiced against any sentient being, especially not where other people might see him.

“What's this?” said the figure, in the loud gruff voice of the half-giant. His umbrella lit up with a white glow, brighter than Filch's dim lamp. In his other hand he held a crossbow; a quiver of short bolts was strapped to his upper arm.

“Students serving detention,” Filch said, loudly. “They're to help you search the Forest for... whatever's been eating 'em.”

“The Forest?” gasped Tracey. “We can't go in there at night!”

“That's right,” said Filch, turning from Hagrid to glare at them. “It's into the Forest you're going, and I'm much mistaken if you'll all come out in one piece.”

“But –” said Tracey. “There’s werewolves, I’ve heard, and vampires, and everyone knows what happens when there’s a girl and a werewolf and a vampire all at the same time!”

The huge half-giant was frowning. “Argus, I ‘ad in mind you an’ maybe a few seventh-years. ‘Ere’s not much point in bringing along help if I’m to watch over ‘em the whole time.”

Argus’s face lit with cruel satisfaction. “That’s their lookout, isn’t it? Should’ve thought of them werewolves before they got in trouble, shouldn’t they? Send them out alone. I shouldn’t be too friendly to them, Hagrid. They’re here to be punished, after all.”

The half-giant gave a massive sigh (it sounded like a normal man having all the air driven out of his lungs by a Bludgeoning Hex). “Yeh’ve done yer bit. I’ll take over from here.”

“I’ll be back at dawn,” said Filch, “for what’s left of them,” he added nastily, and he turned and started back toward the castle, his lamp bobbing away in the darkness.

“Right then,” said Hagrid, “now, listen carefully, ‘cause it’s dangerous what we’re gonna do tonight an’ I don’ want no one takin’ risks. Follow me over here a moment.”

He led them to the very edge of the Forest. Holding his lamp up high he pointed down a narrow, winding earth track that disappeared into the thick black trees. A light breeze blew over Draco’s head as he looked into the Forest.

“There’s summat in there that’s bin eatin’ unicorns,” the huge man said.

Draco nodded; he distantly remembered hearing something along those lines a couple of weeks ago, toward the end of April.

“Did you call us to track down a trail of silvery blood to a wounded unicorn?” Tracey said excitedly.

“No,” said Draco, though he managed to stop the reflexive sneer. “Filch gave us the detention note at lunch today, at noon. Mr. Hagrid wouldn’t wait that long to find a wounded unicorn, and if we were looking for something like that, we’d look in the day when it’s bright. So,” Draco held up a finger, like he’d seen Inspector León do in plays, “I infer that we’re looking for something that only comes out at night.”

“Aye,” said the half-giant, sounding thoughtful. “Yer not what I expected, Draco Malfoy. Not what I expected at all. An’ you’d be Tracey Davis, then. I’ve heard of yeh. One of poor Miss Granger’s lot.” Rubeus Hagrid looked

over at the two older Slytherins, peering at them in the light of his glowing umbrella. "An' who'd yeh be, again? Don't remember seeing much of yeh, boy."

"Cornelia Walt," said the witch, "and this is Yuri Yuliy," indicating the Slavic-looking boy who'd spoken of Durmstrang. "His family is visiting from the Ukrainian lands, so he's in Hogwarts just for the year." The older boy nodded, a faintly contemptuous cast on his face.

"This is Fang," Hagrid said, indicating the dog.

The five of them set off into the woods.

"What could be killing unicorns?" Draco said after they'd walked for a few minutes. Draco knew a bit about Dark creatures, but he couldn't remember anything that was said to prey on unicorns. "What sort of creature does that, does anyone know?"

"Werewolves!" said Tracey.

"Miss Davis?" Draco said, and when she looked at him, he silently pointed a finger up at the moon. It was waxing gibbous, but not yet full.

"Oh, right," said Tracey.

"No weres in the Forest," said Hagrid. "They're plain wizards most o' the time, 'member. Couldn't be wolves either, they're not near fast enough ter catch a unicorn. Powerful magical creatures, unicorns are, I never knew one ter be hurt before."

Draco listened to this, thinking about the puzzle almost despite himself. "Then what is fast enough to catch a unicorn?"

"Wouldn't 'ave been a matter of speed," Hagrid said, giving Draco an indecipherable glance. "Ere's no end ter the ways that creatures hunt. Poison, darkness, traps. Imps as can't be seen or heard or remembered, even while they're eatin' yer face. Always summat new an' wonderful to learn."

A cloud passed over the moon, casting the forest into shadow lit only by the glow of Hagrid's umbrella.

"Meself," Hagrid continued, "I think we might 'ave a Parisian hydra on our 'ands. They're no threat to a wizard, yeh've just got to keep holdin' 'em off long enough, and there's no way yeh can lose. I mean literally no way yeh can lose so long's yeh keep fightin'. Trouble is, against a Parisian hydra, most creatures give up long before. Takes a while to cut down all the heads, yeh see."

"Bah," said the foreign boy. "In Durmstrang we learn to fight Buchholz hydra. Unimaginably more tedious to fight! I mean literally, cannot imagine."

First-years not believe us when we tell them winning is possible! Instructor must give second order, iterate until they comprehend.”

They walked for nearly half an hour, deeper and deeper into the Forest, until the path became almost impossible to follow because the trees were so thick.

Then Draco saw it, thick splashes on the roots of trees, gleaming a brighter color beneath the moonlight. “Is that –”

“Unicorn’s blood,” Hagrid said. The huge man’s voice was sad.

In a clearing ahead, visible through the tangled branches of a great oak, they saw the fallen creature, splayed beautiful and sad upon the ground, the dirt around her shining moon-silver with pooled blood. The unicorn was not white, but pale blue, or appearing so beneath the moon and night sky. Her slender legs stuck out at odd angles, obviously broken, and her mane spread across the dark leaves, green-black but with a sheen like pearls. On her flank was a small white shape like a starburst, a center surrounded by eight straight rays. Half her side had been ripped away, the edges ragged like the marks of teeth, bones and inner organs exposed.

A strange choking sensation rose in Draco’s throat.

“That’s ‘er,” Hagrid said, his sad whisper as loud as a normal man’s voice. “Just where I found ‘er this mornin’, dead as a dead doorknob. She is – was – the first unicorn I e’er met in these woods. I called ‘er Alicorn, not that it matters ter ‘er any more, I s’pose.”

“You named a unicorn Alicorn,” said the older girl. Her voice was a bit dry.

“But she doesn’t have wings,” Tracey said.

“An alicorn’s a unicorn’s horn,” Hagrid said, now louder. “Don’t know where yeh all started thinking it meant a unicorn with wings, ‘ere’s no such thing I ever heard. It’s just like naming a dog Fang,” indicating the huge wolf-like dog that barely came to his knees. “What’d you have called ‘er? Hannah, or some such? I gave ‘er a name as would’ve meant summat ter ‘er. Common courtesy, I call it.”

Nobody said anything to this, and after a further moment, the huge man gave a sharp nod. “We’ll start our search from ‘ere, the last place it struck. We’re gonna split inter two parties an’ follow the trail in diff’rent directions. Yeh two, Walt and Yuliy – yeh’ll go that way, and take Fang. There’s nothin’ that lives in the Forest that’ll hurt yeh if yer with Fang. Send up green sparks if yeh find summat interestin’, an’ send up red sparks if anyone gets in trouble.

Davis, Malfoy, with me.”

The Forest was black and silent. Rubeus Hagrid had dimmed the light of his umbrella after they’d set out, so that Draco and Tracey had to steer themselves by the light of the moon, not without occasional trips and falls. They walked past a mossy tree-stump, the sound of running water speaking of a stream somewhere close by. Now and then a ray of moonlight through the branches above lit a spot of silver blue blood on the fallen leaves; they were following the trail of blood, toward where the creature must have first struck the unicorn.

“There’s rumors about yeh,” Hagrid said in a low voice after they’d walked for a while.

“Well, they’re all true,” Tracey said. “All of them.”

“Not yeh,” Hagrid said. “Did yeh really testify under Veritaserum that yeh tried to help Miss Granger, three times it was?”

Draco weighed his words for a while, and finally said, “Yes.” It wouldn’t have done to appear too eager to claim credit.

The huge man shook his head, his great feet still stomping silently through the woods. “I’m surprised, teh be honest. And yeh too, Davis, tryin’ to put the halls in order. Are yeh sure the Sorting Hat put yeh in the right place? There’s not a single witch or wizard who went bad who wasn’t in Slytherin, so it’s always been said.”

“That’s not true,” Tracey said. “What about Xiaonan Tong the Black Raven, Spencer of the Hill, and Mister Kayvon?”

“Who?” said Hagrid.

“Just some of the best Dark Wizards from the last two centuries,” Tracey said. “They’re probably the best from Hogwarts who weren’t from Slytherin.” Her voice fell, lost its enthusiasm. “Miss Granger always told me I should read up on anything I –”

“Anyway,” Draco said quickly, “that’s not really relevant, Mr. Hagrid. Even if –” Draco worked it around in his head, trying to translate the difference between probability of Slytherin given Dark and probability of Dark given Slytherin into nonscientific language. “Even if most Dark Wizards are from Slytherin, very few Slytherins are Dark Wizards. There aren’t all that many Dark Wizards, so not all Slytherins can be one.” Or as Father had said, while any Malfoy should certainly know much of the secret lore, the more... costly rituals were better left to useful fools like Amycus Carrow.

“So yeh’re saying,” Hagrid said, “that most Dark Wizards are Slytherins... but...”

“But most Slytherins are not Dark Wizards,” Draco said. He had a weary feeling they’d be at this a while, but like fighting a hydra, the important thing was to not give up.

“I never thought of it that way,” the huge man said, sounding awestruck. “But, well, if yeh’re not all a house of snakes, then why – get behind that tree!”

Hagrid seized Draco and Tracey and hoisted them off the path behind a towering oak. He pulled out a bolt and fitted it into his crossbow, raising it, ready to fire. The three of them listened. Something was slithering over dead leaves nearby: it sounded like a cloak trailing along the ground. Hagrid was squinting up the dark path, but after a few seconds, the sound faded away.

“I knew it,” Hagrid murmured. “There’s summat in here that shouldn’ be.”

They went after where the rustling sound had come from, with Hagrid in the lead and Tracey and Draco both gripping their wands at the ready, but they found nothing, despite searching in a widening circle with their ears straining for the faintest sound.

They walked on through the dense, dark trees. Draco kept looking over his shoulder, a feeling nagging at him that they were being watched. They had just passed a bend in the path when Tracey yelled and pointed.

In the distance, a shower of red sparks lit the air.

“You two wait here!” Hagrid shouted. “Stay where yeh are, I’ll come back for yeh!”

Before Draco could say a word, Hagrid spun and crashed away through the undergrowth.

Draco and Tracey stood looking at each other, until they heard nothing but the rustling of leaves around them. Tracey looked scared, but trying to hide it. Draco was feeling more annoyed than anything else. Apparently Rubeus Hagrid, when he had formed his plans for tonight, had not spent even five seconds visualizing the consequences if something actually went wrong.

“Now what?” said Tracey, her voice a little high.

“We wait for Mr. Hagrid to come back.”

The minutes dragged by. Draco’s ears seemed sharper than usual, picking up every sigh of the wind, every cracking twig. Tracey kept looking up at the moon, as though to reassure herself that it wasn’t full yet.

“I’m –” Tracey whispered. “I’m getting a little nervous, Mr. Malfoy.”

Draco thought about it a bit. To be honest, there was something... well, it wasn't that he was a coward, or even that he was scared. But there had been a murder at Hogwarts and if he'd been watching himself in a play, having just been abandoned in the Forbidden Forest by a half-giant, he would currently feel like yelling at the boy on stage that he should...

Draco reached into his robes, and took out a mirror. Tapping the surface showed a man in red robes, who frowned almost immediately.

"Auror Captain Eneasz Brodski," the man said clearly, causing Tracey to start with the loudness in the quiet forest. "What is it, Draco Malfoy?"

"Put me on ten-minute check-in," Draco said. He'd decided not to complain directly about his detention. He did not want to look like a spoiled brat. "If I don't respond, come get me. I'm in the Forbidden Forest."

Inside the mirror, the Auror's brows rose. "What are you doing in the Forbidden Forest, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Looking for the unicorn-eater with Mr. Hagrid," Draco said, and tapped the mirror off, putting it back in his robes before the Auror could ask anything about detentions or say anything about serving it out without complaining.

Tracey's head turned toward him, though it was a little too dim to read her expression. "Um, thanks," she whispered.

The few leaves which had emerged on their branches rustled as another, colder breeze blew through the forest.

Tracey's voice was a little louder when she spoke again. "You didn't have to –" she said, now sounding a little shy.

"Don't mention it, Miss Davis."

The dark silhouette of Tracey put her hand to her cheek, as though to conceal a blush that wasn't visible anyway. "I mean, not for me –"

"No, really," Draco said. "Don't mention it. At all." He would have threatened to take out the mirror and order Captain Brodski not to rescue her, but he was afraid she would consider that flirting.

Tracey's silhouetted head turned from him, looked away. Finally she said, in a smaller voice, "It's too soon, isn't it –"

A high scream echoed through the woods, a not-quite-human sound, the scream of something like a horse; and Tracey shrieked and ran.

"No, you numbskull!" yelled Draco, plunging after her. The sound had been so eerie that Draco wasn't certain where it came from – but he thought that Tracey Davis might, in fact, be running straight toward the source of that eerie scream.

Brambles whipped at Draco's eyes, he had to keep one hand in front of his face to shield them, trying not to lose track of Tracey because it seemed obvious that, if this was a play, and they got separated, one of them was going to die. Draco thought of the mirror secured within his robes but he somehow knew that if he tried to take it out one-handed while running, the mirror would inevitably fall and be lost –

Ahead of them, Tracey had stopped, and Draco felt relieved for an instant, before he saw.

Another unicorn lay on the ground, surrounded by a slowly widening pool of silver blood, the edge of the blood creeping across the ground like spilled mercury. Her coat was purple, like the color of the night sky, her horn exactly the same twilight color as her skin, her visible flank marked by a pink star-blotch surrounded by white patches. The sight tore at Draco's heart, even more than the other unicorn because this one's eyes were staring glassily right at him, and because there was a –

– blurring, twisting form –

– feeding on an open wound on the unicorn's side, like it was drinking from it –

– Draco couldn't understand, somehow couldn't recognize what he was seeing –

– it was looking at them.

The blurring, seething, unrecognizable darkness seemed to turn to regard them. A hiss came from it, like the hiss of the deadliest snake which ever had existed, something more dangerous by far than any Blue Krait.

Then it bent back over the wound in the unicorn, and continued to drink.

The mirror was in Draco's hand, and it remained lifeless as his finger mechanically tapped at the surface, over and over.

Tracey was holding her wand now, saying things like "Prismatis" and "Stupefy" but nothing was happening.

Then the seething outline rose up, like a man rising to his feet only not so; and it seemed to scuttle forward, moving with a strange half-jump across the dying unicorn's legs, approaching the two of them.

Tracey tugged at his sleeve and then turned to run, run from something that could hunt down unicorns. Before she could take three steps there came another terrible hiss, burning his ears, and Tracey fell to the ground and did not move.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Draco knew that he was about to die. Even if the Auror checked his mirror this very instant, there was no way anyone could get here fast enough. There was no time.

Running hadn't worked.

Magic hadn't worked.

The seething outline came closer, while Draco tried, in his last moments, to solve the riddle.

Then a blazing silver ball of light plunged out of the night sky and hung there, illuminating the forest as bright as daylight, and the seething outline leapt backwards, as though in horror of the light.

Four broomsticks plunged out of the sky, three Aurors with bright multicolored shields and Harry Potter holding his wand aloft, seated behind Professor McGonagall within a larger shield.

"Get out of here!" roared Professor McGonagall –

– an instant before the seething thing gave forth another terrible hiss, and all the shielding spells winked out. The three Aurors and Professor McGonagall fell off their broomsticks and dropped heavily to the forest floor, lying motionless.

Draco couldn't breathe, the most intense fear he'd ever felt in his life gripping all through his chest, sending tendrils around his heart.

Harry Potter, who had remained untouched, silently guided his broomstick toward the ground –

– and then leapt off to stand between Draco and the seething outline, interposing himself like a living shield.

"Run!" said Harry Potter, turning his head half-back to look at Draco. The silver moonlight gleamed on his face. "Run, Draco! I'll hold it off!"

"You can't fight that thing alone!" Draco cried aloud. A nausea was in his stomach, a churning sensation that, looking back in memory, seemed both like and unlike a sense of guilt, as though it had the sensations but not quite all of the emotion.

"I must," Harry Potter said grimly. "Go!"

"Harry, I – I'm sorry, for everything – I" Though later, looking back, Draco couldn't quite remember what he'd meant to apologize for, maybe it'd been that he was planning to overthrow Harry's conspiracy, all that time ago.

The seething figure, now seeming blacker and more terrible, rose up into the air, hovering off the ground.

"Go!" shouted Harry.

Draco turned and fled headlong into the woods, with the branches whipping at his face. Behind him, Draco heard another terrible hiss, and Harry's voice rising, crying something that Draco couldn't make out from the distance; Draco turned his head for only an instant to look back, and in that moment ran into something, hitting his head **HARD**, and blacked out.



Harry held a tight grip on his wand, a Prismatic Sphere glowing around him. He stared levelly at the seething, blurring form in front of him, and said, "What on Earth are you doing?"

The seething blurs resolved, reformed, relaxed back into a hooded form. Whatever concealment had been at work – a device rather than a Charm, Harry guessed, since the magic had been able to affect him – had prevented his mind from recognizing the shape or even that the shape was human. But it hadn't prevented Harry from recognizing the sharp sense of doom.

Professor Quirrell stood straight with silver blood all down the front of his enshrouding black cloak, and gave a sigh, looking at the fallen forms of three Aurors, Tracey Davis, Draco Malfoy, and Professor McGonagall. "I had honestly thought," Professor Quirrell murmured, "that I jammed that mirror without alarm. What were two first-year Slytherins doing alone in the Forbidden Forest? Mr. Malfoy has more sense than this... What a fiasco."

Harry didn't answer. The sense of doom was as strong as Harry could ever remember feeling it, a feeling of power in the air so great that it was almost tangible. Some part of him was still viscerally shocked at how fast the shields surrounding the Aurors had been torn apart. He almost hadn't been able to see the successive lashes of color which had torn away the shields like tissue paper. It made the duel Professor Quirrell had fought against the Auror in Azkaban look like a mockery, a child's game – though Professor Quirrell had claimed, then, that if he'd fought for real the Auror would have been dead in seconds; and Harry knew now that this was also true.

Just how high did the power ladder go?

"I take it," Harry said, managing to keep his voice steady, "that your eating unicorns has something to do with why you'll get fired from the Defense Professor position. I don't suppose you'd care to explain in considerable detail?"

Professor Quirrell looked at him. The almost tangible sense of power in the air seemed to diminish, drawing back into the Defense Professor. "I

shall indeed explain myself,” the Defense Professor said. “I need to cast a few Memory Charms first, and then we may go off and discuss it, for it would not be wise for me to stay. You will return to this time later, as I know.”

Harry willed himself to be able to see through the Cloak he had mastered; and knew that another Harry stood beside him, hidden by his own Deathly Hallow. Harry then told his Cloak to hide himself from himself once more, and it did; being able to perceive your future self meant having to match the memory later.

Harry’s own voice said, then, sounding strange in present-Harry’s ears, “He has a surprisingly good explanation.”

Present-Harry remembered the words as best he could. Nothing more was said between them.

Professor Quirrell walked to Draco’s form, and chanted the spell of the False Memory Charm. The Defense Professor stood there for perhaps a minute, seemingly lost to the world.

Harry had been studying Obliviations, these last couple of weeks – though he couldn’t have helped cast the spells, unless he was willing to exhaust himself almost completely, and for some reason they wanted an Auror to lose every single life memory involving the color blue. But Harry had some idea, now, of the concentration which the far more difficult False Memory Charm entailed. You had to try to live the other person’s entire life inside your own head, at least if you wanted to create the False Memories with less than a sixteen-to-one slowdown as you separately crafted sixteen major tracks of memory. It might have been quiet, there might have been no outward sign; but Harry knew something of the difficulties now, and he knew to be impressed.

Professor Quirrell finished, and moved on to Tracey Davis, then the three Aurors, and finally Professor McGonagall. Harry waited, but future-Harry made no protest. It was possible that even Professor McGonagall, if she’d been awake, wouldn’t have protested. It was not yet the Ides of May, and apparently there would be a surprisingly good explanation.

With a gesture, Draco’s stunned body was lifted, and sent a short distance into the woods, before being carefully deposited on the ground. Then a final gesture from Professor Quirrell ripped a huge chunk out of the unicorn’s side, leaving behind ragged edges; the raw meat hovered in the air, then wavered in Vanishment and was gone.

“Done,” Professor Quirrell said. “I must depart this place now, Mr. Potter.

Come with me, and remain here.”

Professor Quirrell strode away, and Harry followed and remained behind.

They walked through the woods in silence for a time, before Harry heard faint voices in the distance. The next set of Aurors, presumably, after the first set had fallen out of contact. What his future self was saying, Harry didn’t know.

“They won’t detect us, nor hear our speech,” said Professor Quirrell. The sense of power and doom around the Defense Professor was still strong. The man seated himself on a tree stump, one where the light of the almost-full moon fell full on him. “I should first say that when you speak to the Aurors, in the future, you should tell them that you frightened away the seething dark, the same as you did that Dementor. It is what Mr. Malfoy will remember seeing.” Professor Quirrell gave a small sigh. “It may cause some alarm, if they conclude that some horror kin to Dementors, and strong enough to break the Aurors’ shields, is loose in the Forbidden Forest. But I could not think of what else to do. If the forest is better-guarded after this – but with any luck I have already consumed what I need. Would you mind telling me how you arrived so quickly? How did you know Mr. Malfoy was in trouble?”

After Captain Brodski had learned that Draco Malfoy was in the Forbidden Forest, seemingly in the company of Rubeus Hagrid, Brodski had begun inquiring to find out who had authorized this, and had still been unable to find out when Draco Malfoy had missed check-in. Despite Harry’s protests, the Auror Captain, who was authorized to know about Time-Turners, had refused to allow deployment to before the time of the missed check-in; there were standard procedures involving Time. But Brodski had given Harry written orders allowing him to go back and deploy an Auror trio to arrive one second after the missed check-in time. There had been a Patronus Charm to locate Draco, which Harry had successfully willed to take the form of a ball of pure silver light, and the flight of Aurors had arrived on time to the second.

“I’m afraid I couldn’t say,” Harry replied evenly. Professor Quirrell was still a major suspect, and it was good for him not to know the details. “Now why are you eating unicorns?”

“Ah,” Professor Quirrell said. “As to that...” The man hesitated. “I was drinking the blood of unicorns, not eating them. The missing flesh, the ragged marks upon the body – those were to obscure the case, to make it seem like some other predator. The use of unicorn’s blood is too well-known.”

"I don't know it," Harry said.

"I know you do not," the Defense Professor said sharply. "Or you would not be pestering me about it. The power of unicorn's blood is to preserve your life for a time, even if you are on the very verge of death."

There was a stretch of time when Harry's brain claimed to be refusing to process the words, which was of course a lie, because you couldn't know the meaning you weren't allowed to process, without having already processed it.

A strange sense of blankness overtook Harry, an absence of reaction, maybe this was what other people felt like when someone went off-script, and they couldn't say or think of anything to do.

Of course Professor Quirrell was dying, not just occasionally ill.

Professor Quirrell had known he was dying. He'd volunteered to take the Defense Professor position at Hogwarts, after all.

Of course he'd been getting worse the whole school year. Of course illnesses which kept getting worse had a predictable destination at their end.

Harry's brain had surely known already, somewhere in the safe back of his mind where he could refuse to process things he'd already processed.

Of course that was why Professor Quirrell wouldn't be able to teach Battle Magic next year. Professor McGonagall wouldn't even have to fire him. He would just be –

– dead.

"No," Harry said, his voice a little shaky. "There has to be a way –"

"I am not stupid nor particularly eager to die. I have already looked. I had to go this far simply to last out my lesson plans, having less time than I had thought, and –" The head of the dark moonlit figure turned away. "I think I do not want to hear about it, Mr. Potter."

Harry's breath hitched. Too many emotions were bubbling up in him at once. After denial came anger, according to a ritual someone had just made up. And yet it seemed surprisingly appropriate.

"And why –" Harry's breath hitched again. "Why isn't unicorn's blood standard in healer's kits, then? To keep someone alive, even if they're on the very verge of dying from their legs being eaten?"

"Because there are permanent side effects," Professor Quirrell said quietly.

"Side effects? Side effects? What kind of side effect is medically worse than DEATH?" Harry's voice rose on the last word until he was shouting.

“Not everyone thinks the same way we do, Mr. Potter. Though, to be fair, the blood must come from a live unicorn and the unicorn must die in the drinking. Would I be here otherwise?”

Harry turned, stared at the surrounding trees. “Have a herd of unicorns at St. Mungos. Floo the patients there, or use portkeys.”

“Yes, that would work.”

Harry’s face tightened, the only outward sign behind his trembling hands of everything that was welling up inside him. He needed to scream, needed some outlet, needed something he couldn’t name and finally Harry leveled his wand at a tree and shouted “Diffindo!”

There was a sharp tearing sound, and a cut appeared across the wood.

“Diffindo!”

Another cut. Harry had learned the Charm only ten days previously, after he’d started getting serious about self-defense. It was theoretically a second-year Charm, but the anger pouring through him seemed to know no bounds, he knew enough now not to exhaust himself and he still had power yet.

“Diffindo!” Harry had aimed at a branch this time, and it plummeted to the ground with a sound of twigs and leaves.

There didn’t seem to be any tears inside him, only pressure with no outlet.

“I shall leave you to it,” Professor Quirrell said quietly. The Defense Professor rose from his tree stump, the unicorn’s blood still moonlit on the black cloak he wore, and drew his hood back over his head.

PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES, PART II

HARRY stood, panting, in the midst of a brief wasted circle amid the forest, more destruction than a first-year should have been able to reach, by himself. The Severing Charm wouldn't bring down a tree, so he'd started partially Transfiguring cross-sections through the wood. It hadn't let out what was inside him, bringing down a small circle of trees hadn't made him feel any better, all the emotions were still there but while he was destroying trees he at least wasn't thinking about how the feelings couldn't be let out.

After Harry had run out of available magic he'd started tearing off branches with his bare hands and snapping them. His hands were bleeding, though nothing that Madam Pomfrey couldn't fix in the morning. Only Dark magic left permanent scars on wizards.

There came a sound of something moving in the woods, like the hoofbeats of a horse, and Harry whirled, his wand rising once more; some part of his magic had returned while he was working with his hands. It occurred to him for the first time that he was out in the Forbidden Forest alone, and making noise.

What emerged into the moonlight was not the unicorn Harry had expected, but a creature with a lower body like that of a horse, gleaming white-brown beneath the moonlight, and the bare upper chest of a male human with long white hair. The moonlight caught the centaur's face, and Harry saw that the eyes were almost as blue as Dumbledore's, halfway to sapphire.

In one hand the centaur held a long wooden spear, with an overlarge metal blade whose edge did not gleam beneath the moonlight; a gleaming edge, Harry had once read, was the sign of a dull blade.

"So," the centaur said. His voice was low, powerful and male. "Here you are, surrounded by destruction. I can smell the unicorn's blood in the air, the blood of something innocent, slain to save oneself."

A jolt of sudden fear brought Harry into the now, and he said quickly, "It's not what it looks like."

"I know. The stars themselves proclaim your innocence, ironically enough." The centaur took a step toward Harry within the small clearing,

still holding his spear upright. "A strange word, innocence. It means lack of knowledge, like the innocence of a child, and also means lack of guilt. Only those entirely ignorant can lack all responsibility for the consequences of their actions. He knows not what he does, and therefore can be without harmful intent; so says that word." The deep voice did not echo in the woods.

Harry's eyes flickered to the spear-tip, and he realized that he should have grabbed his Time-Turner the moment he saw the centaur. Now, if Harry tried to reach beneath his robes, the spear could strike him before then, if the centaur was fast enough. "I read once," Harry said, his voice a bit unsteady as he tried to match deep-sounding words to deep-sounding words, "that it's wrong to think of little children as innocent, because not knowing isn't the same as not choosing. That children do little harms to each other with schoolyard fights, because they don't have the power to do great harm. And some adults do great harm. But the adults who don't, aren't they more innocent than children, not less?"

"The wisdom of wizards," the centaur said.

"Muggle wisdom, actually."

"Of the magicless I know little. Mars has been dim of late, but it grows brighter." The centaur took another step forwards, bringing him almost within striking distance of Harry.

Harry didn't dare look up to the sky. "That means Mars is coming closer to the Earth, as both planets go around the Sun. Mars is reflecting the same amount of sunlight as always, it's just getting nearer to us. What do you mean, the stars proclaim my innocence?"

"The night sky speaks to centaurs. It is how we know what we know. Or do they not even tell wizards that much, these days?" A look of contempt crossed the centaur's face.

"I... tried to look up centaurs, when I was checking out Divination. Most of the authors just ridiculed centaur Divination without explaining why, wizards don't understand argumentative norms, to them ridiculing an idea or a person feels like casting that idea down just as much as bringing evidence against it... I thought the part about centaurs using astrology was just more ridicule..."

"Why?" the centaur intoned. His head cocked curiously.

"Because the course of the planets is predictable for thousands of years in advance. If I talked to the right Muggles, I could show you a diagram of exactly what the planets will look like from this spot ten years later. Would

you be able to make predictions from that?"

The centaur shook his head. "From a diagram? No. The light of the planets, the comets, the subtle shifts in the stars themselves, those I would not see."

"Cometary orbits are also set thousands of years in advance so they shouldn't correlate much to current events. And the light of the stars takes years to travel from the stars to Earth, and the stars don't move much at all, not visibly. So the obvious hypothesis is that centaurs have a native magical talent for Divination which you just, well, project onto the night sky."

"Perhaps," the centaur said thoughtfully. His head lowered. "The others would strike you for saying such a thing, but I have ever sought to know what I do not know. Why the night sky can foretell the future – that I surely do not know. It is hard enough to grasp the skill itself. All I can say, son of Lily, is that even if what you are saying is true, it does not seem useful."

Harry allowed himself to relax a little; being addressed as 'son of Lily' implied that the centaur thought of him as more than a random intruder in the forest. Besides, attacking a Hogwarts student would probably bring some kind of huge reprisal upon the non-wizard centaur tribe in the forests, and the centaur probably knew that... "What Muggles have learned is that there is a power in the truth, in all the pieces of the truth which interact with each other, which you can only find by discovering as many truths as possible. To do that you can't defend false beliefs in any way, not even by saying the false belief is useful. It might not seem to matter whether your predictions are really based on the stars or if it's an innate talent being projected. But if you wanted to really understand Divination, or for that matter the stars, the real truth about centaur predictions would be a fact that matters to other truths."

Slowly the centaur nodded. "So the wandless have become wiser than the wizards. What a joke! Tell me, son of Lily, do the Muggles in their wisdom say that soon the skies will be empty?"

"Empty?" Harry said. "Er... no?"

"The other centaurs in this forest have stayed from your presence, for we are sworn not to set ourselves against the heavens' course. Because, in becoming entangled in your fate, we might become less innocent in what is to come. I alone have dared approach you."

"I... don't understand."

"No. You are innocent, as the stars say. And to slay something innocent to save oneself, that is a terrible deed. One would live only a cursed life, a

half-life, from that day. For any centaur would surely be cast out, if he slew a foal."

The spear made a lightning motion, too fast for Harry's eyes to follow, and smashed his wand out of his hand.

Another powerful blow smashed into Harry's solar plexus, and he went gasping and retching to the forest floor.

Harry's hand reached up toward his robes, for his Time-Turner, and the spear-butt knocked his hand away, almost hard enough to break fingers, he reached with his other hand and that was knocked away too –

"I am sorry, Harry Potter," the centaur said, and then looked up with widened eyes. The spear spun about and came up, intercepting a red spellbolt. Then the centaur dropped the spear and leaped away desperately, a green flash of light went past him and another green flash of light followed in its wake, then a third green flash hit the centaur straight-on.

The centaur fell and did not move again.

It took a long time for Harry to catch his breath, to stagger to his feet, to pick up his wand, to croak, "What?"

By that time the sense of doom, of power almost tangible in the air, had approached once more.

"P-Professor Quirrell? What are you doing here?"

"Well," the man in the black cloak said thoughtfully, "you needed to fly into a rage and have a loud tantrum in the Forbidden Forest in the middle of the night, and I needed to go just outside your ability to detect me and keep watch. One does not leave a student alone in the Forbidden Forest. That should be obvious in retrospect."

Harry stared at the fallen centaur.

The horse-form wasn't breathing.

"You – you killed him, that was Avada Kedavra –"

"I do not always understand how other people imagine morality to work, Mr. Potter. But even I know that on conventional morality, it is acceptable to kill nonhuman creatures which are about to slay a wizard child. Perhaps you do not care about the nonhuman part, but he was about to kill you. He was hardly innocent –"

The Defense Professor stopped, looking at Harry, who had raised one trembling hand to his mouth.

"Well," the Defense Professor said then, "I have made my point, and you may think on it. Centaur spears can block many spells, but no one tries to

block if they see that the spell is a certain shade of green. For this purpose it is useful to know some green stunning hexes. Really, Mr. Potter, you should understand by now how I operate.”

The Defense Professor came nearer the centaur’s body, and Harry took an involuntary step back, then another, at the terrible rising sense of STOP, DON’T –

The Defense Professor kneeled and pressed his wand to the centaur’s head.

The wand stayed there for a time.

And the centaur rose, eyes blank, breathing once more.

“Remember nothing of this time,” the Defense Professor commanded. “Wander away and forget everything about this night.”

The centaur walked away, the four horse-legs moving in strange synchrony.

“Happy now?” the Defense Professor said, sounding rather sardonic about it.

Harry’s brain still felt broken. “He was trying to kill me.”

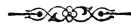
“Oh, for Merlin’s sake – yes, he was trying to kill you. Get used to it. Only boring people never have that experience.”

Harry’s voice emerged, hoarse. “Why – why did he want to –”

“Any number of reasons. I would be lying if I said I’d never considered killing you myself.”

Harry stared at where the centaur had wandered into the trees.

His brain still felt half-broken, like an engine misfiring, but Harry did not see how this could possibly be a good sign.



The news of Draco Malfoy nearly being eaten by a horror had been sufficient to summon back Dumbledore from wherever he’d gone, to wake Lord Malfoy and the Lady Greengrass’s handsome husband, to bring forth Amelia Bones. The supposed presence of the horror had provoked skepticism even from Dumbledore, and the possibility of False Memory Charms had been raised. Harry had said (after some internal debate about the consequences of people believing a demon was on the loose) that he didn’t actually remember making the same effort he’d put forth to frighten the Dementor, the dark thing had just left; which was what you would expect someone to create as a False Memory, if they hadn’t actually known how Harry had done it. The names of

Bellatrix Black, Severus Snape, and Quirinus Quirrell had been mentioned in connection with wizards strong enough to subdue everyone present and cast False Memory Charms, and Harry had known that Lucius was thinking of Dumbledore. There had been Aurors testifying, and discussions going in circles, and glares of accusation, and cutting remarks at 2 AM in the morning. There had been motions, and votes, and consequences.

“Do you believe,” Headmaster Dumbledore said quietly to Harry, when all of it was done, and the two of them alone, “that the Hogwarts you have wrought is an improvement?”

Harry sat with his elbows on his knees, his face resting on his palms, in the conference room from which all the others had now departed. Professor McGonagall, who did not use a Time-Turner as routinely as the two of them, had departed swiftly for her bed.

“Yes,” Harry answered after too long a hesitation. “From my perspective, Headmaster, things in Hogwarts are finally, finally normal. This is how things should be, when four children get sent into the Forbidden Forest at night. There should be a huge fuss, constables showing up, and the responsible party getting sacked.”

“You believe it is good,” Dumbledore said quietly, “that the man who you call responsible was, as you put it, sacked.”

“Yes, in fact, I do.”

“Argus Filch has served this institution for decades.”

“And when given Veritaserum,” Harry said tiredly, “Argus Filch revealed that he had sent an eleven-year-old boy into the Forbidden Forest, hoping something awful would happen to him, because he thought the boy’s father had been responsible for the death of his cat. The three other students in Draco’s company don’t seem to have fazed him. I would have argued for jail time, but your concept of jail in this country is Azkaban. I’ll also note that Filch was remarkably unpleasant to the children in Hogwarts and I expect the school’s hedonic index to be improved by his departure, not that it matters to you, I suppose.”

The Headmaster’s eyes were impenetrable behind the half-moon glasses. “Argus Filch is a Squib. His work at Hogwarts is all he has. Had, rather.”

“The purpose of a school is not to provide work for its employees. I know you probably spent more time around Filch than around any individual student, but that shouldn’t make Filch’s inner experiences loom larger in your thoughts. Students have inner lives too.”

"You don't care at all, do you Harry?" Dumbledore's voice was quiet. "About those you hurt."

"I care about the innocent," Harry said. "Like Mr. Hagrid, who you'll note I argued should not be considered malicious, just oblivious. I was fine with Mr. Hagrid working here so long as he didn't take anyone into the Forbidden Forest again."

"I had thought that with Rubeus vindicated, he might teach Care of Magical Creatures after Silvanus departs the position. But much of that teaching is done in the Forbidden Forest. So that too shall not be, in the wake of your passage."

Harry said slowly, "But – you told us that Mr. Hagrid has a blind spot when it comes to magical creatures threatening wizards. That Mr. Hagrid had a cognitive deficit and couldn't really imagine Draco and Tracey getting hurt, which was why Mr. Hagrid didn't see anything wrong with leaving them alone in the Forbidden Forest at night. Was that not true?"

"It is true."

"Then wouldn't Mr. Hagrid be the worst possible teacher for Magical Creatures?"

The old wizard gazed down at Harry through the half-moon glasses. His voice was thick when he spoke. "Mr. Malfoy himself saw nothing awry. It was not so implausible a trick which Argus played, Harry Potter. And Rubeus might have grown into his position. It would have been – all Rubeus wished, his one greatest desire –"

"Your mistake," Harry said, looking down at his knees, feeling at least ten percent as exhausted as he'd ever been, "is a cognitive bias we would call, in the trade, scope insensitivity. Failure to multiply. You're thinking about how happy Mr. Hagrid would be when he heard the news. Consider the next ten years and a thousand students taking Magical Creatures and ten percent of them being scalded by Ashwinders. No one student would be hurt as much as Mr. Hagrid would be happy, but there'd be a hundred students being hurt and only one happy teacher."

"Perhaps," the old wizard said. "And your own error, Harry, is that you do not feel the pain of those you hurt, once you have done your multiplication."

"Maybe." Harry went on staring at his knees. "Or maybe it's worse than that. Headmaster, what does it mean if a centaur doesn't like me?" What does it mean when a member of a race of magical creatures known for Divination gives you a lecture on people who are ignorant of consequences, apologizes,

and then tries to stab you with a spear?

"A centaur?" the Headmaster said. "When did you – ah, the Time-Turner. You are the reason why I could not travel back to before the event, on pain of paradox."

"Am I? I guess I am." Harry shook his head distantly. "Sorry."

"With very few exceptions," Dumbledore said, "centaurs do not like wizards, at all."

"This was a bit more specific than that."

"What did the centaur say to you?"

Harry didn't reply.

"Ah." The Headmaster hesitated. "Centaurs have been wrong many times, and if there is anyone in the world who could confuse the stars themselves, it is you."

Harry looked up, and saw the blue eyes once more gentle behind the half-circle glasses.

"Do not fret too much about it," said Albus Dumbledore.

CARING

June 3rd, 1992.

PROFESSOR Quirrell was very sick. He'd seemed better for a while, after drinking his unicorn's blood in May, but the air of intense power which had surrounded him afterward hadn't lasted even a day. By the Ides of May, Professor Quirrell's hands had been trembling again, though subtly. The Defense Professor's medical regimen had been interrupted too early, it seemed.

Six days ago Professor Quirrell had collapsed at dinnertime.

Madam Pomfrey had tried to forbid Professor Quirrell from teaching classes, and Professor Quirrell had shouted at her in front of everyone. The Defense Professor had shouted that he was dying regardless, and would use his remaining time as he chose.

So Madam Pomfrey, blinking hard, had forbidden the Defense Professor from doing anything except teaching his classes. She'd asked for a volunteer to help her take Professor Quirrell to a room in the Hogwarts infirmary. More than a hundred students had risen to their feet, only half wearing green.

The Defense Professor no longer sat at the Head Table during mealtimes. He didn't cast spells during lessons. The oldest students who had the most Quirrell points helped him to teach, the seventh-years who had already sat their Defense N.E.W.T.s in May. They took turns floating him from his room in the infirmary to his classes, and brought him food at mealtimes. Professor Quirrell proctored his Battle Magic classes from a chair, sitting.

Watching Hermione die had hurt more than this, but that had ended much more quickly.

This is the true Enemy.

Harry had already thought that, after Hermione had died. Being forced to watch Professor Quirrell die, day by day, week by week, had not done much to change his mind.

This is the true Enemy I have to face, Harry thought in Wednesday's

Defense class, watching Professor Quirrell leaning far to one side of his chair before that day's seventh-year assistant caught him. Everything else is just shadows and distraction.

Harry had been turning over Trelawney's prophecy in his mind, wondering if maybe the true Dark Lord had nothing to do with Lord Voldemort at all. Born to those who have thrice defied him seemed to strongly invoke the Peverell brothers and the three Deathly Hallows – though Harry didn't exactly see how Death could have marked him as an equal, which seemed to imply some sort of deliberate action on Death's part.

This alone is the true Enemy, Harry thought. After this will come Professor McGonagall, Mum and Dad, even Neville in his time, unless the wound in the world can be healed before then. Death alone is my last Enemy; so it was told to me upon my parents' grave.

There was nothing Harry could do. Madam Pomfrey was already doing for Professor Quirrell what magic could do, and magic seemed strictly superior to Muggle techniques when it came to healing.

There was nothing Harry could do.

Nothing he could do.

Nothing.

Nothing at all.



Harry raised his hand, and knocked upon the door, in case the person there could no longer detect him.

"What is it?" came a strained voice from the infirmary room.

"It's me."

There was a long pause. "Come in," said that voice.

Harry slipped inside and closed the door behind him, and cast the Quieting Charm. He stood as far away from Professor Quirrell as he could, just in case his own magic was making the Professor feel uncomfortable.

Though the sense of doom was fading, fading with each passing day.

Professor Quirrell was lying back in his infirmary bed, only his head propped up by a pillow. A coverlet of cottony material, red with black stitching, covered him to his chest. A book hovered before his eyes, outlined in a pale glow which also surrounded a black cube lying by the bed. Not the Defense Professor's own magic, then, but a device of some kind.

The book was Thinking Physics by Epstein, the same book Harry had lent to Draco a few months back. Harry had stopped fretting about its possible misuse several weeks earlier.

"This –" Professor Quirrell said, and coughed, it didn't sound quite right. "This is a fascinating book... if I'd ever realized..." A laugh, mixed with another cough. "Why did I assume the Muggle arts... must not be mine? That they would be... of no use to me? Why did I never bother trying... to test it experimentally... as you would say? In case... my assumption... was wrong? It seems sheerly foolish of me... in retrospect..."

Harry was having more trouble speaking than Professor Quirrell was. Wordlessly, Harry reached into his pocket, and laid a kerchief on the floor; which he unfolded to reveal a small white pebble, smooth and round.

"What's that?" said the Defense Professor.

"It's a, it's a, Transfigured, unicorn."

Harry had checked the books, had learned that since he was too young to have sexual thoughts he would be able to approach a unicorn without fear. The same books had said nothing about unicorns being smart. Harry had already noticed that every intelligent magical species was at least partially humanoid, from merfolk to centaurs to giants, from elves to goblins to veela. All had essentially humanlike emotions, many were known to interbreed with humans. Harry had already reasoned out that magic didn't create new intelligence but just changed the shape of genetically human beings. Unicorns were equinoid, not even partially humanoid-shaped, didn't talk, used no tools, they were almost certainly just magical horses. If it was right to eat a cow to feed yourself for a day, then it had to be right to drink a unicorn's blood in order to stave off death for weeks. You couldn't have it both ways.

So Harry had gone into the Forbidden Forest wearing his Cloak. He had searched the Grove of Unicorns until he saw her, a proud creature with a pure white coat and violet hair, with three blue blotches on her flank. Harry had gone over, and the sapphire eyes had stared at him inquisitively. Harry had tapped out the sequence 1-2-3 on the ground several times with his shoes. The unicorn had shown no sign of responding in kind. Harry had reached over, taken her hoof in his hand, and tapped the same sequence with the unicorn's hoof. The unicorn had only looked at him curiously.

And something about feeding the unicorn the sleeping-potion-laced sugar cubes had still felt like murder.

That magic gives their existence a weight of meaning which no mere

animal could possess... to slay something innocent to save oneself, that is a very grave sin. Those two phrases, from Professor McGonagall, from the centaur, had both run through Harry's mind, over and over as the white unicorn had yawned, laid down on the ground, and closed its eyes for what would be the last time. The Transfiguration had lasted an hour, and Harry's eyes had watered repeatedly as he worked. The unicorn's death might not have come then, but it would come soon enough, and it was foreign to Harry's nature to try to refuse responsibility of any kind. Harry would just have to hope that, if you didn't kill the unicorn to save yourself, if you did it to help a friend, it would be acceptable in the end.

Professor Quirrell's eyebrows had climbed toward his hairline. His voice was less soft, had something of his normal sharpness, as he said, "I forbid you from doing that again."

"I wondered if you'd say that," Harry said. He swallowed again. "But this unicorn is already, already doomed, so you might as well take it, Professor..."

"Why have you done this?"

If the Defense Professor really didn't understand that, he was slower on the uptake than anyone Harry had ever met. "I kept thinking there was nothing I could do," Harry said. "I got tired of thinking it."

Professor Quirrell closed his eyes. His head leaned back into the pillow. "You were lucky," the Defense Professor said in a soft voice, "that a unicorn in Transfigured form... did not set off the Hogwarts wards, as a strange creature... I shall have to... take this outside the grounds, to make use of it... but that can be managed. I shall tell them that I wish to look upon the lake... I will ask you to sustain the Transfiguration before you go, and it should last long enough, after that... and with my last strength, dispel whatever death-alarms were placed to watch over the herd... which, the unicorn being not yet dead, but only Transfigured, will not yet have triggered... you were very lucky, Mr. Potter."

Harry nodded. He started to speak, then stopped again. Words seemed to stick in his throat once more.

You already calculated the expected utilities, if it works, if it goes wrong. You assigned probabilities, you multiplied, and then you threw out the answer and went with your new gut feeling, which was the same. So say it.

"Do you know," Harry said unsteadily, "of any way at all, by which your life might be saved?"

The Defense Professor's eyes opened. "Why... do you ask me that, boy?"

"There's... a spell I heard of, a ritual –"

"Be silent," said the Defense Professor.

An instant later a snake lay in the bed.

Even the snake's eyes were dull.

It did not rise.

"Speak on," hissed that snake, its flickering tongue its only motion.

"There is... there is a ritual, I heard of from the schoolmaster, by which he thinks the Dark Lord might have lived on. It is called –" and Harry stopped, as he realized that he did know how to say the word in Parseltongue. "Horcrux. It requires a death, I have heard. But if you are dying in any case, you might try to adapt the ritual, even at great risk for the new spell, so that it can be done with a different sacrifice. It would change the whole world, if you succeed – though I don't know anything about the spell – the schoolmaster thought it tore off a piece of soul, though I don't see how that could be true –"

The snake was hissing laughter, strange sharp laughter, almost hysterical. "You tell me of that spell? Me? You must learn more caution in the future, boy. But it matters not. I learned of the horcrux spell since long ago. It is meaningless."

"Meaningless?" Harry said aloud in surprise.

"Would be pointless spell from beginning, if souls existed. Tear piece of soul? That is lie. Misdirection to hide true secret. Only one who does not believe in common lies will reason further, see beneath obscurity, realize how to cast spell. Required murder is not sacrificial ritual at all. Sudden death sometimes makes ghost, if magic bursts and imprints on nearby thing. Horcrux spell channels death-burst through caster, creates your own ghost instead of victim's, imprints ghost in special device. Second victim picks up horcrux device, device imprints your memories into them. But only memories from time horcrux device was made. You see flaw?"

The burning sensation was back in Harry's throat. "No continuity of –" there wasn't a snake word for consciousness – self, you would go on thinking after making the horcrux, then self with new memories dies and is not restored –"

"Yes, you do see. Also Merlin's Interdict prevents powerful spells from passing through such a device, since it is not truly alive. Dark Wizards who think to return thus are weaker, easily dispatched. None have

perssisted long by ssuch meanss. Perssonaliessi change, mix with victim'ss. Death iss not truly gainssaid. Real sself is losst, as you ssay. Not to my pressent tasste. Admit I considered it, long ago."

A man was lying in the infirmary bed once more. The Defense Professor breathed, then made a wretched coughing sound.

"Can you give me a full recipe for the spell?" Harry said, after a moment's deliberation. "There might be some way to improve on the flaws, with enough research. Some way to do it ethically and have it work." Like doing the transfer into a clone body with a blank brain, instead of an innocent victim, which might also improve the fidelity of the personality transfer... though that still left the other problems.

Professor Quirrell made a short sound, under his breath, that might have been laughter. "You know, boy," Professor Quirrell whispered, "I had thought... to teach you everything... the seeds of all the secrets I knew... from one living mind to another... so that later, when you found the right books, you would be able to understand... I would have passed on my knowledge to you, my heir... we would have begun as soon as you asked me... but you never asked."

Even the grief surrounding by Harry like thick water gave way to that, to the sheer magnitude of the missed opportunity. "I was supposed to -? I didn't know I was supposed to -!"

Another coughing chuckle. "Ah yes... the unknowing Muggleborn... in heritage if not in blood... that is you. But I thought... better of it... that you should not walk my path... it was not a good path, in the end."

"It's not too late, Professor!" Harry said. A part of Harry yelled that he was being selfish, and then another part shouted that down; there would be other people to help.

"Yes, it is too late... and you shall not... persuade me otherwise... I have... thought better of it... as I said... I am too full... of secrets better left unknown... look at me."

Harry looked, almost despite himself.

He saw a still-unwrinkled face, looking old and pained, beneath a head rapidly losing its hair, even the sides looking wispy now; Harry saw a face he'd always thought was sharp, now revealed as thin, muscle and fat fading away from the face, as from the arms beneath it, like the skeletal form of Bellatrix Black he'd seen in Azkaban -

Harry's head wrenched aside, unthinkingly.

"You see," whispered the Professor. "I dislike to sound clichéd... Mr. Potter... but the truth is... the Arts called Dark... really are not good for a person... in the end."

Professor Quirrell breathed in, breathed out. There was quiet in a time for the infirmary, the two of them watched only by the elaborately ornamented stone of the walls.

"Is there anything left... unsaid between us?" said Professor Quirrell. "I am not dying today... mind you... not right now... but I do not know how long... I shall be able to converse."

"There's," Harry said, swallowed again. "There's a lot of things, way too many things, but... it might be the wrong thing to ask, but I don't want – this one question unanswered – snake?"

A snake lay on the bed.

"I learned how the Killing Cursse workss. Requiress true hate to casst, not much hate, but musst want target dead, they ssay. In prisson with life-eaterss, you casst Killing Cursse at guard – ssaid you did not want him dead – wass that lie? Here, now, at thiss disstance – you may sspeak truth – even if you fear it reflectss poorly on you – it sshould not matter now, teacher. I wissh to know. Musst know. Will not abandon you, either way."

A man lay on the bed.

"Listen carefully," Professor Quirrell whispered. "I will tell you a co-nundrum... a riddle of a dangerous spell... when you know the answer to that puzzle... you will also know... the answer to your question... are you listening?"

Harry nodded.

"There is a limitation... to the Killing Curse. To cast it once... in a fight... you must hate enough... to want the other dead. To cast Avada... Kedavra twice... you must hate enough... to kill twice... to cut their throat with your own hands... to watch them die... then do it again. Very few... can hate enough... to kill someone... five times... they would... get bored." The Defense Professor breathed several times, before continuing. "But if you look at history... you will find some Dark Wizards... who could cast the Killing Curse... over and over. A nineteenth-century witch... who called herself Dark Evangel... the Aurors called her A. K. McDowell. She could cast the Killing Curse... a dozen times... in one fight. Ask yourself... as I asked myself... what is the secret... that she knew? What is deadlier than hate... and flows without limit?"

A second level to the Avada Kedavra spell, just like with the Patronus Charm...

"I don't really care," Harry answered.

The Defense Professor chuckled wetly. "Good. You are... learning. So you see..." A pause of transformation. "I did not wish guard dead, after all. Cast Killing Curse, but not with hate." And then a man.

Harry swallowed hard. It was both better, and worse, than what Harry had suspected; and characteristic enough of Professor Quirrell. A cracked soul, for certain; but Professor Quirrell had never claimed to be whole.

"Any else... to say?" said the man in the bed.

"Are you absolutely sure," Harry said, "that there is nothing you've ever heard of that might save you, Professor? In all your lore? Finding and uniting all three Deathly Hallows, an ancient artifact that Merlin sealed behind a riddle nobody's ever figured out? You've seen some of what I can do. That I'm good at solving riddles. You know I can figure things out, sometimes, that other wizards can't. I –" Harry's voice broke. "I have a strong preference for your life, over your death, Professor Quirrell."

There was a long pause.

"One thing," whispered Professor Quirrell. "One thing... that might do it... or it might not... but to obtain it... is beyond your power, or mine..."

Oh, it was just the setup for a subquest, said Harry's Inner Critic.

All the other parts screamed for that part to shut up. Life didn't work like that. Ancient artifacts could be found, but not in a month, not when you couldn't leave Hogwarts and were still in your first year.

Professor Quirrell took in a deep breath. Exhaled. "I'm sorry... that came out... too dramatic. Do not... get your hopes up... Mr. Potter. You asked... for anything... no matter how unlikely. There is... a certain object... called..."

A snake lay on the bed.

"The Philosopher's Stone," hissed the snake.

If there'd been a mass-manufacturable means of safe immortality this entire time and nobody had bothered, Harry was going to snap and kill everyone.

"I read of it in a book," Harry hissed. "Concluded it was obviously myth. No reason why same device would provide immortality and endless gold. Not unless someone was just inventing happy stories. Not to mention, every sane person should have been researching ways to make more

Sstoness, or kidnapping maker to produce. Thought of you sspecifically, teacher."

A hissing of cold laughter. "Reassoning iss wisse, but not wisse enough. Like with horcrux spell, abssurdity hidess true ssecret. True Sstone iss not what that legend ssayss. True power iss not what sstoryess claim. Sstone's ssupposed maker wass not one who made it. One who holdss it now, wass not born to name now ussed. Yet Sstone iss powerful healing device in truth. Have you heard it ssspoken of?"

"Jusst in the book."

"One who holdss Sstone iss repossitory of much lore. Taught sschoolmasster many ssecretss. Sschoolmasster hass ssaid nothing of Sstone'ss holder, nothing of Sstone? No hintss?"

"Not that I can eassily recall," Harry replied honestly.

"Ah," hissed the snake. "Ah, well."

"Could assk sschoolmasster –"

"No! Do not assk him, boy. He would not take quesstion well."

"But if the Sstone only healss –"

"Sschoolmasster doess not believe that, would not believe that. Too many have ssought Sstone, or ssought holder'ss lore. Do not assk. Musst not assk. Do not try to obtain Sstone yourssself. I forbid."

A man lay on the bed once more. "I am at... my limit..." said Professor Quirrell. "I must regain... my strength... before I go... to the forest... with your gift. Leave now... but sustain the Transfiguration... before you go."

Harry reached out, touched the white pebble lying within the kerchief, renewing the Transfiguration on it. "It should last for one hour and fifty-three minutes after this," Harry said.

"Your studies... do well."

It was far longer than Harry's Transfigurations had lasted at the start of the school year. Second-year spells came to him easily now, without strain; which wasn't surprising, since he would be twelve in less than two months. Harry could even have cast a Memory Charm, if it had been good for someone to forget every memory involving their left arm. He was climbing the power ladder, slowly, from very far down.

The thought came with a potential for sadness, a thought of one door opening as another closed; which Harry also rejected.



The door to the infirmary closed behind Harry, as the Boy-Who-Lived walked swiftly and with purpose, shrugging on his Invisibility Cloak as he moved. Soon, presumably, Professor Quirrell would call for assistance; and an older student trio would guide the Defense Professor into some quiet place, maybe the forest, with an excuse of viewing the lake or some such. Someplace the Defense Professor could eat a unicorn undetected, after Harry's Transfiguration wore off.

And then Professor Quirrell would be healthier, for a time. His power would return to him as strong as he'd ever been, for a much shorter time.

It wouldn't last.

Harry's fists clenched as he strode, the tension radiating up his arm muscles. If the Defense Professor's treatment regimen hadn't been interrupted, by Harry and the Aurors that he had brought to Hogwarts...

It was stupid to blame himself, Harry knew it was stupid and somehow his brain was doing it anyway. Like his brain was searching, carefully finding and selecting some way for this to be his fault, no matter how far it had to stretch.

As if having things be his fault were the only way that his brain knew how to grieve.

A trio of seventh-year Slytherins passed Harry's invisible form in the hallway, heading for the healer's offices where the Professor waited, looking deeply serious and concerned. Was that how other people grieved?

Or did they, on some level, not really care, as Professor Quirrell thought?

There is a second level to the Killing Curse.

Harry's brain had solved the riddle instantly, in the moment of first hearing it; as though the knowledge had always been inside him, waiting to make itself known.

Harry had read once, somewhere, that the opposite of happiness wasn't sadness, but boredom; and the author had gone on to say that to find happiness in life you asked yourself not what would make you happy, but what would excite you. And by the same reasoning, hatred wasn't the true opposite of love. Even hatred was a kind of respect that you could give to someone's existence. If you cared about someone enough to prefer their dying to their living, it meant you were thinking about them.

It had come up much earlier, before the Trial, in conversation with Hermione; when she'd said something about magical Britain being Prejudiced, with considerable and recent justification. And Harry had thought –

but not said – that at least she'd been let into Hogwarts to be spat upon.

Not like certain people living in certain countries, who were, it was said, as human as anyone else; who were said to be sapient beings, worth more than any mere unicorn. But who nonetheless wouldn't be allowed to live in Muggle Britain. On that score, at least, no Muggle had the right to look a wizard in the eye. Magical Britain might discriminate against Muggleborns, but at least it allowed them inside so they could be spat upon in person.

What is deadlier than hate, and flows without limit?

"Indifference," Harry whispered aloud, the secret of a spell he would never be able to cast; and kept striding toward the library to read anything he could find, anything at all, about the Philosopher's Stone.

TESTS

June 4th, 1992.

DAPHNE Greengrass was in the Slytherin's common room, writing a letter to her Lady Mother (who was surprisingly intransigent about power-sharing, despite not even being in Hogwarts to exercise control) when she saw Draco Malfoy stagger in through the portrait door carrying what must have been a dozen books, Vincent and Gregory behind him each carrying a dozen more. The Auror who'd accompanied Malfoy stuck his head in briefly, then withdrew to who-knew-where.

Draco looked around, then seemed to be struck by a bright idea as he staggered toward her, Vincent and Gregory following after.

"Can you help me read these?" said Draco, sounding slightly out of breath as he approached.

"What." Lessons were over, only the exams were left now, and since when did Malfoys ask Greengrasses for help with their homework?

"These," Draco Malfoy said importantly, "are all the library books Miss Granger borrowed between April 1st and April 16th. I thought I'd go through them in case there are any Clues there, only then I thought, maybe you should help because you knew Miss Granger better."

Daphne stared at the books. "The General read all that in two weeks?" A twinge of pain went through her heart, but she suppressed it.

"Well, I don't know if Miss Granger finished them all," Draco said. He held up a cautioning finger. "In fact, we don't know if she read any of them, or if she really borrowed them, I mean, all we've observed is that the library ledger says she checked them out –"

Daphne suppressed a groan. Malfoy had been talking like this for weeks. There were some people who clearly were not meant to be involved with mysterious murders because it did strange things to their minds. "Mr. Malfoy, I couldn't read all these if I spent my whole summer doing nothing else."

"Then just skim through them, please?" Draco said. "Especially if there's, you know, mysterious words scribbled in her handwriting, or a bookmark

left inside, or –”

“I’ve seen those plays too, Mr. Malfoy.” Daphne rolled her eyes. “Don’t we have Aurors now for –”

“We’re doomed!” shrieked Millicent Bulstrode, as she burst up from the lower chambers into the Slytherin common room.

People paused to look at her.

“It’s Professor Quirrell!”

A sudden air of attentiveness, as of long-standing disputes about to be settled. “Well, finally,” someone said, as Millicent tried to catch her breath. “He’s only got, what, ten days left to go bad?”

“Eleven days,” said the seventh-year who was running the betting pool.

“He’s gotten a little better suddenly and he’s going to summon the first-years for our Defense final! By surprise! In fifty minutes!”

“A Defense final?” Pansy said blankly. “But Professor Quirrell doesn’t give exams.”

“The Ministry Defense final!” shrieked Millicent.

“But Professor Quirrell doesn’t teach anything from the Ministry curriculum,” objected Pansy.

Daphne was already fleeing to her room, racing for the first-year Defense textbook that she hadn’t touched since September and screaming curses inside her mind.



One desk back of her, someone was crying, their soft sobs providing a background chant of despair for the classroom. Daphne looked back, expecting to see a Hufflepuff and hoping it wasn’t Hannah, and was surprised at first (though not on further reflection) to see it was a Ravenclaw.

Before them were set the exam parchments, turned over, waiting for the bell.

Fifty minutes hadn’t been nearly enough preparation time, but it was something, and Daphne was now feeling ashamed that she hadn’t thought to send messengers to warn the Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor Houses. They’d started giving House Points again just three days ago, at the beginning of June, but the Auxiliary Protective Special Committee still ought to promote House unity.

Another Ravenclaw, sitting four desks to her left, also started to cry. That was Katherine Tung of Dragon Army, if she recalled correctly, whom she'd once seen take on three Sunshine Soldiers simultaneously without a flinch.

Daphne had calmed down after the first couple of minutes of frantic reading. It was just a test, not a murder or anything; and if almost all the first-year students turned in mostly blank parchments then it stood to reason that nobody would be shamed. But Daphne could understand, if not exactly sympathize, that Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs might not see it that way.

"He's evil," another Ravenclaw witch said in a shaking voice. "One hundred percent pure Dark Wizard to the bone. The Dark Lord Grindelwald wouldn't do this, not to children, he's worse than You-Know-Who."

Daphne looked reflexively at where Professor Quirrell was sitting, slumped to one side but his eyes alert; and she thought she saw the Defense Professor smile for one tiny instant. No, that had to be her imagination, there was no way the Defense Professor could have heard that.

The bell rang.

Daphne flipped the parchment over.

The top was stamped with the seals for the Ministry, the Hogwarts Board of Governors, and the Department of Magical Education, and runes to detect cheating. Below that was a line for her to write her name, and a list of exam rules with a picture of Lindsay Gagnon, the Director of the Department of Magical Education, shaking an admonishing finger at everyone.

Halfway down the page was the first exam question.

It was, Why is it important for children to stay away from strange creatures?

There was a stunned pause.

One student began laughing, she thought it was from the Gryffindor section of the class. Professor Quirrell made no motion to censor it, and the laughter spread.

Nobody spoke aloud, but the students looked around at each other, exchanging glances as the laughter died down, and then as if by some unspoken agreement they all looked at Professor Quirrell, who was smiling down at them benevolently.

Daphne bent over her exam, wearing a defiant evil smile that would have done proud to either Godric Gryffindor or Grindelwald; and she wrote down, Because my Stunning Hex, my Most Ancient Blade, and my Patronus Charm won't work against everything.



Harry Potter turned over the last page of his Defense exam.

Even Harry had needed to quash a small bit of nervousness, some tiny remnant of his childhood, upon reading the first real question ('How can you make a Shrieking Eel be silent?'). Professor Quirrell's lessons had spent roughly zero time on the surprising yet useless trivia that some idiot had imagined a 'Defense class' should look like. In principle, Harry could have used his Time-Turner to read through the first-year Defense book after being notified of the surprise exam; but that might have unfairly skewed the grading curve for others. After staring at the question for a couple of seconds, Harry had written down 'Quieting Charm', and included the casting directions in case the Ministry grader didn't believe that Harry knew it.

Once Harry had decided to just answer all the questions correctly, the exam had gone by very quickly. The most realistic answer to more than half the questions was 'Stunning Hex', and many of the other questions had optimal solutions along the lines of 'Turn around and walk in the opposite direction' or 'Throw away the cheese and buy a new pair of shoes.'

The last question on the test was "What would you do if you suspected there might be a Bogeysnake underneath your bed?" The Ministry-approved answer, Harry could in fact recall from his read-through of the textbook at the start of the year, was Tell your parents. The problem with this had occurred to Harry right away, which was why Harry had remembered it.

After some pondering, Harry wrote down:

Dear Ministry grader: I'm afraid the real answer to that is a secret, but rest assured that a Bogeysnake would present no more trouble to me than a mountain troll, a Dementor, or You-Know-Who. Please inform your superiors that I find your standard answer prejudicial to Muggleborns, and that I expect this failing will be corrected at once without any need for my direct intervention.

Sincerely, the Boy-Who-Lived.

Harry signed the last parchment with a broad flourish, turned it over into his stack, put down his pen, and sat up.

Looking around, Harry saw that Professor Quirrell seemed to be looking in his rough direction, though the Defense Professor's head had nodded to one side. The other students were still writing. Some of them were silently crying, but they were still writing. Continuing to fight was also a lesson Professor Quirrell had taught.

Interminably later, the official exam time was up. A seventh-year student went from desk to desk, collecting the exams in Professor Quirrell's place.

The last exam parchment was collected, and Professor Quirrell sat up straight.

"My young students," he said softly. The seventh-year student had her wand trained on the Defense Professor's mouth, so that they all heard his voice seeming to come from right beside them. "I know... that probably seemed very fearsome to some of you... it is a different kind of fear from facing the enemy's wand... you must conquer it separately. So I... shall tell you this now. It is the custom of Hogwarts... that grades are given in the second week of June. But for my case... they can make an exception, I think." The Defense Professor smiled his familiar dry smile, tinged now as though by a suppressed grimace. "I know you are worried... that you were not prepared for this exam... that my lessons have not covered this material... and I quite forgot to mention... that it was approaching... though you should have known... it would come in time. But I have just now magically checked... the answers you have given on that... terribly, terribly important final exam... though of course only the Ministry grade is official... and assigned your full-year grades taking the results into account... and magically written your full grades down on these parchments," Professor Quirrell tapped a stack of parchments on the side of his desk, "which will now be handed out... an incredible spell... is it not?"

A few students on the Ravenclaw side were looking indignant, but for the most part the students just looked relieved, and some Slytherins were chuckling. Harry would have laughed too, if not for the pain of watching Professor Quirrell gasp out the words.

The seventh-year student standing beside Professor Quirrell pointed her wand and spoke an incantation in magical pseudo-Latin. The parchments rose up and started to drift through the air, separating in mid-flow to drift toward each student.

Harry waited until his parchment had arrived on his desk, and then unfolded it.

The parchment said **EE+**, which stood for Exceeds Expectations. It was the second-highest grade letter, the highest being Outstanding.

In another world, a distant vanished world, a little boy named Harry would have shouted with indignation about receiving only the second-highest grade. This Harry sat quietly and thought. Professor Quirrell was making

some point, and it wasn't as though the exact grade letter mattered in any other way. Was Professor Quirrell saying that Harry had done relatively well, but not lived up to his full potential? Or was the grade meant to be read literally, that Harry had in fact exceeded the Defense Professor's expectations?

"All of you... pass," Professor Quirrell said, as the students all looked at their final grades, as sighs of relief rose from desks and Lavender Brown raised her parchment in a clenched fist held high with triumph. "Every student in first-year Battle Magic has passed... except for one."

A number of students looked up in sudden terror.

Harry sat there silently. He had seen the point immediately, and even if it was a wrong point, he knew Professor Quirrell would never, ever be talked out of making it.

"All of you in this room... have received grades of at least Acceptable. Neville Longbottom... who took this test in the Longbottom home... received a grade of Outstanding. But the other student who is not here... has had a Dreadful grade entered on her record... for failing the only important test... that was given her this year. I would have marked her even lower... but that would have been in poor taste."

The room was very quiet, though a number of students were staring angrily at the Professor.

"You may think that a grade of Dreadful... is not fair. That Miss Granger was faced with a test... for which her lessons... had not prepared her. That she was not told... that the exam was coming on that day."

The Defense Professor drew in a shaking breath.

"Such is realism," said Professor Quirrell. "The only important test... may come at any time... be better prepared for it... than she was. As for the rest of you... those who have received Exceeds Expectations or above... have received my letters of recommendation... to certain organizations beyond Britain's shores... where your training might be completed. They will contact you... when you are old enough... if you still appear worthy... and if you have not failed an important test. And remember... from this day... you must train yourselves... you cannot rely... on future Defense professors. Your first year of Battle Magic is over... you are dismissed."

Professor Quirrell sat back with his eyes closed, seeming to ignore the excited babble that broke out around him.

In time most of the students had departed, and one remained, staying a prescribed distance from the Defense Professor.

The Defense Professor opened his eyes.

Harry raised the parchment with its EE+, still silent.

The Defense Professor smiled, and it went all the way to those tired eyes.

“It is the same grade... that I received in my own first year.”

“Th, th, th,” Harry couldn’t make the words thank you come out, they were stuck in his suddenly closed throat, the Defense Professor tilting his head and giving him an inquiring stare, so Harry just bowed jerkily and then left the room.

Nine days yet remained.

THE TRUTH, PART I, RIDDLES AND ANSWERS

June 13th, 1992.

IT was the last week of school in Hogwarts, and Professor Quirrell was still alive, barely. The Defense Professor himself would be in a healer's bed, this day, as he'd been for almost the last week.

Hogwarts tradition said that exams were given in the first week of June, that exam results were released the second week, and that in the third week, there would be the Leave-Taking Feast on Sunday and the Hogwarts Express transporting you to London on Monday.

Harry had wondered, a long time ago when he'd first read about that schedule, just what exactly the students did during the rest of the second week of June, since 'waiting for exam results' didn't sound like much; and the answer had surprised him when he'd found out.

But now the second week of June was done as well, and it was Saturday; there was nothing left of the year but the Leave-Taking Feast on the 14th and the Hogwarts Express ride on the 15th.

And nothing had been answered.

Nothing had been resolved.

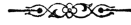
Hermione's killer hadn't been found.

Somehow Harry had been thinking that, surely, all the truth would come out by the end of the school year; like that was the end of a mystery novel and the mystery's answer had been promised him. Certainly it had to be known by the time the Defense Professor... died, it couldn't be allowed for Professor Quirrell to die without knowing the answer, without everything being neatly resolved. Not exam grades, certainly not death, it was only truth that finished a story...

But unless you bought Draco Malfoy's latest theory that Professor Sprout had been assigning and grading less homework around the time of Hermione being framed for attempted murder, thereby proving that Professor Sprout

had been spending her time setting it up, the truth remained unfound.

And instead, like the world had priorities that were more like other people's way of thinking, the year was going to end with a climactic Quidditch match.



In the air above the stadium, distant figures on broomsticks swooped and pirouetted and spun around each other. The red-purplish truncated tetrahedron that was the Quaffle was caught, tossed, blocked, and occasionally thrown through floating hoops, accompanied by stadium-rocking cries of triumph or dismay. Blue and green and yellow and red-trimmed robes shouted with the enthusiasm that people felt so easily when no action would be required from them personally.

It was the first Quidditch match Harry had attended at Hogwarts, and he'd already decided that it would be the last.

"Davies has the Quaffle!" shouted the amplified voice of Lee Jordan. "That's another ten points for Ravenclaw in seven... six... five... holy smokes, he's done it already! Smack through the center of the central hoop! I've never seen such a winning streak – I'm calling it right now for Davies becoming Captain next year after Bortan steps down –"

Lee's voice cut out abruptly and Professor McGonagall's own amplified voice said, "That's the Ravenclaw team's own business, Mr. Jordan. Confine yourself to the match, please."

"And the Slytherins take possession – Flint hands off the Quaffle to the lovely –"

"Mr. Jordan!"

"To the merely acceptable Sharon Vizcaino, whose hair trails behind her like a comet as she blazes toward the Ravenclaw defense – now with two Bludgers in close pursuit! Pucey's on Sharon's tail – what are you doing, Inglebee? – and she swerves in midair to avoid – IS THAT THE SNITCH? GO, CHO CHANG, GO, HIGGS IS ALREADY – WHAT ARE YOU TWO DOING?"

"Calm down, Mr. Jordan!"

"HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO CALM DOWN? THAT WAS THE WORST MISSED PLAY I'VE EVER SEEN! And the Snitch is gone – maybe gone for good, after being missed that badly – Pucey's heading off towards the goal posts, Inglebee's nowhere near him –"

In a distant era of history, maybe in another world entirely, Professor Quirrell had undertaken that the House Cup would be awarded to either Slytherin or Ravenclaw. Or possibly, somehow, both; for he had promised that three wishes would be granted. So far it was looking good on two out of three.

If you just went by the current score, Hufflepuff was leading the race for the House Cup by something like five hundred points, thanks to Hufflepuff's students doing their homework and staying out of trouble. It appeared that Professor Snape had been strategically taking quite a lot of points from Hufflepuffs for, er, the last seven years or so. Slytherin House, reigning champion for the last seven years, still had to its advantage a certain generosity of its Head of House in handing out points; and this was sufficient to put it neck-and-neck with Ravenclaw House, home of the academic achievers. Gryffindor was far behind in the last place, as befit the House of nonconformists; Gryffindor had Slytherin's profile when it came to academics and mischief, only without the advantage of Professor Snape. Even Fred and George had barely broken even on the year.

Ravenclaw House and Slytherin House both needed a lot of points from somewhere if either wanted to catch up with Hufflepuff in the next two days.

And so far as anyone knew, Professor Quirrell hadn't done a single thing leading to the obvious result. It was happening all by itself, now that one lone Professor in Hogwarts had taught a class with creative problem-solving.

The final Quidditch match of the year was between Ravenclaw and Slytherin. Earlier in the year, Gryffindor's initial Quidditch lead had vanished after their new Seeker, Emmett Shear, fell off a possibly malfunctioning broomstick during his second game. This had also required some hasty rescheduling of the remaining games.

This, the final game of the year, wouldn't end until the Snitch was caught.

Quidditch scores added directly onto the House points total.

And what did you know, today it seemed that both the Slytherin and Ravenclaw Seekers just could... not... catch... the... Snitch.

"THE SNITCH WAS PRACTICALLY ON TOP OF YOU, YOU DIM-EYED DIMWIT!"

"Language, Mr. Jordan, or I'll remove you from this game! Though it was a terrible play, I admit."

Harry had to admit that Lee Jordan and Professor McGonagall had a wonderful comedic routine, with Jordan as the banana-man and Professor McGonagall as the straight-woman; Harry now felt a little sorry to have

missed it at the earlier Quidditch matches. It was a side of Professor McGonagall he hadn't seen before.

A few seats down from where Harry sat in the Hufflepuff section of the Quidditch bleachers, there lurked the hulking form of Cedric Diggory. The Super Hufflepuff had observed the most recent near-air-collision between Cho Chang and Terence Higgs with the keen eye of a wizard who was a Seeker and a Quidditch Captain in his own right.

"The Ravenclaw Seeker is new," Cedric said. "But Higgs is in his seventh year. I've played against him. He's better than that."

"You think it's a strategy?" asked one of the Hufflepuffs sitting next to Cedric.

"It would make sense if Slytherin needed some extra points to lead for the Quidditch Cup," Cedric said. "But Slytherin already has us beat for the title. What are they thinking? They could've won right there!"

The game had started at six o'clock in the afternoon. A typical game would have gone until seven or so, at which point it would have been time for dinner. June in Scotland meant plenty of daylight; sunset wasn't until ten.

It was at eight pm and six minutes, according to Harry's watch, when Slytherin had just scored another 10 points bringing the score to 170-140, when Cedric Diggory leapt out of his seat and shouted "Those bastards!"

"Yeah!" cried a young boy beside him, leaping to his own feet. "Who do they think they are, scoring points?"

"Not that!" cried Cedric Diggory. "They're – they're trying to steal the Cup from us!"

"But we're not in the running any more for –"

"Not the Quidditch Cup! The House Cup!"

The word spread, with cries of outrage.

That was Harry's cue.

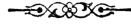
Harry politely asked a Hufflepuff witch sitting next to him, and another Hufflepuff sitting one row above him, if they could move aside. Then Harry drew forth from his pouch a huge scroll, and unfurled it into a 2-meter-tall banner which stuck in place in midair. The enchantment had been done courtesy of a sixth-year Ravenclaw who had a reputation for knowing less about Quidditch than Harry did.

In huge, glowing purple letters, the sign read:

JUST BUY A CLOCK

2 : 06 : 47

Beneath it was a Snitch, with a blinking red x over it.



Second, after second, after second, the time counter incremented.

As that counter rose higher, there seemed to be an awful lot of Hufflepuffs who'd decided that they wanted to sit next to Harry's banner.

As the game dragged on past nine, there also seemed to be a lot of Gryffindors.

As the sun set and Harry started using Lumos to read his books – he'd given up on the actual game a long time ago – there were a noticeable number of Ravenclaws who'd betrayed patriotism for sanity.

And Professor Sinistra.

And Professor Vector.

And as the stars began to come out, Professor Flitwick.

The climactic final Quidditch game of the year... dragged on.



One of the things Harry hadn't planned on, when he'd decided to do this, was that he would still be out here at – Harry glanced at his watch – eleven-oh-four at night. Harry was now reading a sixth-year Transfiguration textbook; or rather he'd weighted the book open, illuminated by a Muggle glowstick, while he did one of the exercises. Last week, when the graduating Ravenclaws were discussing their N.E.W.T. scores, Harry had overheard that upper-year Transfiguration practice involved several 'shaping exercises' that relied more on control and precise thinking than raw power; and Harry had promptly set out to learn those, whacking himself hard on the forehead for not trying to read all the later-year textbooks earlier. Professor McGonagall had approved Harry doing a shaping exercise that involved controlling the way in which a Transfiguring object approached its final form – for example, Transfiguring a quill so that the shaft grew out first, then the barbs. Harry was doing an analogous exercise with pencils, growing out the lead first, then surrounding it with wood and finally having the eraser form on top. As Harry had suspected, focusing his attention and magic into a particular part of the pencil's ongoing transformation had proven similar to the mental discipline used in partial Transfiguration – which could indeed have been used to fake the same effect, by partially Transfiguring only the outer layers of the object. This way was proving relatively easier, though.

Harry finished his current pencil and looked up at the Quidditch game, which was, check, still fantastically boring. Lee Jordan was commentating in a tone of dull disgust, "Another ten points – yay – whoopee – and now someone takes possession of the Quaffle again – ask if I care who."

Almost nobody remaining in the stands was paying attention either, since everyone who'd remained in the stadium seemed to have discovered a new and more interesting sport, the debate about how to amend the House Cup rules and/or Quidditch. The argument had become heated to the point where all of the nearby Professors were barely keeping order at a level short of open combat. This argument, unfortunately, had considerably more than two factions. Some darned busybodies were proposing sensible-sounding alternatives to eliminating the Snitch entirely, and this was threatening to split the vote and sap the momentum for reform.

In retrospect, Harry thought, it would have been nice to have Draco unfurl his own banner from the Slytherin side saying 'SNITCHES ARE AWESOME', to set the polarity of the debate. Harry had squinted over at the Slytherin section earlier, but he hadn't been able to spot Draco anywhere in the stands. Severus Snape, who could also have been sympathetic enough to play the villainous opposition, was likewise nowhere to be seen.

"Mr. Potter?" said a voice next to him.

Beside Harry's seat was standing a short but older Hufflepuff boy, someone who'd never before come to Harry's attention, holding out a blank parchment envelope with wax dripped on the front. The wax was also blank, without impression.

"What is it?" said Harry.

"It's me," said the boy. "With the envelope you gave me. I know you said not to talk to you, but –"

"Then don't talk to me," Harry said.

The boy tossed the envelope at Harry and walked away, looking offended. It made Harry wince a little, but it probably hadn't been the wrong decision considering the temporal issues...

Then Harry broke the unsigned wax seal and drew out the envelope's contents. It was parchment instead of the Muggle paper that Harry would have expected, but the writing on it was his own handwriting, if done with a quill instead of a pen. The parchment said:

Beware the constellation,
and help the watcher of stars.

Pass unseen by the life-eaters' confederates,
and by the wise and the well-meaning.

Six, and seven in a square,
in the place that is prohibited and bloody stupid.

Harry took it in at a glance, then folded the paper again and put it back into his cloak with another exhaled sigh. 'Beware the constellation', really? Harry would have expected a riddle left by himself, to himself, to have been easier to interpret... though some parts were obvious enough. Clearly future-Harry had been worried about this paper being intercepted, and while present-Harry wouldn't ordinarily have thought of the local Aurors as 'the ones in league with the Dementors of Azkaban', maybe that had been the best way to say 'Auror' without potentially tipping off anyone else who read the parchment and did their own best to decrypt it. Translating the idiom back out of the Parseltongue he'd used during the Incident with Azkaban... that worked, Harry supposed.

The note had said that Professor Quirrell needed help, and that whatever was going on needed to pass unnoticed from the Aurors, and from Dumbledore and McGonagall and Flitwick. Since Time-Turning was involved already, the obvious solution was to leave for the loo, travel back in time, and return to the game right after he'd left.

Harry started to rise from his seat, then hesitated. His Hufflepuff side was remarking something about leaving the Auror escorts behind and not telling Professor McGonagall anything, and wondering if his future self was being stupid.

Harry unfolded the parchment again, and took another glance at the contents.

On closer examination, the riddle-verse didn't say that Harry couldn't bring anyone along. Draco Malfoy... was he missing from the Quidditch game because future-Harry, hours in the past, had brought Draco with him as backup? But that didn't make sense, there wasn't much marginal improvement in safety from bringing along another first-year...

... Draco Malfoy would certainly have been present, regardless of his personal feelings about Quidditch, to watch Slytherin clinch the House Cup. Had something happened to him?

Suddenly Harry didn't feel as tired anymore.

A trickle of adrenaline was starting to rise in Harry, but no, this wouldn't be like the troll. The message had told Harry when to arrive. Harry wouldn't be too late, not this time.

Harry glanced over at where Cedric Diggory was looking back and forth, visibly torn between a clutch of Ravenclaws arguing that the Snitch had to be kept because it was traditional and rules were rules, and a pack of Hufflepuffs saying that it wasn't fair for the Seeker to be more important than the other players.

Cedric Diggory had been an excellent dueling tutor to Harry and Neville, and Harry had thought they'd established a good relationship. More importantly, a student taking literally all of the electives would have his own Time-Turner. Maybe Harry could try to get Cedric to go back in time with him? The Super Hufflepuff seemed like a good spare wand to have by your side in any sort of sticky situation...



Later, and earlier:

Harry's watch now said 11:45, which translated into 6:45 PM after looping back five hours.

"It's time," Harry murmured to the empty air, and began walking down the third-floor corridor above the grand staircase, on the right-hand side.

"The place that is prohibited" would ordinarily mean the Forbidden Forest; that was probably what someone intercepting the message was meant to think. But the Forbidden Forest was huge, and there was more than one distinguished location inside it. No obvious Schelling Point at which to rendezvous, or find some event that needed intervention.

But when you added the 'bloody stupid' modifier, there was only one prohibited place in Hogwarts that fit.

And so Harry set forth on that outlawed path where, if rumor spoke true, all the first-year Gryffindors had gone before. The third-floor corridor, on the right-hand side. A mysterious door leading to a series of rooms filled with dangerous and potentially lethal traps that nobody could possibly get through, especially if they were only in their first year.

Harry didn't know himself what sort of traps awaited. Which, on reflection, meant that the students who'd gone through had been surprisingly scrupulous about not ruining the puzzle for others. Maybe there was a sign

down there saying Don't give it away, just as a favor to me, sincerely Headmaster Dumbledore. All Harry knew so far was that the outer door would open to Alohomora, and that the final room contained a magic mirror that would show your reflection in some situation you found highly appealing, which was apparently the big payoff.

The third-floor corridor was illuminated by dim blue light that seemed to come from nowhere, and the arches were covered with cobwebs, as though the corridor hadn't been used in centuries rather than just the last year.

Harry's pouch was loaded with useful Muggle things, and useful wizarding things, and everything he'd found that could possibly be a quest item. (Harry had asked Professor McGonagall to recommend someone who could expand the pouch's capacity, and she'd just done it herself.) Harry had applied the Charm he'd learned for battles that made his eyeglasses stick to his face, regardless of how his head moved. Harry had refreshed the Transfigurations he was maintaining, both the tiny jewel in the ring on his hand and the other one, in case he was knocked unconscious. He wasn't literally ready for anything, but Harry was as ready as he thought he could be.

The five-sided floor tiles creaked beneath Harry's shoes and vanished behind him like the future becoming the past. It was almost 6:49 – six, and seven in a square. Obvious if you thought in Muggle math, otherwise not so much.

Just as Harry was about to round another corner, something tickled at the back of his mind, and he heard a soft voice talking.

“... sensible person... wait until later... after certain faculty had departed...”

Harry stopped, then crept forward as lightly as he could, not going around the corner, trying to hear Professor Quirrell's voice better.

There came a louder cough, and then the soft voice spoke again from around the corner. “But if they were also... to depart themselves... at that time...” murmured the voice, “they might think... this final game... makes for the best distraction... left in this year... a predictable distraction. So I looked... to see what people of significance... were not at the game... and I saw the Headmaster missing... but for all my magic can tell me... he could be in another... realm of existence... I also saw your own absence... so I decided to go... where you were. That is what I am doing here... now... what are you doing here?”

Harry breathed shallowly, and listened.

“And just how did you know where I was?” drawled the voice of Severus

Snape, so much louder that Harry nearly jumped.

A small, coughing laugh. "Check your wand... for Trace."

Severus said something in magical pseudo-Latin, and then, "You dared tamper with my wand? You dared?"

"You are a suspect... just like myself... so your false indignation is wasted... however finely crafted it may be... now tell me... what are you doing?"

"I am watching this door," said the voice of Professor Snape. "And I will ask you to be off from it!"

"On whose authority... are you ordering me... my fellow Professor?"

There was a pause, then, "Why, the Headmaster's," came the smooth voice of Severus Snape. "I was ordered by him to watch this door during the Quidditch match, and as a Professor I must obey his whims. I shall have words about it with the Board of Governors later, but for now I am doing as I must. Now be off with you, as the Headmaster desires."

"What? You mean I am to believe... that you abandoned your Slytherins... during their most important... game of the year... and leapt up like a dog... at Dumbledore's word? Well that... I must say... is entirely plausible. Even so... I think it would be wise... if I kept my own watch over you.. while you watch this fine door." There was a sound of rustling cloth and a soft thud, as if someone had sat down hard upon the ground, or maybe just fallen.

"Oh, for the love of Merlin –" Severus Snape's voice now sounded angry. "Get up, you!"

"Ba-blu-a-bu-bluh –" said the Defense Professor's zombie-mode.

"Get up!" said Severus Snape, and there was a soft thud.

Help the watcher of stars –

Harry stepped around the corner, though it was possible that he'd have done so even without an intertemporal message. Had Professor Snape just kicked Professor Quirrell? That would have been foolhardy if Professor Quirrell had been dead and buried.

A round-topped door of dark wood was framed within a stone arch, set within the dusty marble bricks of Hogwarts. Where a Muggle would have set a doorknob there was only a handle of polished metal; there were no visible locks, or visible keyholes. Set upon the wall to either side, a pair of torches burned, sending forth an ominous orange glow. Before the door stood the Potions Master in his customary stained robes. Beside the door, to the left side beneath the orange torch, slumped the form of the Defense Professor,

back against the wall, head staring out at the surroundings. The eyes seemed to flicker, as if halfway between awareness, and emptiness.

"What," said the towering form of the Potions Master, "are you doing here, Potter?"

Going by facial expressions and tone of voice, the Potions Master was quite angry with Harry; and certainly was not Harry's co-conspirator in councils to which the Defense Professor had never been invited.

"I'm not sure," Harry said. He wasn't sure what role he should be playing, and was, in desperation, falling back on simple honesty. "I think perhaps I'm supposed to be keeping an eye on the Defense Professor."

The Potions Master stared at him coldly. "Where's your escort, Potter? Students are not to wander these halls alone!"

Harry's mind was genuinely blank. The game was afoot, and nobody had told him the rules. "I'm not sure how to answer that..."

The cold expression on Professor Snape's face flickered. "Perhaps I should call the Aurors," he said.

"Wait!" Harry blurted.

The Potions Master's hand hovered about his robes. "Why?" said the Potions Master.

"I... I just think you probably shouldn't call them..."

In a blur, the Potions Master's wand was in his hand. "Nullus confundio!" A black jet darted out and hit Harry, striking in the direction Harry had already started to evade. There followed four other spells, containing words like Polyfluis and Metamorphus; and for those Harry politely stood still.

After all of those spells had failed to produce any effect, Severus Snape was staring at Harry with a dark glitter that now seemed genuine. "I suggest," the Potions Master said softly, "that you explain yourself, Potter."

"I can't explain myself," Harry said. "I don't have the Time, not yet."

Harry looked directly into the Potions Master's gaze as he said the words myself and time, widening his own eyes to try to convey the key information, and the Potions Master hesitated.

Harry was frantically trying to work out who was pretending to be what. Since Professor Quirrell wasn't in on Dumbledore's conspiracy, Severus was pretending to be the evil Potions Master of Hogwarts, who'd been sent here by the Headmaster... and might or might not have actually been sent here by Dumbledore... but Professor Quirrell either thought, or was pretending to think, that someone needed to keep an eye on Professor Snape... and Harry

himself had been sent here by future-Harry and had no idea why... and why were they all standing outside the Headmaster's forbidden door in the first place?

And then...

From behind where Harry stood...

Came the growing sound of another set of footsteps, rapid and manyfold.

Professor Snape stabbed his wand once, creating a burst of darkness that shrouded where the Defense Professor was lying. "Muffliato," the Potions Master hissed. "Mr. Potter, if you must be here, then hide! Put on your invisibility cloak! My duty is to guard this door in case he comes here. And there has been – a disturbance, meant to draw the Headmaster, he thinks –"

"Who –"

Severus took a long stride forward and snapped his wand against the side of Harry's head. There was a trickling sensation like an egg had been cracked over him, the feeling of a Disillusionment Charm; and Harry's hands faded out, followed by the rest of him.

The darkness shrouding one side of the wall dissipated like slow mist, and there was again visible the huddled form of the Defense Professor, who said nothing.

Harry tiptoed away quietly as he could, then turned to watch.

The approaching footsteps rounded the corner –

"What are you doing here?" came many simultaneous cries.

Trimmed in three sets of Slytherin green and one Hufflepuff yellow stood Theodore Nott, Daphne Greengrass, Susan Bones, and Tracey Davis.

"Where," said Professor Snape with mounting wrath, "are your escorts, children? First-years must be accompanied by a sixth or seventh-year student at all times! Especially you!"

Theodore Nott raised his hand. "We're, um," said Theodore Nott. "We're doing what the Chaos Legion calls a team-building exercise... see, we realized just now that none of us had tried the Headmaster's forbidden chamber yet, and there wasn't much time left... and Harry Potter has authorized it, Professor, he said specifically that you mustn't interfere."

Severus Snape turned to glance over at where Harry Potter had tiptoed; a storm seemed to be gathering on his brow, and a dark fury in his eyes.

I... maybe? There was still one hour left on Harry's Time-Turner, so it was possible.

“Harry Potter does not have that authority,” the Potions Master said in a deceptively mild tone. “Explain yourselves, now.”

“Really?” said the form of Susan Bones. “Really? You’re telling Professor Snape that Harry Potter authorized the mission, that’s your idea of a bluff?” The young Hufflepuff turned to Professor Snape and spoke, her voice strangely firm. “Professor, this is the truth and it’s urgent. Draco Malfoy is missing and we think he went down there –”

“If Mr. Malfoy is missing,” said Professor Snape, “why have the Aurors not been notified?”

“Because of, because of reasons!” cried Daphne Greengrass. “There’s no time, you’ve got to let us through!”

Professor Snape’s voice was now as sardonic as Harry had ever heard it. “Are you four morons under the impression that you are on some sort of adventure? Well, you are mistaken. I assure you that Mr. Malfoy has not passed through this door.”

“We think Mr. Malfoy has an invisibility cloak,” Susan Bones said rapidly. “Do you remember the door seeming to open for no reason?”

“No,” the Potions Master said. “Now be gone from here. This place is off-limits for today.”

“This is Dumbledore’s forbidden corridor,” Tracey said. “The Headmaster himself said nobody was to come here. Who do you think you are, forbidding it too?”

“Miss Davis,” said the Potions Master, “you need to stop associating with Gryffindors, especially those named Lavender Brown. And if you are still here in one minute, I will file papers requesting your transfer into that House.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” shrieked Tracey.

“Hm,” Susan Bones said, her face screwed up in concentration. “Professor Snape, do you occasionally open the door yourself, to check on whatever’s inside?”

Professor Snape froze in place. Then he spun and put his right hand on the metal knocker –

Harry was watching the hand on the knocker, so he didn’t notice what Professor Snape was doing with his left hand until he heard the sudden outcry.

“No, in fact,” said Professor Snape, now holding the choking head of Draco Malfoy by his collar, though the rest of Draco was still underneath his invisibility cloak. “A fine try, though.”

“What?” cried Tracey and Daphne.

Susan Bones hit herself in the forehead. “I can’t believe I fell for that.”

“So, Mr. Malfoy,” Professor Snape said. His voice had lowered. “You sent your friends here on a ruse... just in the hopes that you could pass through this door? Now why would you do that?”

“I think we should trust him –” said Theodore Nott. “Mr. Malfoy, we’ve got to trust him, he’s the one Professor who would take our side!”

“No!” cried Draco’s floating head, from where Professor Snape was still grasping his collar. “You mustn’t say anything! Stop!”

“We’ve got to take the chance!” yelled Theodore. “Professor Snape, Mr. Malfoy finally worked out what’s been going on this whole year, and why – Dumbledore is trying to get the Philosopher’s Stone away from Nicholas Flamel! Because Dumbledore doesn’t think anyone ought to have immortality! So Dumbledore tried to convince Flamel that the Dark Lord was coming back and needed the Stone to revive, and asked Flamel to give it to him, but Flamel wouldn’t, and instead Flamel put the Stone in the magic mirror that’s down there, and Dumbledore is finding out right now how to get it, and then he’ll come for it and we’ve got to get to it first! Dumbledore really will be all-powerful if he gets the Philosopher’s Stone!”

“What?” said Tracey. “That’s not what you said before!”

“It –” Daphne said. She looked frightened, but determined. “It doesn’t matter – Professor Snape, please, you have to believe me. I looked at the books Hermione checked out of the library, and she was researching the Philosopher’s Stone just before someone killed her. Her notes said that something dangerous might happen if the Stone stays inside the mirror too long. We have to get it out of the castle right away.”

Susan Bones now had both hands over her face. “I’m not with them, I just came along to prevent anything even stupider from happening.”

Severus Snape was staring at Theodore Nott and the others. Then he turned his head to look at Draco Malfoy. “Mr. Malfoy,” the Potions Master drawled. “How did you come to discover Dumbledore’s plot?”

“I deduced it from evidence!” said Draco Malfoy’s floating head.

Professor Snape’s head swiveled back to Theodore Nott. “How did you intend to obtain this Stone from inside a magic mirror that could supposedly baffle Dumbledore himself? Answer me at once!”

“We’re going to take the whole mirror and send it back to Flamel,” said Theodore Nott. “It’s not like we want the Stone for ourselves, we just need

to stop Dumbledore from stealing it.”

Professor Snape nodded, as though confirming something, and turned his head to look at the other students. “Tell me, have any of you noticed one of the others behaving in an unusual fashion? Especially if there is a peculiar object that they have in their possession, or they can use spells a first-year should not know?” Professor Snape’s right hand now pointed his wand at Susan Bones. “I see that Miss Greengrass and Miss Davis are trying not to look at you, Miss Bones. If there is a mundane explanation, you would be wise to offer it immediately.”

Susan Bones’s hair turned bright red, though her face didn’t change. “I suppose there’s not much point keeping it mum any longer,” she said, “since I’m graduating in two days anyway.”

“Double witches get to graduate six years early?” said Tracey Davis. “That’s not fair!”

“Bones is a double witch?” cried Theodore.

“No, she is Nymphadora Tonks, a Metamorphmagus,” Professor Snape said. “Masquerading as another student is extremely against regulation, as you are well aware, Miss Tonks. It is not too late to expel you from Hogwarts two days before your graduation, which would be a dreadful tragedy – from your perspective, that is. From my perspective it would be hilarious. Now tell me what exactly you are doing here.”

“That explains it,” said Daphne Greengrass. “Um, is there actually a Susan Bones, or is the House dying out so they had you secretly –”

The red-haired form of Susan Bones had a palm to her face. “Yes, Miss Greengrass, there’s a real Susan Bones. She only sends me in when you lot are about to get into ridiculous amounts of trouble. Professor Snape, the reason I’m here is because Draco Malfoy was missing, and this lot insisted on trying to find him instead of calling the Aurors. For reasons the real Miss Bones said there was no time to explain to me, which I now realize were stupid. But young students must never go alone, and must be accompanied by a sixth or seventh year at all times. And now we found Draco Malfoy and we can all go back. Please? Before this gets any more ridiculous?”

“What in Merlin’s name is going on here?”

“Ah,” said Professor Snape, who was still pointing the wand at the red-haired form of Susan Bones, his other hand still grasping the collar below the disembodied head of Draco Malfoy, standing next to the crumpled form of the Defense Professor. “Professor Sprout, I perceive.”

“It’s not what it looks like,” volunteered Tracey Davis.

The short, dumpy form of the Herbology Professor stormed forwards. She had, by this point, drawn her wand, though she wasn’t pointing it at anyone. “I don’t even know what this looks like! Down wands, all of you, right now! Including you, Professor!”

Distraction. The thought came to Harry with sudden clarity. Whatever he was watching now, from where he stood invisibly and well back of the action, it wasn’t what was really going on, it wasn’t the true thread of the story, it had been arranged. Professor Sprout’s arrival had broken Harry’s suspension of disbelief; things like that didn’t happen just for the sake of comedic coincidence. Someone was deliberately causing all this chaos, but what was the point?

Harry really hoped he hadn’t gone back in time and done this, because it did seem like the sort of thing he would do.

Severus Snape lowered his wand. His other hand unfisted Draco Malfoy. “Professor Sprout,” the Potions Master said, “I am here on the Headmaster’s orders to watch this door. Everyone else present is not supposed to be here, and I ask you to see them cleared away.”

“A likely story,” snapped Professor Sprout. “Why would Dumbledore set you of all people to guard the door to his playground? It’s not as if he wants to keep the students out, oh no, they need to go in and get stuck in my Devil’s Snare! Susan, dear, you’ve got a communications mirror, don’t you? Use it to call the Aurors.”

The watching Harry nodded to himself. That was the point. The Aurors would take away everyone present at this terribly confusing situation, no excuses accepted, and then the door would be unguarded.

But was Harry meant to go into the forbidden corridor himself? Or watch, to see who finally came once all the others were gone?

A loud fit of hacking and coughing caused everyone to look at where the Defense Professor lay.

“Snape – listen –” said the Defense Professor between coughs. “Why – Sprout – here –”

The Potions Master looked down.

“Memory Charm – implies – Professor –” The Defense Professor began coughing again.

“What?”

And the logic unfolded in Harry's mind in crystalline dismay, all the steps already suspected, the dreadful realization coming as a repetition with greater confidence.

Someone had Memory-Charmed Hermione to believe she'd tried to kill Draco.

Only a Hogwarts Professor could have done it without alarm.

So all the true mastermind needed to do was Legilimise or Imperius a Hogwarts Professor.

And the last person anyone would suspect would be the Head of House Hufflepuff.

Snape's head snapped around, as Professor Sprout raised her wand, and the Potions Master managed to raise a wordless translucent ward between them. But the bolt that shot from Professor Sprout's wand was a dark brown that produced a surge of awful apprehension in Harry's mind; and the brown bolt made Severus's shield wink out before they touched, clipping the Potions Master's right arm even as he dodged. Professor Snape gave a muffled shriek and his hand spasmed, dropping his wand.

The next bolt that came from Sprout's wand was a bright red the color of a Stunning Hex, seeming to grow brighter and move faster even as it left her wand, accompanied by another surge of anxiety; and that blew the Potions Master into the door, dropping him motionless to the ground.

By that time pink-haired-Susan-Bones was surrounded by a multifaceted blue haze and she was firing hex after hex at Professor Sprout. Professor Sprout was ignoring the hexes to summon plant tendrils that entangled the younger students as they tried to run, except Draco Malfoy, who had again vanished beneath his invisibility cloak.

Not-Susan-Bones stopped casting hexes. She leveled her wand, took a deep breath, and cried aloud an incantation that sent golden worms of light chewing into the shield around Professor Sprout. At that the Herbology Professor turned to face not-Susan, her expression vacant, a new set of plant tentacles rising in the air behind her. Those stalks were a darker green, and seemed to have shields of their own.

Harry Potter murmured to the seemingly empty air, "Attack Sprout. Help Bones. Nonlethal only."

"Yes, my lord," whispered Lesath Lestrange beneath Harry's Cloak of Invisibility, and the fifth-year Slytherin's presence moved off toward the fight.

Harry looked down at his own hands, and saw with a jolt of unpleasant shock that his Disillusionment Charm wasn't as complete as it had been before. There were hints of distortion in the air, each time Harry moved...

Slowly, Harry stepped backward, until he came to a corner, and ducked behind a wall. Then he took out his communications mirror... which was blank and jammed. Of course. Harry levitated the mirror to where he could use it to see around the corner, and watch the end of the... distraction? What was happening, why?

Professor Sprout and the form of Susan Bones were dueling in flashes of light and leaves; and the blazing green of a Greater Drill Hex erupted from midair and chewed halfway through the outer layer of Professor Sprout's shields. The Herbology Professor turned and fired a broad wash of yellow at where the Drill Hex had come from, but the spell didn't seem to hit anything.

Yellow blazes, blue facets, dark green plant-tendrils and swirling purple flower petals...

It was when Professor Sprout started firing arcs of crimson in all directions that one of the crimson blades caught something in midair, the Invisibility Cloak not concealing how the crimson arc was absorbed and winked out; and Lesath's presence beneath the Invisibility Cloak fell to the ground.

And that gave not-Susan-Bones time enough to stand still, catch her breath, and scream something that inspired in Harry another surge of dread; and the white spark that blazed out went through Professor Sprout's chewed shields and her plant-armor and dropped her.

Not-Susan-Bones went to her knees, panting, her robes soaked in sweat.

Her head turned to look around her, at the bodies lying stunned on the floor or wrapped in vines.

"What," said not-Susan. "What. What. What."

There was no reply. The victims entangled in Professor Sprout's vines weren't moving, though they did seem to be breathing.

"Malfoy..." said the pink-haired form of Susan, still gasping for breath. "Draco Malfoy, where are you? Are you there? Call the Aurors already! Merlin damn it – *Homenum Revelio!*"

And Harry found himself visible again, staring in his mirror at the form of Draco Malfoy half-visible beneath a shimmering cloak, standing behind not-Susan, pointing his wand at a gap in not-Susan's blue haze.

Harry's mind moved in flashes of insight, too slow and yet too fast; even as Harry's mouth opened and he inhaled in preparation to shout.

beware the constellation
there was a constellation named Draco
if you could control a Professor you could control a student

"Duck!" Harry shouted, but it was too late, a bolt of red light caught the back of not-Susan's head at point-blank, smashing her to the floor.

Harry stepped around the corner and said, "Somnium Somnium Somnium Somnium Somnium Somnium."

Draco Malfoy's shimmering form collapsed in a heap.

Harry took a moment to catch his breath. Then Harry said "Stupefy!" and verified that, yes, the Stunning Hex did hit Draco Malfoy's form.

(You could be mistaken about whether a Somnium had really hit. Harry had seen enough horror movies, not to mention the business with the Sunshine Regiment, that he wasn't about to make that error again.)

After a further reflection on this, Harry cast another Stunning Hex into the prostrate form of Professor Sprout.

Harry gripped his wand, staring at the scene, breathing heavily from the exhaustion. He didn't have enough magic left to cast a messenger Patronus to Dumbledore and he really really should have thought of that possibility immediately this time around. Harry started to reach back to where his mirror had fallen, to see if it was now unjammed.

And then Harry hesitated.

His note to himself had said to avoid notice from Aurors, and Harry still did not know what was going on.

The crumpled form of Professor Quirrell gave another series of racking coughs, reached out a hand to the wall beside him, and slowly pulled himself to his feet.

"Harry," croaked Professor Quirrell. "Harry. Are you there?"

It was the first time Professor Quirrell had ever called him by his first name.

"I'm here," Harry said. Without any conscious thought, his feet were moving forward.

"Please," said Professor Quirrell. "Please, I haven't... much time. Please take me... to the mirror... help me... get the Stone."

"The Philosopher's Stone?" Harry said. He glanced around at the scattered bodies, but he couldn't see Draco anymore, the revealment had worn off.

“You think Mr. Nott was right? I don’t think Dumbledore would –”

“Not – Dumbledore,” gasped Professor Quirrell. “Because – Sprout –”

“I understand,” Harry said. If Dumbledore had been the one behind it all, he wouldn’t have needed to mind-control a Professor in order to use Memory Charms.

“Mirror... ancient relic... could hide anything... Stone could be there... many others want Stone... one sent Sprout...”

Harry repeated rapidly, “The mirror down there is an ancient relic that can be used to hide things, and it would be one possible place to hide the Philosopher’s Stone. If the Philosopher’s Stone is inside the mirror then any number of people might want to get it. One of them is controlling Sprout and that would explain what their goal really is... only... that doesn’t explain why Sprout’s controller would go after Hermione?”

“Harry, please,” Professor Quirrell said. His breathing was yet more labored now, his voice came with excruciating slowness. “It’s the one thing... that can save my life... and I find, now... I don’t want to die... please, help me...”

And somehow that tore it.

Somehow that was a little too much.

The sense of detachment that had come over Harry when Professor Sprout had arrived, the broken suspension of disbelief, was returning; his Inner Critic weighing up everything as though it were a set-piece. Timing, probability, so many people showing up at the same door, the Defense Professor’s desperation... this whole situation didn’t feel real. But he might be able to solve it if he just took time to think things through in advance, instead of running off at adventure’s first call. All the accumulated experience from the last year had finally crystallized into something like a touch of battle hardening. An instinct born of past disaster was telling Harry that if he just rushed on ahead, he would end up afterward in a sad conversation, realizing that he’d been stupid. Again.

“Let me think,” Harry said. “Let me think for a minute before we go.” He turned away from the Defense Professor, looking at the unconscious bodies draped in various shapes over the floor. There’d been so many puzzle pieces already, this last year, maybe everything would just fall into place with one more piece...

“Harry...” the Defense Professor said in a faltering voice. “Harry, I’m dying...”

One more minute can't make the difference he's had the WHOLE YEAR to be sick it's IMPROBABLE that his life versus death would be precisely timed to rest on this last minute no matter what happened to Hermione –

"I know!" Harry said. "I'll think quickly!"

Harry stared at the bodies and tried to think. There was no time for doubts, for caveats, no brakes or second-guessing just take the first thoughts and run with them –

In the back of Harry's mind, fragments of abstract thought flitted past, heuristics of problem-solving that there was no time to rehearse in words. In wordless flashes they shot past, to set up the object-level problem.

– what do I notice I am confused by –

– the first place to look for a problem is whatever aspect of the situation seems most improbable –

– simple explanations are more probable, eliminate separate improbabilities that must be postulated –

Professor Snape had already been here then Professor Quirrell had arrived then Harry had arrived (via Time-Turner) then the adventuring party had arrived and Draco had been revealed (part of the party) then Professor Sprout had shown up.

Too many people had shown up synchronously and that was too much coincidence, it was improbable that so many different parties would show up at the same location within a five-minute window, there had to be hidden entanglements.

Label Sprout's controller as the mastermind who had ordered Hermione Memory-Charmed. The mastermind had sent Sprout.

Professor Snape had said that the Headmaster had sent him to guard the door after there'd been some sort of disturbance, if the mastermind had caused that as a distraction then that explained Severus's presence as well.

Harry wasn't sure any more that Draco had been controlled by the mastermind, that hypothesis had come to him in the spur of the moment, Draco might have just been trying to drop not-Susan so he could get into the corridor unhindered –

No that was the wrong way to think, turn it around, try to explain the timed presence of Draco and his adventuring party, no time for self-questioning, run with the hypothesis, therefore suppose Sprout's mastermind had sent Draco or triggered his coming.

That was three arrivals explained.

Harry had shown up because his note to himself had told him to do so. That could be attributed to time travel.

That left the Defense Professor who'd said he was following Snape, only that didn't really seem like an adequate reason for Professor Quirrell to show up it didn't really make Harry feel less confused and so maybe the mastermind had also controlled the timing of Professor Quirrell's presence somehow and even arranged for Harry himself to enter the time loop.

Harry's mind hit a stumbling-block, he couldn't see how to extend that reasoning further.

There was no time to stare blankly at stumbling-blocks.

Without any pause or braking Harry's mind attacked the problem from a new angle.

Professor Quirrell had deduced a controlled Hogwarts Professor from the need for some Professor to Memory-Charm Hermione which meant that Professor Sprout's controller had framed and then murdered Hermione which meant Professor Sprout's controller had detailed information about Hogwarts life and maybe a personal interest in the Boy-Who-Lived and his friends.

Harry's mind finally threw up the relevant memory, Dumbledore saying that Lord Voldemort's strongest road to life was hidden here inside Hogwarts run with the hypothesis so that resurrection tool was the Philosopher's Stone hidden inside the mirror why had Dumbledore put the mirror into a corridor first-years could get through no ignore this question it's not important right now and Professor Quirrell had said the Philosopher's Stone possessed great healing power so that part also fit.

But if it was the Philosopher's Stone that was hidden in the mirror to keep it away from the Dark Lord, that meant the mirror also contained the one thing in the world that could save the Defense Professor's life –

Harry's mind tried to hesitate, to flinch away, feeling a sudden apprehension as to where this was going.

But there was no time allowed for hesitation.

– and that was also far too much coincidence just too much improbability if your mind didn't write it off as an amazing plot twist like you were inside a story.

Could the putative Dark Lord also be manipulating Professor Quirrell so that Professor Quirrell would discover his supposed salvation at the right time so that Harry and Professor Quirrell would go get the resurrection

tool from the mirror that might not even actually be the Philosopher's Stone and then the Dark Lord's avatar or some other servant would show up and seize it from them that would explain all the synchronies and negate every coincidence.

Or Professor Quirrell had known from the beginning that the one thing that could save his life was hidden inside this mirror and that was why he had agreed to teach Defense at Hogwarts and now he was finally trying to get it but then why wait until he was this sick to even try and why had Sprout shown up at the same time as Professor Quirrell –

Harry's mind faltered harder.

His inner eye was looking in a direction it was afraid to look.

The note I sent myself said to help the watcher of stars. I wouldn't send myself a note saying that, if I hadn't already worked out in the future that it was the right thing to do – maybe the note is just telling me to get on with it –

A small note of confusion was promoted to conscious attention.

The coded message on the parchment... one or two lines hadn't quite sounded right, hadn't sounded like the code Harry would expect himself to use...

"Harry," whispered the dying voice of Professor Quirrell from behind him. "Harry, please."

"I'm almost done thinking," Harry's voice said aloud, and Harry realized as he spoke the words that they were true.

Turn it around.

Look at it from the Enemy's perspective, from where the Enemy does their own intelligent planning, somewhere out of your sight.

There are Aurors in Hogwarts, and your target Harry Potter is now fully on guard. Harry Potter will call in Aurors at the first sign of trouble, or send a Patronus to Albus Dumbledore. Considering that as a puzzle, one creative solution is to –

– forge a supposedly Time-Turned message to Harry Potter from himself, telling Harry Potter not to call for help, telling him to be at the place and time you want him to be. You get the target himself to bypass all the protections he set up. You even bypass his protection of skepticism with the overriding authority of his own future self's judgment.

It isn't even difficult. You can Memory-Charm some random student into remembering Harry Potter handing over an envelope to be given back

to himself later.

You can Memory-Charm that student because you are a Hogwarts Professor.

You don't go to the extra effort to steal a pencil and Muggle paper from Harry Potter's pouch. Instead you forge Harry Potter's handwriting on wizard parchment. You can forge Harry Potter's handwriting because you have seen it on Ministry-mandated exams you have graded.

You call Draco Malfoy 'the constellation' because you know Harry Potter is interested in astronomy and you are a wizard and you have taken Astronomy and memorised the names of all the constellations. But it's not the natural code that Harry Potter would use to describe Draco Malfoy to himself, that would have been 'the apprentice'.

You call Professor Quirrell 'the watcher of stars', and tell Harry Potter to help him.

You know that life-eater is how you say 'Dementor' in Parseltongue and you expect Harry Potter to think of the Aurors as being in league with them.

You encode 6:49 as 'six, and seven in a square' because you have been reading a Muggle physics book that Harry Potter gave you.

Who are you, then?

Harry noticed his breathing had sped up, and with a burst of heartrate, Harry slowed his breath down again, Professor Quirrell was watching him.

What if hypothetically speaking Professor Quirrell was the mastermind and had faked Harry's message then that explained all five parties showing up the whole synchronous coordination of the comedy and then Professor Sprout was just controlled to give Professor Quirrell deniability let him blame someone else for the False Memory Charm after the dust settled but

But why would Professor Quirrell risk the fragile alliance Harry had with Draco via the attempted murder-frame

(that Professor Quirrell had 'detected' and 'stopped' allegedly via a tracer put on Draco)

Why would Professor Quirrell kill Hermione

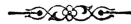
(if his first attempt to remove her hadn't worked)

If Professor Quirrell was the bad guy then he might have lied about everything to do with horcruxes and maybe it wasn't coincidence at all that the only thing that could save his life was the avenue that could resurrect the Dark Lord what if the Dark Lord had arranged that too somehow

(one day David Monroe had mysteriously disappeared, presumed dead at the Dark Lord's hands)

An awful intuition had come over Harry, something separate from all the reasoning he'd done so far, an intuition that Harry couldn't put into words; except that he and the Defense Professor were very much alike in certain ways, and faking a Time-Turned message was just the sort of creative method that Harry himself might have tried to bypass all of a target's protections –

And that was when Harry finally realized what should have been obvious from the very, very beginning.

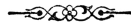


Professor Quirrell was smart.

Professor Quirrell was smart in the same way as Harry.

Professor Quirrell was smart in exactly the same way as Harry's mysterious dark side.

If you had to guess when the Boy-Who-Lived had acquired his mysterious dark side, the obvious guess was the night of October 31st, 1981.



And

And

And Professor Quirrell had known a password that Bellatrix Black had thought identified the Dark Lord and his presence gave the Boy-Who-Lived a sense of doom and his magic interacted destructively with Harry's and his favorite spell was Avada Kedavra and and and –

The realization blasted through Harry like a vast dam breaking, releasing out all its water, bursting through his mind in an irresistible flood that swept everything away.

There is only one reality that generates all of the observations.

If different observations seem to point in incompatible directions, it means the true hypothesis is one you haven't thought of yet.

And in those cases, when you finally think of the correct hypothesis, everything aligns behind it, beyond denial or horror, tearing away every doubt and every emotion that might stand in its path.

– and then 'David Monroe' and 'Lord Voldemort' had just been one person playing both sides of the Wizarding War and that was why the Monroe family

had been killed before they could meet 'David Monroe' just like Moody had suspected –

Reality settled down into a single known state, one coherent state-of-affairs that compactly generated the observation set.

Harry didn't jump, didn't change his breathing, tried not to show a single sign of the horror and agony flooding his mind.

The Enemy was behind him, watching him.

"All right," Harry said out loud, as soon as he dared trust his voice to sound normal. He kept on staring at the bodies, looking away from Professor Quirrell, because Harry didn't trust his own face. Harry lifted a sleeve to wipe away the sweat on his forehead, trying to make the gesture look casual; Harry couldn't control the sweat, or the rapid hammering in his chest. "Let's go get the Philosopher's Stone."

All Harry needed was a single moment of distraction anywhere along the way to use his Time-Turner.

There was no reply from behind him.

The silence stretched.

Slowly, Harry turned around.

Professor Quirrell was standing upright and smiling.

In the Defense Professor's hand was a shape of black metal pointed at Harry's wand arm, held with the sure grip of someone who knew exactly how to use a semiautomatic handgun.

Harry's mouth was dry, even his lips were trembling with adrenaline, but he managed to speak. "Hello, Lord Voldemort."

Professor Quirrell inclined his head in acknowledgement, and said, "Hello, Tom Riddle."

THE TRUTH, PART II

Tom Riddle.

The words seemed to echo inside Harry's head, sparking resonances that as quickly died away, broken patterns trying to complete themselves and failing.

Tom Riddle is a

Tom Riddle was the

Riddle

There were other priorities occupying Harry's attention.

Professor Quirrell was pointing a gun at him.

And for some reason Lord Voldemort hadn't fired it yet.

Harry's voice came out in more of a croak. "What is it that you want from me?"

"Your death," said Professor Quirrell, "is clearly not what I am about to say, since I have had plenty of time to kill you if I wished. The fateful battle between Lord Voldemort and the Boy-Who-Lived is a figment of Dumbledore's imagination. I know where to find your family's house in Oxford, and I am familiar with the concept of sniper rifles. You would have died before you ever touched a wand. I hope this is clear to you, Tom?"

"Crystal," Harry whispered. His body was still shaking, running programs more suited to fleeing a tiger than casting delicate spells or thinking. But Harry could think of one thing the person pointing a gun at him obviously wanted him to do, a question that person was waiting for him to ask, and Harry did so. "Why are you calling me Tom?"

Professor Quirrell regarded him steadily. "Why am I calling you Tom? Answer. Your intellect is not everything I hoped for, but it should suffice for this."

Harry's mouth seemed to know the answer before his brain could manage to focus on the question. "Tom Riddle is your name. Our name. That's who Lord Voldemort is, or was, or – something."

Professor Quirrell nodded. "Better. You have already vanquished the Dark Lord, the one and only time that you will ever do so. I have already de-

stroyed all but a remnant of Harry Potter, eliminating the difference between our spirits and enabling us to reside in the same world. Now that it is clear to you that the battle between us is a lie, you might act sensibly to advance your own interests. Or you might not." The gun jabbed slightly forward, causing prickles of sweat to appear on Harry's forehead. "Drop your wand. Now."

Harry dropped it.

"Step away from the wand," said Professor Quirrell.

Harry obeyed.

"Reach toward your neck," said Professor Quirrell, "and remove your Time-Turner, touching it by the chain only. Place the Time-Turner on the ground, then step away from it as well."

This also Harry did. Even in his state of shock, his mind still looked for a way to spin the Time-Turner in the process, a sudden move that would win; but Harry knew that Professor Quirrell would already be imagining himself in Harry's position, looking for the same possible opportunities.

"Remove your pouch and place it also on the ground, then step away."

Harry did this.

"Very good," said the Defense Professor. "Now. It is time for me to obtain the Philosopher's Stone. I mean to bring along these four first-years here, suitably Obliviated of their most recent memories so that they still recall their original purpose. Snape I shall control and set to guard this door. After this day's work is done, I intend to kill Snape for the betrayals he has offered my other identity. The three heir-children I shall take with me afterwards, to shape their future loyalties. And know this, I have taken hostages. I have already set in motion a spell that will kill hundreds of Hogwarts students, including many you called friends. I can stop that spell using the Stone, if I obtain it successfully. If I am interrupted before then, or if I choose not to stop the spell, hundreds of students will die." Professor Quirrell's voice was still mild. "Do you yet perceive any interests you have at stake, boy? I would smile to hear you say 'no', but that is too much to hope."

"I'd like," Harry managed to say, through the horror, and the heartbreak, and the knives slicing away at an emotional connection that hurt like living flesh as it was cut, "for you not to do those things, Professor." Why, Professor Quirrell, why, why did it have to turn out like this, I don't, I don't, I don't want this to be happening...

"Very well," Professor Quirrell said. "I grant you permission to offer me something I want." The gun gestured invitingly. "That is a rare privilege,

child. Lord Voldemort does not usually negotiate for what he wants.”

Some part of Harry’s mind scrambled frantically, looking for something, anything that might be of more value to Lord Voldemort or Professor Quirrell than child hostages or Severus’s death.

Another part of him, the part that had never stopped thinking, already knew his answer.

“You already have an idea for what you want from me,” Harry said, through the sickness and the bleeding wounds in his soul. “What is it?”

“Your help in obtaining the Philosopher’s Stone.”

Harry swallowed. He couldn’t stop his eyes from going to the gun, then back up at Professor Quirrell’s face.

He was aware that the hero in a storybook was supposed to say ‘No’, but now that he was actually in a situation like this, saying ‘No’ didn’t seem to make sense.

“I am disappointed that you need to think about this,” said Professor Quirrell. “It is straightforward that you should obey me for now, since I hold every advantage over you. I have taught you better than this; in this situation you should certainly pretend to lose. You can expect to gain nothing by resisting, except pain. You should have calculated that it was better to answer sooner, and not earn my distrust.” Professor Quirrell’s eyes studied him curiously. “Perhaps Dumbledore has filled your ears with nonsense about noble defiance? I find such morals amusing, since they are so easy to manipulate. I assure you that I can make defiance seem morally worse, and you would be well advised to submit before I demonstrate how.” The gun stayed pointed at Harry; but with a wave of Professor Quirrell’s other hand, Tracey Davis rose up into the air, spun lazily, her limbs stretched out spreadeagle –

– then, even as new adrenaline hammered at Harry’s heart, Tracey floated back down again.

“Choose,” said Professor Quirrell. “This begins to try my patience.”

I should have spoken just then, before he might’ve ripped off Tracey’s legs, no, I shouldn’t have, the Headmaster said I mustn’t show Lord Voldemort that I’ll do things if he threatens my friends because that will just make him threaten more of them – only what he said before isn’t a threat it’s just the sort of thing Lord Voldemort does –

Harry took a deep breath, several of them. Whatever part of him kept on running on full automatic was screaming at the remainder of his mind that it

could not afford to stay in shock. Shocks were of finite duration, neurons kept firing regardless, the only reason Harry's mind would shut down while his brain kept running was if Harry's self-model believed his mind would shut down –

"I don't mean to try your patience," Harry said. His voice was cracking. That was good. Sounding like he was still in shock meant that Lord Voldemort might give him more time. "But if Lord Voldemort had a reputation for keeping his bargains, I don't know about it."

"An obvious concern," Professor Quirrell said. "There is a simple answer, and I would have enforced it upon you in any case. Snakes can't lie. And since I have a tremendous distaste for stupidity, I suggest you do not say anything like 'What do you mean?' You are smarter than that, and I do not have time for such conversations as ordinary people inflict on one another."

Harry swallowed. Snakes can't lie. "Two plus two equals four." Harry had tried to say that two plus two equalled three, and the word four had slipped out instead.

"Good. When Salazar Slytherin invoked the Parselmouth curse upon himself and all his children, his true plan was to ensure his descendants could trust one another's words, whatever plots they wove against outsiders." Professor Quirrell had adopted his lecturing pose from Battle Magic, like someone putting on a well-worn mask, but the gun remained pointed in his hand. "Occlumency cannot fool the Parselmouth curse as it can fool Veritaserum, and you may put that to the trial also. Now listen well. Come with me, promise your best aid in getting the Stone, and I shall leave these children behind unharmed. Hostages are real, hundreds of students die tonight unless I stop events already set in motion. Will spare hostages if I obtain the Stone successfully. And mark also this, mark it well: I cannot be truly slain by any means known to me, and losing the Stone will not stop me from returning, nor spare you or yours my wrath. Any impetuous act you are contemplating cannot win the game for you, boy. I do credit your ability to annoy me, and suggest you avoid doing so."

"You said," Harry's voice was strange in his own ears, "that the Philosopher's Stone had different powers from what legend said. You said that to me in Parseltongue. Tell me what the Stone really does, before I agree to help you get it." If it was something along the lines of gaining total power over the universe, then nothing was worth an incrementally greater chance of Lord Voldemort getting the Stone.

"Ah," said Professor Quirrell, and smiled. "You are thinking. That is better, and as a reward I shall offer you a further incentive for cooperation. Eternal life and youth, the creation of gold and silver. Suppose these are true benefits of holding the Stone. Tell me, boy. What is the Stone's power?"

It might have been the adrenaline still in him, being actually useful for his brain for once. It might have been the power of being told that an answer existed, and that the evidence wasn't a lie. "It can make Transfigurations permanent."

Then Harry stopped, as he heard what his own mouth had just said.

"Correct," said Professor Quirrell. "Thus, whoever holds the Philosopher's Stone is able to perform human Transfiguration."

Harry's torn mind was knocked about yet again, as he realized what further incentive would be offered him.

"You stole Miss Granger's remains and Transfigured them into some innocuous-appearing target," said Professor Quirrell. "A Transfigured target that you must keep somewhere about your own person, in order to sustain the Transfiguration. Ah, I see your eyes going to that ring upon your hand, but of course Miss Granger would not be the little jewel set into the ring, would it? That would be too obvious. No, I expect you Transfigured Granger's remains into the ring itself, letting the aura of the Transfigured jewel mask the magic in the Transfigured ring."

"Yes," Harry said, forcing out the word. It was a lie, for once, and Harry's glance had been deliberate. Harry had expected someone to challenge him on the steel ring, he'd tried to provoke that challenge so he could prove to be innocent yet again, though nobody had taken him up on it – maybe Dumbledore had just sensed that the steel by itself wasn't magical.

"Fine and good," said Professor Quirrell. "Now come with me, help me to obtain the Stone, and I will resurrect Hermione Granger on your behalf. Her death has had unfortunate effects on you, and I would not mind undoing them. That, as I understand you, is your greatest desire. I have done you many kindnesses, and I would not mind doing you this one more." A blank-eyed Professor Sprout had now risen from the ground and was pointing her own wand at Harry. "Help me obtain the Stone of Transfiguration, and I shall try my hardest to resurrect your girl-child friend to true and lasting life. That said, boy, I am swiftly running out of patience with you, and you shall not like what comes next." This last line was hissed out in a voice that conveyed the impression of a snake rearing its head to strike.



Even then.

Even then, with all the world upturned, with shock after shock, even then Harry's brain did not stop being a brain, or completing the patterns its circuits had been wired to complete.

Harry knew that this was too good an offer to make to someone at whom you were pointing a gun.

Unless you desperately needed their help to get the Philosopher's Stone out of the magic mirror.

And there wasn't any time left to plan, only the thought that, if Professor Quirrell really was going this far to get his help – what Harry wanted was to demand Professor Quirrell promise not to kill anyone in the future in exchange for his help now, but Harry had a strong sense that Professor Quirrell would reply 'Don't be ridiculous' and there wasn't time for ordinary conversation Harry had to guess the highest safe request in advance –

Professor Quirrell's eyes narrowed, his lips parted –

"If I help you," Harry's mouth said, "I want your promise that you aren't planning to turn on me when this is over. I want you to not kill Professor Snape or anyone else in Hogwarts for at least a week. And I want answers, the truth about everything that's been going on this whole time, everything you know about my nature."

The pale blue eyes regarded him dispassionately.

I really think we could have thought of something better to ask for than that, said Harry's Slytherin side. But I suppose we were legitimately out of time, and whatever we need to do next, answers will help.

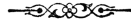
Harry wasn't listening to that voice right now. Cold chills were still going down his spine from hearing the words that had just come out of his lips, addressed to the man with the gun.

"That is your condition for helping me to obtain the Stone?" said Professor Quirrell.

Harry nodded, unable to form words.

"Agreed," hissed Professor Quirrell. "Help me, and you shall have answers to your questions, so long as they are about past events, and not my plans for the future. I do not intend to raise my hand or magic against you in future, so long as you do not raise your hand or magic against me. I shall kill none within school grounds for a week, unless I must. Now promise that you will not attempt to warn against me or escape. Promise

to put forth your own besst efforts toward helping me to obtain the Sstone. And your girl-child friend sshall be revived by me, to true life and health; nor sshall me or mine ever sseek to harm her." A twisted smile. "Promisse, boy, and the bargain will be sstruck."



"I promise," whispered Harry.

WHAT? screamed other parts of his mind.

Um, he's still pointing a gun at us, pointed out Slytherin. We don't actually have a choice, we're just getting as much mileage out of this as possible.

You bastard, said Hufflepuff. Do you think this is what Hermione would have wanted? This is Lord Voldemort we're talking about, do we even know how many people he's killed, and will kill?

I deny that we are compromising with Lord Voldemort for Hermione's sake, said Slytherin. Since there is, in fact, a gun and we can't otherwise stop him. Also, Mum and Dad would want us to just go along and stay safe.

Professor Quirrell regarded him steadily. "Repeat the full promise in Parseltongue, boy."

"I sshall help you obtain the Sstone... I cannot promisse I will usse my besst efforts, my heart will not be in it, I fear. I intend to try. Sshall not do anything I think will annoy you to no good end. Sshall call no help if I expect them to be killed by you or for hosstages to die. I'm ssorry, teacher, but it iss besst I can do." Harry's mind was settling, composing itself, as the decision was made. He would stay with Professor Quirrell, go with him to get the Stone, save the student hostages, and... and... and Harry didn't know, except that he'd go on thinking.

"You actually are sorry about that?" Professor Quirrell looked amused. "I suppose it shall have to do. Then keep two other things in mind: I have plan to sstop even sschoolmasster, if he appearss before uss. And also this: I will occasionally ask you to say in Parseltongue whether you have betrayed me. The bargain is sstruck."

After that, Professor Sprout picked up Harry's wand, and wrapped it in shimmering cloth; then she placed it on the floor, and again pointed her wand at Harry. Only then did Professor Quirrell lower his gun, which seemed to disappear into his hand, and pick up Harry's wrapped wand, tucking it into his robes.

The True Cloak of Invisibility was removed from the sleeping form of Lesath Lestrangle, and Professor Quirrell took the Cloak, as well as Harry's pouch and Time-Turner.

Then Professor Quirrell cast a mass Obliviation followed by the mass version of the False Memory Charm, the one that just had the subject fill in the blanks using their own suggestibility, on all the students present. Afterwards Professor Sprout floated away the sleeping children, now wearing an expression that seemed annoyed and preoccupied, as if they'd been in some Herbology accident.

Professor Quirrell then turned back to where the Potions Master lay sprawled, bent over and placed his wand on Professor Snape's forehead. "*Alienis nervus mobile lignum.*"

The Defense Professor stepped back, and began to move his left fingers in the air as though manipulating a puppet on strings.

Professor Snape pushed himself up from the ground by smooth motions, and stood once more before the corridor door.

"*Alohomora*," Professor Quirrell said, pointing his wand at the forbidden door. The Defense Professor looked rather amused. "Would you do the honors, boy?"

Harry swallowed. He was once again having second thoughts, and third thoughts.

It was strange how you could do something even while knowing it was the wrong thing, not the selfish thing but the wrong thing to do on some deeper level.

But the man behind him was holding the gun; it had once more appeared in his hand at Harry's hesitation.

Harry laid his hand on the door-knocker, and took several deep breaths, again composing his mind as best he could. Go through with it, don't get shot, don't let the hostages die, be there to optimize events, be there to watch for opportunities and stay capable of taking them. It wasn't a good choice, but all the other ones seemed worse.

Harry pushed open the forbidden door, and stepped through.

THE TRUTH, PART III

AFTER a single step into Dumbledore's forbidden chamber, Harry shrieked and jumped back and collided with Professor Snape, sending the two of them down in a heap.

Professor Snape picked himself up and resumed standing in front of the door. His head tracked to look at Harry. "I am guarding this door at the Headmaster's orders," said Professor Snape in his usual sardonic tones. "Be off with you at once, or I shall deduct House Points."

This was bone-chillingly creepy, but Harry's attention was occupied by the gigantic three-headed dog which had lunged forward, only to be stopped meters from Harry by the chains upon its three collars.

"That – that – that –" Harry said.

"Yes," Professor Quirrell said from a ways behind him, "that is indeed the usual occupant of that chamber, which is off-limits to all students, especially first-years."

"That's not safe even by wizard standards!" Within the chamber, the enormous black beast gave a multi-voiced bellow, flecks of white saliva flying from three fanged mouths.

Professor Quirrell sighed. "It is enchanted not to eat students, just spit them back out through the door. Now, boy, how would you recommend that we deal with this dangerous creature?"

"Uh," Harry stuttered, trying to think over the continued roaring of the chamber's guardian. "Uh. If it's like the Cerberus from the Muggle legend of Orpheus and Eurydice, then we have to sing it to sleep so we can pass –"

"Avada Kedavra."

The three-headed beast fell over.

Harry looked back at Professor Quirrell, who was giving him a look of extreme disappointment, as if to ask whether Harry had attended any of his classes, ever.

"I sort of assumed," Harry said, still trying to catch his breath, "that going through this challenge in any way except the one used by first-years, might perhaps trigger an alarm."

“That is a lie, boy, you simply did not remember your lessons when you faced the occasion in true life. As for alarms, I have spent months befuddling all the wards and trip signs upon these chambers.”

“Then why did you send me in first, exactly?”

Professor Quirrell just smiled. It looked significantly more evil than usual.

“Never mind,” Harry said, and walked slowly into the chamber, his limbs still shaking.

The chamber was all of stone, illuminated by a pale blue light that shone from arched nooks carved into the wall; as if the light of a grey sky were passing through windows, though there were no windows. At the far end of the chamber was a wooden trapdoor upon the floor, with a single ring attached. In the middle of the chamber lay a gigantic dead dog with three lifeless heads.

Harry turned toward one of the arched nooks and looked inside it. There was nothing there but the sourceless blue glow, so he walked over and looked in the next one, also scrutinizing the wall as he passed.

“What,” said Professor Quirrell, “are you doing?”

“Searching the room,” Harry said. “There could be a clue, or an inscription, or a key we’ll need later, or something –”

“Are you serious, or are you deliberately trying to slow us down? Answer in Parseltongue.”

Harry looked back. “Wass sseriouss,” hissed Harry. “Would have done ssame if came by myself.”

Professor Quirrell briefly massaged his forehead. “I confess,” he said, “that your approach would serve you well in, say, exploring the tomb of Amon-Set, so I will not quite call you an idiot, but still. The false puzzle, the outer form of the challenge, is a game meant for first-years. We simply go down through the trapdoor.”

Beneath the trapdoor was a gigantic plant, something like an enormous dieffenbachia with wide leaves emerging from the central stem like a spiral staircase, but darker-colored than a normal dieffenbachia, with tendril-like vines emerging from the central stem and hanging down. The base spread out wide with bigger leaves and tendrils, as though promising to cushion anyone’s fall. Beneath was another stone chamber like the first, with the same nooks like false arched windows, emitting the same grey-blue light.

"The obvious thought is to fly down on the broomstick in my pouch, or toss something heavy to see if those tendrils are traps," Harry said, peering down. "But I'm guessing you'll say that we just walk down the leaves." They certainly looked like they were meant to be a spiral staircase.

"After you," said Professor Quirrell.

Harry carefully put a foot down on a leaf and found that it indeed supported his weight. Then Harry took a last look around the room before departing, to see if there was anything worth noticing.

The enormous dead dog called enough attention to itself that it was hard to focus on anything else.

"Professor Quirrell," Harry said, omitting the phrase your approach to dealing with obstacles has certain drawbacks, "what if somebody looks in the door and sees that the Cerberus is dead?"

"Then they have probably already noticed something wrong with Snape," said Professor Quirrell. "But since you insist..." The Defense Professor walked over to the three-headed corpse and placed his wand against it. He began a Latin-sounding incantation that was accompanied by a sense of rising apprehension, the Boy-Who-Lived feeling the Dark Lord's power as he always had.

The last word spoken was "Inferius" and it was accompanied by a final surge of STOP, DON'T.

And the three-headed dog rose to a stand, its six eyes dull and blank, turning to watch the door once more.

Harry stared at the huge Inferus with a horrible sinking sensation in his stomach, the third-worst feeling he'd ever felt in his life.

He knew then that he'd seen and sensed this procedure before, only without the spoken Latin.

The centaur who'd confronted him in the Forbidden Forest was dead. The Defense Professor had hit it with a real Avada Kedavra, not a fake one.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Harry had thought that if he could just get Hermione back then he could return to the code of nobody dying, the ethic of Batman, most people went through their whole lives without anyone getting killed on whatever adventures they had.

And that was not to be.

He hadn't even noticed, the day he lost his last chance to win. Even if Hermione was resurrected, now, Harry wouldn't have come through the whole mess without anyone getting killed.

He hadn't even learned the centaur's name.

Harry said nothing aloud. The Defense Professor would either confirm the accusation in Parseltongue or lie in plain speech, and either way the Defense Professor would have more reason to suspect Harry's next actions. But Harry knew that – although he didn't know how he would stop Professor Quirrell, although he didn't dare any positive act of betrayal, maybe not even making the decision, until it was almost time to win – there would never be an amicable settlement between him and Lord Voldemort, for those two different spirits could not exist in the same world.

And it was like that resolution, that knowledge of opposition, invoked a strength from what Harry had thought of as his dark side. Harry had stopped trying to call deliberately on his dark side after the day he'd killed the troll. But his dark side had never been something separate from him. It had been something remembered from Tom Riddle. Harry didn't know how that had happened, but taking the assumption and running with it, whatever echoes of cognitive skill were in his dark side should be there for him to use. Not as a separate mode, as Harry had conceptualized at first, but just as neural patterns with a strong tendency to chain into one another since they had once formed part of a connected whole.

This unfortunately did not change that Professor Quirrell had the same skills with far more life experience backing them up, and also had the gun.

Harry turned, and set foot on the giant plant, and began to walk down the spiral staircase provided by the leaves. It had taken Harry too long this time, but he'd recovered himself to some degree, despite the grief still weighing him down like thick water. It wasn't a cold steel rod in his spine, but it was something straight and solid nonetheless. He was going to play this through, see Hermione returned to life first, and then, somehow, stop Professor Quirrell. Or stop Professor Quirrell first and then get the Stone himself. There had to be something, some possibility, some opportunity that would present itself, some way to stop Voldemort and return Hermione to life...

Harry continued his descent.

Behind him, the three-headed dog waited, guarding the gate.

THE TRUTH, PART IV

THE spiraling leaves of the gigantic dieffenbachia felt like forest loam beneath Harry's shoes, not as unyielding as concrete, but supporting his weight. Harry kept a wary eye on the tendrils, but they remained passive.

When Harry reached the bottom of the leafy spiral staircase, the tendrils suddenly whipped out and grasped Harry's arms and legs.

After a brief struggle, Harry allowed himself to go limp.

"Interesting," said Professor Quirrell, as he floated down from above, not touching any of the plant's leaves or tendrils. "I notice that you seem to have no trouble losing to a plant."

Harry looked more closely at the Defense Professor, seeing him now without the lens of panic. Professor Quirrell was upright and moving, flying without apparent difficulty; the sense of doom about him was strong. But his eyes were still sunken in the skull, his arms thin and wasted. The sickness had not been bluff, and the obvious hypothesis was that the Defense Professor had recently eaten another unicorn to temporarily regain some strength.

And the Defense Professor was also speaking like the mask of Professor Quirrell, not like Lord Voldemort, which might not be a bad thing from Harry's perspective. Harry didn't know why – unless it was that the Defense Professor still needed him for something – but it certainly seemed to be in Harry's own interests to play along.

"You specifically let me walk into this trap, Professor," Harry answered, just the way he'd have spoken to Professor Quirrell. Roles, masks, remind him of how it was between us... "On my own, I'd have used my broomstick."

"Perhaps. How would an ordinary first-year solve this challenge? If they had their wand, that is." The plant was now reaching tendrils out toward Professor Quirrell, but Professor Quirrell was hovering just out of their reach.

Harry had now remembered Professor Sprout talking about a Devil's Snare plant, which the Herbology textbook had said liked cool, dark places like caves – though how that could be true of a leafy plant was anyone's guess. "At a guess, I'd say this is a Devil's Snare plant and it might retreat from light

or heat. So maybe a first-year could use Lumos? Today I'd use Inflammare, but I didn't learn that spell until May."

A twirl of the Defense Professor's wand, and a pattern of sprays of liquid shot out from it, striking the plant near the bases of its tendrils, hitting with a quiet splat and then a quiet hissing. All the tendrils touching Harry frantically shot back and began to beat at the growing wounds appearing on the plant's skin, as if trying to remove the pain-stimulus; something about the plant gave the impression that it was screaming soundlessly.

Professor Quirrell finished drifting downward. "Now it is afraid of light, heat, acid, and me."

Harry stepped off the final leaves onto the floor, after a careful glance at his robes and then the floor to make sure that none of the acid had splashed anywhere. Harry had begun to suspect that Professor Quirrell was trying to make some sort of point, but Harry did not know what that point might be. "I thought we were on a mission, Professor. I can't stop you, but is it smart to spend this much time on messing with me?"

"Oh, we have time," said Professor Quirrell, sounding amused. "There would be a great uproar if we were discovered here, guarded by an Inferius. You did not act like you had heard of such an uproar at your Quidditch match, before you arrived in this time and spoke to Snape as you did."

A slight chill came over Harry, as he comprehended this. Anything he did to beat Professor Quirrell would have to not disrupt the school, or at least the Quidditch game, because it hadn't disrupted the Quidditch game. Even if enough forces could be called in to subdue Lord Voldemort, it might not be easy to do it without Professor McGonagall or Professor Flitwick or anyone else at the Quidditch game noticing...

Fighting a smart enemy was hard.

And even so... even so it seemed to Harry that if he stood in Professor Quirrell's shoes, he would not be having leisurely conversations and playing mind games. Professor Quirrell was gaining something by taking his time here. But what? Was there some other process that had to run to completion?

"By the by, have you betrayed me yet?" said Professor Quirrell.

"Have not betrayed you yet," Harry hissed.

The Defense Professor gestured pointedly with the gun he was now holding in his left hand, and Harry walked ahead to the great wooden door at the end of the room, and opened it.



The next chamber was smaller in diameter, with a higher ceiling. The light shining out of the arched alcoves was white, instead of blue.

Around them whizzed hundreds of winged keys, beating frantically through the air. After watching for a few seconds, it became clear that only a single key was the golden color of a Snitch – though it was moving slower than a Snitch in a real Quidditch game.

On the other end of the room was a door containing a large, prominent keyhole.

Against the left wall leaned a broomstick, the school's workhorse Cleansweep Seven.

"Professor," Harry said, staring up at the clouds and flocks of whizzing keys, "you said you would answer my questions. What exactly is all this about? If you think you've secured a door so that it won't open without a key, you keep the key in a safe place and only give a copy to authorized entrants. You don't give the key wings and then leave a broomstick propped against the wall. So what the heck are we doing in here and what is going on? It's an obvious guess that the magic mirror is the only real factor guarding the Stone, but why the rest of this – and why encourage first-years to come here?"

"I am truly not sure," said the Defense Professor. He had entered the room and taken up station well to Harry's right, maintaining the distance between them. "But I shall answer, as I said I would. Dumbledore's way is to do a dozen things which seem mad, and then only eight of them, or perhaps nine, conceal an inner meaning. My guess is that Dumbledore intends to make it seem like I am invited to send a student as my proxy. Precisely so that Lord Voldemort, as Dumbledore conceives of him, is less tempted to think himself clever by doing so. Imagine Dumbledore first considering the issue of how to ward the Stone. Imagine Dumbledore considering whether to set true dangers to guard the Mirror. Imagine him imagining some young student blundering through those dangers at my behest. I think that is what Dumbledore is trying to avoid, by making it seem as though that strategy is invited, and so not cunning. Unless, of course, I have misunderstood what Dumbledore thinks Lord Voldemort will think." Professor Quirrell grinned, and it looked just as natural, on him, as any grin he'd shown Harry before. "Plotting does not come naturally to Dumbledore, but he tries because he must. To that task Dumbledore brings intelligence, dedication, the ability to learn from his mistakes, and an utter lack of native talent. He is marvelously hard to predict for that reason alone."

Harry turned away, looking at the door on the opposite side of the room. It wasn't a game to him, Professor. "My guess is that the intended solution for first-years is to ignore the broomstick and use Wingardium Leviosa to grab the key, since this isn't a Quidditch game and there are no rules forbidding that. So what absurdly overpowered spell are you going to unleash on this one, then?"

There was a brief silence but for the whizzing of keys.

Harry took several steps away from Professor Quirrell. "I probably shouldn't have said that, should I."

"Oh, no," Professor Quirrell said. "I think that is a quite reasonable thing to say to the most powerful Dark Wizard in the world when he is standing not a dozen paces from you."

Professor Quirrell put his wand back into the sleeve of his other hand, the hand that sometimes held the gun.

Then the Defense Professor reached into his mouth and took out what appeared to be a tooth. He tossed the false tooth high in the air, and when it came down, it had transformed into a wand that sparked a strange sense of recognition in Harry's mind, as though some part of him recognized that wand as being... part of him...

Thirteen and a half inches, yew, with a core of phoenix feather. Harry had memorized the information when the wandmaker Olli-something had given it, because it had seemed like it might be Plot-Relevant. The event, and the thinking that had underlain it, both felt a lifetime distant.

The Defense Professor raised that wand, and traced in the air a flaming rune that was all jagged edges and malevolence; Harry took another instinctive step back. Then Professor Quirrell spoke. "Az-reth. Az-reth. Az-reth."

The flaming rune began pouring out fire that was... twisted, as though the jagged edges of the rune had become the nature of the fire itself. The fire was blazing crimson, shaded further red than blood, glowing as searingly intense as an arc-welder. That brilliance in that shade seemed wrong in its own right, like nothing shaded so far red should give off that much light; and the searing crimson was shot through with veins of black that seemed to suck the light from the fire. Within the blackened fire, outlined in the interplay of crimson and darkness, animal shapes twisted wildly from one predator to another, cobra to hyena to scorpion.

"Az-reth. Az-reth. Az-reth." When Professor Quirrell had repeated the

word six times, as much black-crimson fire had poured out as the volume of a small bush.

The cursed fire slowed in its changes as Professor Quirrell locked eyes upon it, taking on a single form, the form of a blackened blood-burning phoenix.

And something told Harry with a terrible certainty that if that black burning phoenix met Fawkes, the true phoenix would die and never be reborn.

Professor Quirrell made a single gesture with his wand, and the blackened fire went soaring across the room. It met the door and its keyhole, and with a single sweep of crimson-burning wings, most of the door and part of the archway was consumed. Then the tainted crimson blaze swept on.

Harry had only a glance through the hole to see huge statues just beginning to raise swords and clubs, when the blackened fire came among them, and they cracked and burned.

When it ended, the blackened-fire phoenix swept back in through the hole, and hovered above Professor Quirrell's left shoulder, the sun-intense crimson claws staying an inch from his robes.

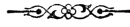
"Go on ahead," said Professor Quirrell. "It's safe now."

Harry walked forward, needing to invoke his dark side's cognitive patterns in order to maintain calm enough to do it. Harry stepped over the glowing edges of the remaining part of the door, and gazed at a chessboard of ruined huge chess-pieces. The alternating tiles of black and white marble on the floor started five meters after the ruined doorway, and extended from wall to wall, but stopped five meters short of the next door on the opposite side of the room. The ceiling was significantly higher than any of the statues should have been able to reach.

"I would guess," Harry said, and his dark side's cognitive patterns kept his voice calm, "that the intended solution is to fly over the statues using the broomstick from the previous room, since it wasn't actually needed to get the key?"

From behind, Professor Quirrell laughed, and it was Lord Voldemort's laugh. "Proceed," said a voice grown colder and higher. "Go to the next room. I wish to see what you will make of what is there."

Arranged by Dumbledore for first-years, Harry reminded himself, it *will* be safe, and he walked across the ruined chessboard, laid his hand upon that door's handle, and pushed it inward.



Half a second later, Harry slammed the door and leapt back.

It took Harry several seconds to master his breathing, and master himself. From behind the door came continued loud bellows, and great slams as of a rock club pounding the floor.

"I suppose," Harry said in a voice grown cold as well, "that since Dumbledore would hardly put a real mountain troll in there, the next challenge is an illusion of my worst memories. Like a Dementor, with the memory projected into the outside world. Very amusing, Professor."

Professor Quirrell advanced himself toward the door, and Harry stepped well aside. Besides the sense of doom that was now strong about the Professor, Harry's dark side or just plain instinct was advising him not to get anywhere near that black-crimson fire hovering above Professor Quirrell's shoulder.

Professor Quirrell swung open the door, and looked in. "Hm," Professor Quirrell said. "Just the troll, as you say. Ah, well. I had hoped to learn something about you more interesting than that. What lies within is a Kokorekkus, also known as the common boggart."

"A boggart? What does that – no, I suppose I know what it does."

"A boggart," Professor Quirrell said, and now his voice was again that of a Hogwarts Professor lecturing, "gravitates to dark enclosures that are rarely opened, such as a neglected cupboard in the attic. It seeks to be left alone, and it will manifest in whatever form it thinks will scare you away."

"Scare me away?" Harry said. "I killed the troll."

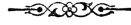
"You leapt backward out of the room without thinking. A boggart seeks out the instinctive flinch, not the reasoned threat. Else it would have selected something more believable. In any case, the standard counter-Charm for a boggart is, of course, Fiendfyre." Professor Quirrell gestured, and the blackened fire leapt off his shoulder and poured through the doorway.

From within the room there was a single squeak, and then nothing.

They advanced into the boggart's former room, Professor Quirrell going first this time. With the seeming mountain troll gone, the room was just another huge chamber lit by sconces of cold blue light.

Professor Quirrell's gaze seemed distant, thoughtful. He crossed the room without waiting for Harry, and swung open the door on the opposite wall of his own accord.

Harry followed after, and not closely.



The next chamber contained a cauldron, a rack of bottled ingredients, chopping boards, stirring sticks, and the other apparatus of Potions. The light coming from the arched alcoves was white instead of blue, presumably because color vision was important to Potions-brewing. Professor Quirrell was already standing next to the brewing apparatus, scrutinizing a long parchment he had picked up. The door to the next chamber was guarded by a curtain of purple fire that would have looked a lot more threatening, if it hadn't seemed pale and weak by comparison to the blackened flame hovering over Professor Quirrell's shoulder.

Harry's suspension of disbelief had already checked out on vacation at this point, so he didn't say anything about how real-world security systems had the goal of distinguishing authorized from unauthorized personnel, which meant issuing challenges that behaved differently around people who were or weren't supposed to be there. For example, a good security challenge would be testing whether the entrant knew a lock combination that only authorized people had been told, and a bad security challenge would be testing whether the entrant could brew a potion according to written instructions that had been helpfully included.

Professor Quirrell tossed the parchment toward Harry, and it fluttered to the ground between them. "What do you make of this?" said Professor Quirrell, who then stepped back so that Harry could come forward and pick up the parchment.

"Nope," Harry said after skimming the parchment. "Testing whether the entrant can solve a ridiculously straightforward logic puzzle about the order of the ingredients is still not a challenge that behaves differently for authorized and unauthorized personnel. It doesn't matter if you use a more interesting logic puzzle about three idols or a line of people wearing colored hats, you're still completely missing the point."

"Look at the other side," said Professor Quirrell.

Harry turned over the two-foot parchment.

On the other side, written in tiny letters, was the longest list of brewing instructions Harry had ever seen. "What on Earth –"

"A potion of effulgence, to quench the purple fire," Professor Quirrell said. "It is made by adding the same ingredients, over and over again, in slightly different ways. Imagine some eager young group of first-years, passing all the other chambers, thinking they are just about to reach the magic mirror,

and then encountering this task. This room is the handiwork of the Potions Master indeed.”

Harry glanced pointedly at the blackfire shape on Professor Quirrell’s shoulder. “Fire can’t beat fire?”

“It can,” said Professor Quirrell. “I am not sure it should. Suppose this room is trapped?”

Harry did not want to be stuck brewing this potion for laughs, or for whatever other reason Professor Quirrell was taking them through these chambers so slowly. The potion’s recipe had thirty-five separate occasions for adding bellflowers, fourteen times to add ‘a lock of bright hair’... “Maybe the potion gives off a lethal gas that is fatal to adult wizards but not children. Or any of a hundred other deadly tricks, if we’re suddenly being serious. Are we being serious?”

“This room is the handiwork of Severus Snape,” Professor Quirrell said, once more looking thoughtful. “Snape is not a bystander in this game, not quite. He lacks Dumbledore’s intelligence, but possesses the killing intent that Dumbledore never had.”

“Well, whatever’s going on here, it doesn’t actually keep out children,” Harry observed. “Lots of first-years made it through. And if you can somehow keep out everyone except children, then that, from Dumbledore’s perspective, forces Lord Voldemort to possess a child to enter. I don’t see the point, given their goals.”

“Indeed,” Professor Quirrell said, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “But see, boy, this room lacks the triggers and trip signs that are upon the others. There are no subtle wards to be defeated. It is as if I am invited to bypass the Potion and simply enter – but Snape knows that Lord Voldemort will perceive this. If in fact there was a trap laid for anyone who did not brew the potion, then it would be wiser to lay wards, and give no sign that this room was different from the others.”

Harry listened, frowning in concentration. “So... the only point of leaving off the detection webs is to make you not bulldoze this room.”

“I expect Snape expects me to deduce that as well,” the Defense Professor said. “And past that point I cannot predict at what level he thinks I will play. I am patient, and I have given myself plenty of time for this endeavor. But Snape does not know me, he only knows Lord Voldemort. He has sometimes seen Lord Voldemort shriek in frustration, and act on impulses that appear counterproductive. Consider this matter from Snape’s perspective: it is the

Potions Master of Hogwarts telling Lord Voldemort to be patient and follow instructions if he wants to enter, as though Lord Voldemort were a mere schoolboy. I would find it easy to comply, smiling the while, and take my vengeance later. But Snape does not know that Lord Voldemort finds it easy to think this way.” Professor Quirrell looked at Harry. “Boy, you saw me floating in the air by the Devil’s Snare, did you not?”

Harry nodded. Then he noticed his confusion. “My Charms textbook says that it’s impossible for wizards to levitate themselves.”

“Yes,” said Professor Quirrell, “that is what it says in your Charms textbook. No wizard may levitate themselves, or any object supporting their own weight; it is like trying to lift yourself up by your own bootstraps. Yet Lord Voldemort alone can fly – how? Answer as quickly as you can.”

If the question was answerable by a first-year student – “You had someone else cast broomstick enchantments on your underwear, then you Obliviated them.”

“Not quite,” said Professor Quirrell. “The broomstick enchantments require a long narrow shape, which must be solid. Cloth will not do.”

Harry’s eyebrows furrowed. “How long does the shape have to be? Can you attach some short broomstick rods to a fabric harness, and fly using those?”

“Indeed, at first I strapped enchanted rods to my arms and legs, but that was only to teach myself a new mode of flight.” Professor Quirrell drew back the sleeve of his robes, revealing the bare arm. “As you can see, I have nothing up my sleeve right now.”

Harry absorbed this further constraint. “You had someone cast broomstick enchantments on your bones?”

Professor Quirrell sighed. “And that was one of Voldemort’s most feared feats, or so I am told. After all these years, and some amount of reluctant Legilimency, I still do not truly comprehend what is wrong with ordinary people... But you are not one of them. It is time for you to begin contributing to this expedition. You have known Severus Snape more recently than I. Tell me your own analysis of this room.”

Harry hesitated, trying to look thoughtful.

“I will mention,” said Professor Quirrell, as the blackened-fire-phoenix on his shoulder seemed to extend its head and glare at Harry, “that if you knowingly allow me to fail, I will call it betrayal. I remind you that the Stone is key to Miss Granger’s resurrection, and that I hold hostage the lives of

hundreds of students.”

“I remember,” Harry said, and on the heels of this Harry’s wonderful inventive brain came up with a thought.

Harry wasn’t sure if he should say it.

The silence stretched.

“Have you thought of anything yet?” said Professor Quirrell. “Answer in Parseltongue.”

No, this was not going to be easy, not against a smart opponent who could force you to tell the literal truth at any time. “Severus, at least the modern-day Severus, respects your intelligence a great deal,” Harry said instead. “I think... I think he might expect Voldemort to believe that Severus wouldn’t believe that Voldemort could pass his test of patience, but Severus would expect Voldemort to pass it.”

Professor Quirrell nodded. “That is a plausible theory. Do you believe it yourself? Answer in Parseltongue.”

“Yes,” Harry hissed. It might not be safe to withhold information, not even thoughts and ideas... “Therefore, the point of this room is to delay Lord Voldemort for an hour. And if I wanted to kill you, believing what Dumbledore believes, the obvious thing to try would be a Dementor’s Kiss. I mean, they think you’re a disembodied soul – are you, by the way?”

Professor Quirrell was still. “Dumbledore would not think of that method,” the Defense Professor said after a time. “But Severus might.” Professor Quirrell began to tap a finger against his cheek, his gaze distant. “You have power over Dementors, boy, can you tell me if there are any nearby?”

Harry closed his eyes. If there were voids in the world, he could not feel them. “None that I can sense.”

“Answer in Parseltongue.”

“Do not ssense life-eaterss.”

“But you were being honest with me when you suggested the possibility? You intended no clever trickery?”

“Wass honessst. Not trick.”

“Perhaps there is some means by which Dementors might be concealed, being told to leap out and eat a possessing soul if they see one...” Professor Quirrell was still tapping his cheek. “It is not impossible that I would qualify. Or it can be told to eat anyone who passes through this room too quickly, or anyone who is not a child. Bearing in mind that I hold Hermione and

hundreds of other students hostage over you, would you use your power over Dementors to defend me, if a Dementor unmasked itself? Answer in Parseltongue.”

“Don’t know,” Harry hissed.

“Life-eaterss cannot desstroy me, I think,” hissed Professor Quirrell. “And I will ssimply abandon thiss body if they approach too closse. Sshall return sswiftly thiss time, and then there will be no sstopping me. Will torture your parentss for yearss, to punissh you for balking me. Hundredss of hosstage sstudentss die, including thosse you call friendss. Now I assk again. Will you usse power over life-eaterss to protect me, if life-eaterss come?”

“Yess,” Harry whispered. The sadness and horror that Harry had pushed down flared up again, and his dark side had no stored patterns for handling the emotions. Why, Professor Quirrell, why are you like this...

Professor Quirrell smiled. “That reminds me. Have you betrayed me yet?”

“Have not betrayed you yet.”

Professor Quirrell went over to the Potions equipment, and began chopping a root one-handed, the knife moving almost invisibly fast and with no apparent effort. The Fiendfyre phoenix drifted over to the opposite corner of the room and waited there. “All matters considered in their uncertainty, it seems wiser to expend the time to pass this room as a first-year would,” said the Defense Professor. “We may as well talk while we are waiting. You had questions, boy? I said that I would answer them, so ask.”

THE TRUTH, PART V, ANSWERS AND RIDDLES

THE Defense Professor had set up a cauldron, floating it into place with a wave of his wand, another wave starting a fire beneath it. A brief circling of the Defense Professor's finger had set in motion a long-handled spoon, and it had continued stirring the cauldron without being held. Now the Defense Professor was measuring out a heap of flowers from a large jar, what Harry supposed to be bellflowers; the indigo petals seemed luminous in the white light of the walls, and curved inward in a way that gave the impression of a desire for privacy. The first of these flowers had been added to the potion at once, but then the cauldron had just gone on stirring itself for a while.

The Defense Professor had assumed a position from which he could see Harry just by turning his head slightly, and Harry knew that he was within the Defense Professor's peripheral vision.

In the corner a Fiendfyre phoenix waited, some of the nearby stone beginning to gloss over as it melted to greater smoothness. The burning wings shed crimson light that gave everything in the room a tint of blood, and reflected in scarlet sparks from the glassware.

"Time is wasting," said Professor Quirrell. "Ask your questions, if you have them."

Why, Professor Quirrell, why, why must you be this way, why make yourself the monster, why Lord Voldemort, I know you might not want the same things I do, but I can't imagine what you want that makes this the best way to get it...

That was what Harry's brain wanted to know.

What Harry needed to know was... some way out of what was going to happen next. But the Defense Professor had said that he wouldn't talk about his future plans. It was strange enough that the Defense Professor was willing to talk about anything, that had to contradict one of his Rules...

"I'm thinking," Harry said aloud.

Professor Quirrell smiled slightly. He was using a pestle to grind the

potion's first magical ingredient, a glowing red hexagon. "I quite understand," said the Defense Professor. "But do not think over-long, child."

Goals: Prevent Lord Voldemort from harming people, find a way to kill or neutralise him, but first get the Stone and resurrect Hermione...

... convince Professor Quirrell to STOP THIS...

Harry swallowed, pushing down the emotion, trying not to let the water reach his eyes. Tears probably wouldn't make a good impression on Lord Voldemort. Professor Quirrell was already frowning, though from the direction of his gaze he was examining a leaf colored in vivid shades of white, green, and purple.

There wasn't any obvious way to reach any of the goals, not yet. All Harry could do was ask the questions that seemed most likely to provide useful information, even if Harry didn't yet have a plan.

So we just ask about whatever seems most interesting? said Harry's Ravenclaw side. I'm up for that.

Shut up, Harry told the voice; and then, on further reflection, decided that he was no longer pretending it was there.

Four topics came to Harry's mind as being priorities from the standpoint of curiosity about important things. Four questions, then, four major subjects, to try to fit in while this potion was still being brewed.

Four questions...

"I ask my first question," Harry said. "What really happened on the night of October 31st, 1981?" Why was that night different from all other nights... "I would like the entire story, please."

The question of how and why Lord Voldemort had survived his apparent death seemed likely to matter for future planning.

"I expected you would ask that," Professor Quirrell said, dropping a bellflower and a white glittering stone into the potion. "To begin, everything I told you about the horcrux spell is true; as you should realise, since I spoke in Parseltongue."

Harry nodded.

"Within seconds after you learned the details of the spell, you perceived the central flaw, and began pondering how the spell might be improved. Do you think the young Tom Riddle was any different?"

Harry shook his head.

"Well, he was," said Professor Quirrell. "Whenever I was tempted to despair of you, I reminded myself how I was an idiot at twice your age. When

I was fifteen I made myself a horcrux as a certain book had shown me, using the death of Abigail Myrtle beneath the eyes of Slytherin's basilisk. I planned to make a new horcrux every year after I left Hogwarts, and call that my fallback plan if my other hopes of immortality did not come to fruition. In retrospect, the young Tom Riddle was grasping straws. The thought of making a better horcrux, of not being content with the spell I had already learned... this thought did not come to me until I had grasped the stupidity of ordinary people, and realised which follies of theirs I had imitated. But in time I learned the habit that you inherited from me, to ask in every instance how it might be done better. To be content with the spell I had learned from a book, when it bore only a faint resemblance to what I truly wanted? Absurd! And so I set forth to create a better spell."

"You have true immortality, now?" Harry was aware that, even with everything else going on, this was a question more important than war and strategy.

"Indeed," said Professor Quirrell. He paused in his Potions work and turned to face Harry fully; there was a look of exultation in the man's eyes that Harry had never seen there before. "In all the Darkest Arts I could find, in all the interdicted secrets to which Slytherin's Monster gave me keys, in all the lore remembered among wizardkind, I found only hints and smatterings of what I needed. So I rewove it and remade it, and devised a new ritual based on new principles. I kept that ritual burning in my mind for years, perfecting it in imagination, pondering its meaning and making fine adjustments, waiting for the intention to stabilise. At last I dared to invoke my ritual, an invented sacrificial ritual, based on a principle untested by all known magic. And I lived, and yet live." The Defense Professor spoke with quiet triumph, as though the act itself was so great that no words could ever do it justice. "I still use the word 'horcrux', but only from sentiment. It is a new thing entirely, the greatest of all my creations."

"As one of my questions you said you'd answer, I ask how to cast that spell," Harry said.

"Denied." The Defense Professor turned back to his potion, dropping in a gray-flecked white feather and a bellflower. "I had thought perhaps to teach you when you were older, for no Tom Riddle would be content otherwise; but I have changed my mind."

Memory is a hard thing to recall, sometimes, and Harry had been trying to remember if Professor Quirrell had dropped any hints about this subject

before. Something about Professor Quirrell's phrasing sparked a memory: Perhaps you will be told when you are older...

"There are still physical anchors for your immortality," Harry said aloud. "It resembles the old horcrux spell by that much, which is another reason you still call them horcruxes." It was dangerous to say aloud, but Harry needed to know. "If I'm wrong, you can always deny it in Parseltongue."

Professor Quirrell was smiling evilly. "Your guesss iss right, boy, for all the good it does you."

Unfortunately, that wasn't a difficult vulnerability to cover if the Enemy was smart. Harry wouldn't ordinarily have made the suggestion, just in case the Enemy hadn't thought of it for themselves, but in this case he'd already made it. "One horcrux dropped into an active volcano, weighted so it would sink into the Earth's mantle," Harry said heavily. "The same place I thought of dropping the Dementor if I couldn't destroy it. And then you asked me where else I would hide something if I didn't want anyone to find it ever again. One horcrux buried kilometers down, in an anonymous cubic meter of the Earth's crust. One horcrux you dropped into the Mariana Trench. One horcrux floating high in the stratosphere, transparent. Even you don't know where they are, because you Obliviated the exact details from your memory. And the last horcrux is the Pioneer 11 plaque that you snuck into NASA and modified. It's where you get your image of the stars, when you cast the spell of starlight. Fire, earth, water, air, void." Something of a riddle, the Defense Professor had called it, and therefore Harry had remembered it. Something of a Riddle.

"Indeed," said the Defense Professor. "It did give me something of a shock when you remembered it that quickly, but I suppose it makes no difference; all five are beyond my reach, or yours."

That might not be true, especially if there was some way to trace the magical connection somehow and determine the location... though presumably Voldemort would have done his best to obscure it... but what magic had done, magic might be able to defeat. Pioneer 11 might be far away by wizard standards, but NASA knew exactly where it was, and it was probably a lot more reachable if you could use magic to tell the Tsiolkovsky rocket equation to bugger off...

A sudden note of worry plucked at Harry's mind. There was no rule saying the Defense Professor needed to have told the truth about which interstellar probe he'd horcruxed, and if Harry recalled correctly, communication

and tracking of the Pioneer 10 probe had been lost shortly after the Jupiter fly-by.

Why wouldn't Professor Quirrell have just horcruxed them both?

The obvious next thought came to Harry. It was something that ought not to be suggested, if the Enemy had not thought of it. But it seemed extremely probable that the Enemy had thought of it.

"Tell me, teacher," Harry hissed, "would desstroying thosse five anchors sslay you?"

"Why do you assk?" hissed the Defense Professor, with a lilt to the hiss that Parseltongue translated as snakish amusement. "Do you ssuspect that ansswer is no?"

Harry couldn't think of how to answer, though he strongly suspected that it didn't matter in any case.

"Your ssuspicion iss right, boy. Desstroying thosse five would not render me mortal."

Harry's throat felt a bit dry again. If the spell had no disastrous cost associated with it... "How many anchorss did you make?"

"Would not ordinarily ssay, but iss clear you have already guesssed." The Defense Professor's smile widened. "Ansswer iss that I do not know. Sstopped counting ssomewhere around one hundred and sseven. Ssimply made a habit of it each time I murdered ssomeone in private."

Over one hundred murders, in private, before Lord Voldemort had stopped counting. And even worse news – "Your immortality spell still requires a human death? Why?"

"Great creation maintainss life and magic within devicess created by ssacrificing life and magic of otherss." Again that hissing snake laughter. "Liked falsse desscription of previousss horcrux spell sso much, sso dissappointed when realissed truth of it, thoughtss of improved version came out in that sshape."

Harry wasn't sure why the Defense Professor was giving him all this vital information, but there had to be a reason, and that was making him nervous. "So you really are a disembodied spirit possessing Quirinus Quirrell."

"Yess. I sshall return sswiftly, if thiss body iss killed. Will be greatly annoyed, and vengeful. I am telling you this, boy, so that you do not try anything stupid."

"I understand," Harry said. He did his best to organize his thoughts, remember what he'd meant to ask next, while the Defense Professor turned

his eyes back to the potion. The man's left hand was dribbling crushed seashell into the cauldron, while his right hand dropped in another bellflower. "So what did happen on October 31st? You... tried to turn the baby Harry Potter into a horcrux, either the new kind or the old kind. You did it deliberately, because you told Lily Potter," Harry took a breath. Now that he knew why the chills were there, he could endure them. "Very well, I accept the bargain. Yourself to die, and the child to live. Now drop your wand so that I can murder you." In retrospect, it was clear that Harry had remembered that event mainly from Lord Voldemort's perspective, and only at the very end had he seen it through the baby Harry Potter's eyes. "What did you do? Why did you do it?"

"Trelawney's prophecy," Professor Quirrell said. His hand tapped a bellflower with a strip of copper before dropping it in. "I spent long days pondering it, after Snape brought the prophecy to me. Prophecies are never trivial things. And how shall I put this in a way that does not make you think stupid things... well, I shall say it, and if you are stupid I shall be annoyed. I was fascinated by the prophecy's assertion that someone would be my equal, because it might mean that person could hold up the other end of an intelligent conversation. After fifty years of being surrounded by gibbering stupidity, I no longer cared whether my reaction might be considered a literary cliché. I was not about to pass up on that opportunity without thinking about it first. And then, you see, I had a clever idea." Professor Quirrell sighed. "It occurred to me how I might fulfill the Prophecy my own way, to my own benefit. I would mark the baby as my equal by casting the old horcrux spell in such fashion as to imprint my own spirit onto the baby's blank slate; it would be a purer copy of myself, since there would be no old self to mix with the new. In some years, when I had become bored with ruling Britain and moved on to other things, I would arrange with the other Tom Riddle that he should appear to vanquish me, and he would rule over the Britain he had saved. We would play the game against each other forever, keeping our lives interesting amid a world of fools. I knew a dramatist would predict that the two of us would end by destroying each other; but I pondered long upon it, and decided that both of us would simply decline to play out the drama. That was my decision and I was confident that it would remain so; both Tom Riddles, I thought, would be too intelligent to truly go down that road. The prophecy seemed to hint that if I destroyed all but a remnant of Harry Potter, then our spirits would not be so different, and we could exist in the same

world.”

“Something went wrong,” Harry said. “Something that blew off the top of the Potters’ home in Godric’s Hollow, gave me the scar on my forehead, and left your burnt body behind.”

Professor Quirrell nodded. His hands had slowed in their Potions work. “The resonance in our magic,” Professor Quirrell said quietly. “When I had shaped the baby’s spirit to be like my own...”

Harry remembered the moment in Azkaban when Professor Quirrell’s Killing Curse had collided with his Patronus. The burning, tearing agony in his forehead, like his head had been about to split in half.

“I cannot count how many times I have thought of that night, rehearsing my mistake, thinking of wiser things I should have done,” said Professor Quirrell. “I later decided that I should have thrown my wand from my hand and changed into my Animagus form. But that night... that night, I instinctively tried to control the chaotic fluctuations in my magic, even as I felt myself burning up from inside. That was the wrong decision, and I failed. So my body was destroyed, even as I overwrote the infant Harry Potter’s mind; either of us destroying all but a remnant of the other. And then...” Professor Quirrell’s expression was controlled. “And then, when I regained consciousness inside my horcruxes, it turned out that my great creation did not work as I had hoped. I should have been able to float free of my horcruxes and possess any victim that consented to me, or that was too weak to refuse me. That was the part of my great creation that failed my intent. As with the original horcrux spell, I would only be able to enter a victim who contacted the physical horcrux... and I had hidden my unnumbered horcruxes in places where nobody would ever find them. Your instinct is correct, boy, this would not be a good time to laugh.”

Harry stayed very quiet.

The Potions-making had come to a temporary pause, a space where no ingredients were added while the cauldron simmered for a time. “I spent most of my time looking at the stars,” Professor Quirrell said, his voice quieter now. The Defense Professor had turned from the potion, staring at the white-illuminated walls of the room. “My remaining hope was the horcruxes I had hidden in the hopeless idiocy of my youth. Imbuing them into ancient locket, instead of anonymous pebbles; guarding them beneath wells of poison in the center of a lake of Inferi, instead of portkeying them into the sea. If someone found one of those, and penetrated their ridiculous

protections... but that seemed like a distant hope. I was not sure I would ever be embodied again. Yet at least I was immortal. The worst of all fates had been averted, my great creation had done that much. I had little left to hope for, and little left to fear. I decided that I would not go insane, since there seemed to be no advantage in it. Instead, I gazed out at the stars and thought, as the Sun slowly diminished behind me. I reflected on the errors of my past life; they were many, in that hindsight. In my imagination I constructed powerful new rituals I might attempt, if I was free to use my magic once more, and yet confident of my immortality. I contemplated ancient riddles at greater length than before, for all that I had once thought myself patient. I knew that if I won free, I would be more powerful by far than in my previous life; but I mostly did not expect that to happen.” Professor Quirrell turned back to the potion. “Nine years and four months after that night, a wandering adventurer named Quirinus Quirrell won past the protections guarding one of my earliest horcruxes. The rest you know. And now, boy, you may say what we both know you are thinking.”

“Um,” Harry said. “It doesn’t seem like a very smart thing to say –”

“Indeed, Mr. Potter. It is not a clever thing to say to me. Not even a little. Not in the slightest. But I know you’re thinking it, and you will go on thinking it and I will go on knowing that until you say it. So speak.”

“So. Um. I realise that this is something that is more obvious in hindsight than in foresight, and I’m certainly not suggesting that you try to correct the error now, but if you are a Dark Lord and you happen to hear about a child who has been prophesied to defeat you, there is a certain spell which is unblockable, unstoppable, and works every single time on anything with a brain –”

“Yes thank you Mr. Potter that thought occurred to me several times over the next nine years.” Professor Quirrell picked up another bellflower and began crumbling it in his bare fist. “I made that principle the centerpiece of my Battle Magic curriculum after I learned its centrality the hard way. It was not the first Rule on the younger Tom Riddle’s list. It is only by harsh experience that we learn which principles take priority over which other principles; as mere words they all sound equally persuasive. In retrospect it would have been better if I had sent Bellatrix to the Potters’ home in my place; but I had a Rule telling me that for such matters I must go myself and not try sending a trusted lieutenant. Yes, I considered the Killing Curse; but I wondered if casting the Killing Curse at an infant would somehow cause

the curse to bounce off and hit me, thus fulfilling the prophecy. How was I to know?"

"So use an axe, it's hard to get a prophecy-fulfilling spell backfire out of an axe," Harry said and then shut up.

"I decided the safest path was to try to fulfill the prophecy on my own terms," Professor Quirrell said. "Needless to say, the next time I hear a prophecy I do not like, I will tear it apart at every possible point of intervention, rather than trying to play along." Professor Quirrell was crushing a rose as though to squeeze the juice out of it, still using his bare fist. "And now everyone thinks the Boy-Who-Lived is somehow immune to the Killing Curse, even though Killing Curses do not ruin houses or leave burnt bodies behind them, because it has not occurred to them that Lord Voldemort would ever use any other spell."

Harry again stayed quiet. It had occurred to Harry that there was another obvious way that Lord Voldemort could have avoided his mistake. Something that might perhaps be easier to see given a Muggle upbringing, instead of the wizarding way of looking at things.

Harry had not yet decided whether to tell Professor Quirrell about his thought; there were both pros and cons to pointing out that particular error.

After a time Professor Quirrell picked up the next Potions ingredient, a strand of what looked like unicorn hair. "I tell you this as a caution," said Professor Quirrell. "Do not expect me to be delayed another nine years, if you somehow destroy this body of mine. I set horcruxes in better places at once, and now even that is unnecessary. Thanks to you, I learned where to find the Resurrection Stone. The Resurrection Stone does not bring back the dead, of course; but it holds a more ancient magic than my own for projecting the seeming of a spirit. And since I am one who has defeated death, Cadmus's Hallow acknowledged me its master, and answered all my will. I have now incorporated it into my great creation." Professor Quirrell smiled slightly. "I had many years earlier considered making that device a horcrux, but decided against it at the time, since I realized that the ring had magic of unknown nature... ah, such ironies does life play upon us. But I digress. You, boy, you brought that about, you freed my spirit to fly where it pleases and seduce the most opportune victim, by being too casual with your secrets. It is a catastrophe for any who oppose me, and you wrought it with one finger drawing wetness on a tea-saucer. This world will be a safer place for all, if you learn the rectitude that wizardborns absorb in childhood. And all this

that I have just said is the truth.”

Harry closed his eyes, and his own hand massaged his forehead; if he had seen it from the outside, it would have looked the mirror of Professor Quirrell in deep thought.

The problem of defeating Professor Quirrell was looking increasingly difficult, even by the standards of the sort of impossible problems that Harry had solved already. If communicating that difficulty was what Professor Quirrell was trying to do, he was succeeding. Harry was starting to seriously consider the possibility that it might be better to offer to rule Britain as Voldemort’s nonhomicidal delegate, if Professor Quirrell himself would just agree to stop killing people all the time. Even mostly.

But that wasn’t likely to happen.

Harry stared at his hands, from where he had sat down upon the floor, feeling sadness shading over into despair. The Lord Voldemort who’d given Harry his dark side had spent that long thinking things over and reflecting on his own thought processes... and had emerged as the calm, clear-headed, and still homicidal Professor Quirrell.

Professor Quirrell added a pinch of golden hair to the potion of effulgence, and that reminded Harry that time was continuing to move; the locks of bright hair were rarer than the bellflowers.

“I ask my second question,” Harry said. “Tell me about the Philosopher’s Stone. Does it do anything besides making Transfigurations permanent? Is it possible to make more Stones, and why is that problem hard?”

Professor Quirrell was bent over the potion, and Harry could not see his face. “Very well, I shall tell you the Stone’s story as I have inferred it. The one and only power of the Stone is the imposition of permanency, to render a temporary form into a true and lasting substance – a power absolutely beyond ordinary spells. Conjurations such as the castle Hogwarts are maintained by a constant well of magic. Even Metamorphmagi cannot manifest golden fingernails and then trim them for sale. It is theorized that the Metamorphmagus curse merely rearranges the substance of their flesh, like a Muggle smith manipulates iron with hammer and tongs; and their body contains no gold. If Merlin himself could create gold from thin air, history does not record it. So the Stone, we can guess even before research, must be a very old thing indeed. In contrast, Nicholas Flamel has been known to the world for a mere six centuries. Tell me the obvious next question to ask, boy, if you wanted to trace the Stone’s history.”

“Um,” Harry said. He rubbed his forehead, concentrating. If the Stone was old, but the world had only known Nicholas Flamel for six centuries... “Was there some other very long-lived wizard who disappeared at around the same time Nicholas Flamel showed up?”

“Close,” said Professor Quirrell. “You recall that six centuries ago there was a Dark Lady called undying, the sorceress Baba Yaga? She was said to be able to heal any wound in herself, to change shape into any form she pleased... she held the Stone of Permanency, obviously. And then one year Baba Yaga agreed to teach Battle Magic at Hogwarts, under an old and respected truce.” Professor Quirrell looked... angry, a look such as Harry had rarely seen on him. “But she was not trusted, and so there was invoked a curse. Some curses are easier to cast when they bind yourself and others alike; Slytherin’s Parselmouth curse is an example of such. In this case, Baba Yaga’s signature, and signatures from every student and teacher of Hogwarts, were placed within an ancient device known as the Goblet of Fire. Baba Yaga swore not to shed a drop of students’ blood, nor take from the students anything that was theirs. In return, the students swore not to shed a drop of Baba Yaga’s blood, nor take from her anything that was hers. So they all signed, with the Goblet of Fire to witness it and punish the transgressor.”

Professor Quirrell picked up a new ingredient, a loose thread of gold wrapped around a pinch of foul-looking substance. “Entering her sixth year at Hogwarts, then, was a witch named Perenelle. And although Perenelle was new-come into the beauty of her youth, her heart was already blacker than Baba Yaga’s own –”

“You’re calling her evil?” Harry said, then realized he had just committed the fallacy of *ad hominem tu quoque*.

“Hush, boy, I am telling the story. Where was I? Ah, yes, Perenelle, the beautiful and covetous. Perenelle seduced the Dark Lady over the months, with gentle touches and flirtations and the shy pretense of innocence. The Dark Lady’s heart was captured, and they became lovers. And then one night Perenelle whispered how she had heard of Baba Yaga’s shape-changing power and how this thought had enflamed her desires; thus Perenelle swayed Baba Yaga to come to her with the Stone in hand, to assume many guises in a single night, for their pleasures. Among other forms Perenelle bid Baba Yaga take the form of a man; and they lay together in the fashion of a man and a woman. But Perenelle had been a virgin until that night. And since they were all rather old-fashioned in those days, the Goblet of Fire accounted that as the shedding

of Perenelle's blood, and the taking of what was hers; thus Baba Yaga was tricked into being forsworn, and the Goblet rendered her defenseless. Then Perenelle killed the unsuspecting Baba Yaga as she slept in Perenelle's bed, killed the Dark Lady who had loved her and come peacefully to Hogwarts under truce; and that was the end of the pact by which Dark Wizards and Witches taught Battle Magic at Hogwarts. For the next few centuries the Goblet of Fire was used to oversee pointless inter-school tournaments, and then it resided in a disused chamber at Beauxbatons, until I finally stole it." Professor Quirrell dropped a pale beige-pink twig into the cauldron, and its color changed to white just as it touched the surface. "But I digress. Perenelle took the Stone from Baba Yaga, and assumed the guise and name of Nicholas Flamel. She also kept her identity as Perenelle, calling herself Flamel's wife. The two have appeared together in public, but that might be done by any number of obvious methods."

"And the Stone's manufacture?" said Harry, his brain working to process all this. "I saw an alchemical recipe for it, in a book –"

"Another lie. Perenelle was making it appear as though 'Nicholas Flamel' had earned the right to live forever by completing a great magic that any could attempt. And she was giving others a false path to pursue, instead of seeking the one true Stone as Perenelle had sought Baba Yaga's." Professor Quirrell looked rather sour. "It should come as no surprise that I spent years trying to master that false recipe. Next you will ask why I did not kidnap, torture, and kill Perenelle after I learned the truth."

This had not in fact been a question that had come into Harry's mind.

Professor Quirrell continued to speak. "The answer is that Perenelle had foreseen and forestalled the ambitions of Dark Wizards like myself. 'Nicholas Flamel' publicly took Unbreakable Vows not to be coerced by any means into relinquishing his Stone – to guard immortality from the covetous, he claimed, as if that were a public service. I was afraid the Stone would be lost forever, if Perenelle died without saying where it was hidden, and her Vow prevented attempts at torture. Further, I had hopes of gaining Perenelle's knowledge, if I could find the right strategy to extract it from her. Though Perenelle began with little lore of her own, she has held hostage the lives of wizards greater than herself, holding out dribs and drabs of healing in exchange for secrets, and small reversals of age in exchange for power. Perenelle does not condescend to bestow any real youth upon others – but if you hear of a wizard who lived, greybearded, to the age of two hundred and fifty, you

may be sure that her hand was in play. By my own generation, the centuries had given Perenelle enough of an advantage that she could raise up Albus Dumbledore as a counterweight to the Dark Lord Grindelwald. When I appeared as Lord Voldemort, Perenelle raised up Dumbledore yet further, parceling out another drop of her hoarded lore whenever Lord Voldemort seemed to gain an advantage. I felt like I ought to be able to figure out something clever to do with that situation, but I never did. I did not attack her directly, for I was not sure of my great creation; it was not impossible that I would someday need to go begging to her for a dollop of reversed age." Professor Quirrell dropped two bellflowers at once into the potion, and they seemed to merge as they touched the bubbling liquid. "But now I am sure of my creation, and so I have decided that the time has come to take the Stone by force."

Harry hesitated. "I would like to hear you answer in Parseltongue, was all of that true?"

"None of it is known to me to be false," said Professor Quirrell. "Telling a tale implies filling in certain gaps; I was not present to observe when Perenelle seduced Baba Yaga. The basics should be mostly correct, I think."

Harry had noticed a trace of confusion. "Then I don't understand why the Stone is here in Hogwarts. Wouldn't the best defense just be hiding it under an anonymous rock in Greenland?"

"Perhaps she respected my abilities as a particularly good finder," said the Defense Professor. He appeared focused on his cauldron as he dipped a bellflower into a jar of liquid labeled with the Potions symbol for rainwater.

We are very much alike, the Defense Professor and I, in some ways if not others. If I imagine what I'd do, given his problem...

"Did you bluff everyone into believing you had some way of finding the Stone?" Harry said aloud. "So that Perenelle would put it inside Hogwarts, where Dumbledore could guard it?"

The Defense Professor sighed, not looking up from the cauldron. "I suppose that stratagem would be futile to conceal from you. Yes, after I possessed Quirrell and returned, I implemented a strategy I had conceived while gazing at the stars. First I made sure to be accepted as Defense Professor at Hogwarts, for it would not do to have suspicions raised while I was still seeking employment. When that was done, I arranged for one of Perenelle's curse-breaking expeditions to discover a falsified but credible inscription

describing how the Crown of the Serpent could be used to seek out the Stone wherever it was hidden. Immediately after, before Perenelle could buy up the Crown, it was stolen; furthermore I left clear indications that the thief had possessed the power to speak to snakes. So Perenelle thought that I could infallibly find the Stone's location, and that it needed a guardian powerful enough to defeat me. That is how the Stone came to be held in Hogwarts, in Dumbledore's domain. Just as I intended, naturally, since I had already gained access to Hogwarts for the year. I think that is all of this that concerns you, if I speak not of future plans."

Harry frowned. Professor Quirrell should not have told him that. Unless the strategy had somehow become irrelevant to any future deception of Perenelle...? Or unless, by answering so quickly, the Defense Professor had hoped to have people conclude that it was a double-bluff, and that the Crown of the Serpent really could find the Stone...

Harry decided not to question this answer in Parseltongue.

Another lock of bright hair, seeming white but not with age, was gently dribbled into the cauldron, again reminding Harry that they were on a time limit. Harry considered, but he couldn't see any further path to pursue this line of questioning; there was no known way to manufacture more Philosopher's Stones and no obvious way to invent such, which was probably the objectively worst news Harry had heard all day.

Harry took a deep breath. "I ask my third question," Harry said. "What's the truth behind this entire school year? All the plots you ran, all the plots you know about."

"Hm," said Professor Quirrell, dropping another bellflower into the potion, accompanied by a plant-shape like a tiny cross. "Let me see... the most shocking twist is that the Defense Professor turns out to be secretly Volde-mort."

"Well, obviously," Harry said, with a good deal of self-directed bitterness.

"Then where do you wish me to start?"

"Why did you kill Hermione?" The question just slipped out.

Professor Quirrell's pale eyes glanced up from the potion, watched him intently. "One would think that should be evident – but I suppose I cannot blame you for distrusting what seems evident. To understand the object of an obscure plot, observe its consequences and ask who might have intended them. I killed Miss Granger to improve your position relative to that of Lucius Malfoy, since my plans did not call for him to have so much leverage

over you. I admit I am impressed by how far you managed to parlay that opening.”

Harry unclenched his teeth, which took an effort. “That’s after your failed attempt to frame Hermione for the attempted murder of Draco and send her to Azkaban because of why? Because you didn’t like the influence she was having on me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Professor Quirrell said. “If I had only wished to remove Miss Granger, I would not have brought the Malfoys into it. I observed your game with Draco Malfoy and found it amusing, but I knew it could not continue for very long before Lucius learned and intervened; and then your folly would have brought you great trouble, for Lucius would not take it lightly. Had you just been able to lose during the Wizengamot trial, lose as I had taught you, then in only two more weeks, ironclad evidence would have shown that Lucius Malfoy, after discovering his son’s seeming perfidy, had Imperiused Professor Sprout into using the Blood-Cooling Charm on Mr. Malfoy and casting the False Memory Charm on Miss Granger. Lucius would have been swept off the political gameboard, sent to exile if not Azkaban; Draco Malfoy would have inherited the wealth of House Malfoy, and your influence over him would have been unchallenged. Instead I had to abort that plot in mid-course. You managed to completely disrupt the real plan in the course of sacrificing double your entire fortune, by giving Lucius Malfoy the perfect opportunity to prove his true concern for his son. You have an incredible anti-talent for meddling, I must say.”

“And you also thought,” Harry said, even with his dark side’s patterns he had to work to keep his voice level and cool, “that two weeks in Azkaban would improve Miss Granger’s disposition, and get her to stop being a bad influence on me. So you somehow arranged for there to be newspaper stories calling for her to be sent to Azkaban, rather than some other penalty.”

Professor Quirrell’s lips drew up in a thin smile. “Good catch, boy. Yes, I thought she might serve as your Bellatrix. That particular outcome would also have provided you with a constant reminder of how much respect was due the law, and helped you develop appropriate attitudes toward the Ministry.”

“Your plot was stupidly complicated and had no chance of working.” Harry knew he ought to be more tactful, that he was engaging in more of what Professor Quirrell called folly, but in that instant he could not bring himself to care.

“It was less complicated than Dumbledore’s plot to have the three armies

tie in the Christmas Battle, and not much more complicated than my own plot to make you think Dumbledore had blackmailed Mr. Zabini. The insight you are missing, Mr. Potter, is that these were not plots that needed to succeed." Professor Quirrell continued to casually stir the potion, smiling. "There are plots that must succeed, where you keep the core idea as simple as possible and take every precaution. There are also plots where it is acceptable to fail, and with those you can indulge yourself, or test the limits of your ability to handle complications. It was not as if something going wrong with any of those plots would have killed me." Professor Quirrell was no longer smiling. "Our journey into Azkaban was of the first type, and I was less amused by your antics there."

"What exactly did you do to Hermione?" Some part of Harry wondered at the evenness of his voice.

"Obliviations and False Memory Charms. I could not trust anything else to go undetected by the Hogwarts wards and the scrutiny I knew her mind would undergo." A flicker of frustration crossed Professor Quirrell's face. "Part of what you rightly call complication is because the first version of my plot did not go as planned, and I had to modify it. I came to Miss Granger in the hallways wearing the appearance of Professor Sprout, to offer her a conspiracy. My first attempt at suasion failed. I Obliviated her and tried again with a new presentation. The second bait failed. The third bait failed. The tenth bait failed. I was so frustrated that I began going through my entire library of guises, including those more appropriate to Mr. Zabini. Still nothing worked. The child would not violate her childish code."

"You do not get to call her childish, Professor." Harry's voice sounded strange in his own ears. "Her code worked. It prevented you from tricking her. The whole point of having deontological ethical injunctions is that arguments for violating them are often much less trustworthy than they look. You don't get to criticize her rules when they worked exactly as intended." After they resurrected Hermione, Harry would tell her that Lord Voldemort himself hadn't been able to tempt her into doing wrong, and that was why he'd killed her.

"Fair enough, I suppose," said Professor Quirrell. "There is a saying that even a stopped clock is right twice a day, and I do not think Miss Granger was actually being reasonable. Still, Rule Ten: one must not rant about the opposition's unworthiness after they have foiled you. Regardless. After two full hours of failed attempts, I realized that I was being over-stubborn, and

that I did not need Miss Granger to carry out the exact part I had planned for her. I gave up on my original intent, and instead imbued Miss Granger with False Memories of watching Mr. Malfoy plotting against her under circumstances that implied she should not tell you or the authorities. In the end it was Mr. Malfoy who gave me the opening I needed, entirely by luck." Professor Quirrell dropped a bellflower and a scrap of parchment into the cauldron.

"Why did the wards show the Defense Professor as having killed Hermione?"

"I wore the mountain troll as a false tooth while Dumbledore was identifying me to the Hogwarts wards as the Defense Professor." A slight smile. "Other living weapons cannot be Transfigured; they will not survive the disenchantment for the requisite six hours to avoid being traced by Time-Turner. The fact that a mountain troll was used as a weapon of assassination was a clear sign that the assassin had needed a proxy weapon that could be Transfigured safely. Combined with the evidence of the wards, and Dumbledore's own knowledge of how he had identified me to Hogwarts, you could have deduced who was responsible – in theory. However, experience has taught me that such puzzles are far harder to solve when you do not already know the solution, and I considered it a small risk. Ah, that reminds me, I have a question of my own." The Defense Professor was now giving Harry an intent look. "What gave me away at the last, in the corridor outside these chambers?"

Harry put aside other emotions to weigh up the cost and benefit of answering honestly, came to the conclusion that the Defense Professor was giving away far more information than he was getting (why?) and that it was best not to give the appearance of reticence. "The main thing," Harry said, "was that it was too improbable that everyone had arrived in Dumbledore's corridor at the same time. I tried running with the hypothesis that everyone who arrived had to be coordinated, including you."

"But I had said that I was following Snape," the Defense Professor said. "Was that not plausible?"

"It was, but..." Harry said. "Um. The laws governing what constitutes a good explanation don't talk about plausible excuses you hear afterward. They talk about the probabilities we assign in advance. That's why science makes people do advance predictions, instead of trusting explanations people come up with afterward. And I wouldn't have predicted in advance for you

to follow Snape and show up like that. Even if I'd known in advance that you could put a trace on Snape's wand, I wouldn't have expected you to do it and follow him just then. Since your explanation didn't make me feel like I would have predicted the outcome in advance, it remained an improbability. I started to wonder if Sprout's mastermind might have arranged for you to show up, too. And then I realised the note to myself hadn't really come from future-me, and that gave it away completely."

"Ah," said the Defense Professor, and sighed. "Well, I think it is all working out for the best. You did understand only too late; and there would have been inconveniences as well as benefits to you remaining unaware."

"What on Earth were you trying to do? The reason I was trying so hard to figure it out was that the whole thing was just so weird."

"That should have pointed at Dumbledore, not myself," said Professor Quirrell, and frowned. "The fact is that Miss Greengrass was not supposed to arrive in that corridor for several hours... though I suppose, since I did have Mr. Malfoy give her the clue I assigned her, it is not too surprising they banded together. Had Mr. Nott arrived seemingly alone, events would have played out less farcically. But I consider myself a specialist in battlefield control magics, and I was able to ensure that the fight went as I wished. I suppose it did end up looking a bit ridiculous." The Defense Professor dropped a peach slice and a bellflower into the cauldron. "But let us defer our discussion of the Mirror until we reach it. Did you have any more questions concerning Miss Granger's regrettable and hopefully temporary demise?"

"Yes," Harry said in an even voice. "What did you do to the Weasley twins? Dumbledore thought – I mean, the school saw the Headmaster go to the Weasley twins after Hermione was arrested. Dumbledore thought you, as Voldemort, had wondered why Dumbledore had done so, and that you'd checked on the Weasley twins, found and took their map, and Obliviated them afterward?"

"Dumbledore was quite correct," Professor Quirrell said, shaking his head as though in wonderment. "He was also an utter fool to leave the Hogwarts Map in the possession of those two idiots. I had an unpleasant shock after I recovered the Map; it showed my name and yours correctly! The Weasley idiots had thought it a mere malfunction, especially after you received your Cloak and your Time-Turner. If Dumbledore had kept the Map himself – if the Weasleys had ever spoken of it to Dumbledore – but they did not, thankfully."

Showed my name and yours correctly –

“I would like to see that,” Harry said.

Without taking his eyes from the cauldron, Professor Quirrell drew a folded parchment from within his robes, hissed at it “Sshow our ssurround-ingss,” and tossed the folded parchment toward Harry. It cut unerringly through the air, an increase of doom breathing on Harry’s senses as it moved toward him, and then it fluttered gently to Harry’s feet.

Harry picked up the parchment and unfolded it.

At first the parchment seemed blank. Then, as though an unseen pen were moving across it, the outline of walls and doors appeared, all drawn in handwritten lines. The writing outlined a series of chambers, most of them shown as empty; the last chamber in the series had a confused scribble in its center, as though the Map were trying to indicate its own bewilderment; and the second-to-last chamber showed two names within, written in positions within the chamber corresponding to where Harry was sitting and Professor Quirrell was standing.

Tom M. Riddle.

Tom M. Riddle.

Harry gazed at the parchment, an unpleasant chill coming over him. It was one thing to hear Lord Voldemort claim that your name was Tom Riddle; it was another thing to find that Hogwarts’s magic agreed. “Did you tamper with thiss map to achieve thiss ressalt, or did it appear before you by ssurprise?”

“Wass ssurprise,” replied Professor Quirrell, with an overtone of hissing laughter. “No trickss.”

Harry folded the Map and threw it back in Professor Quirrell’s direction; some force caught it in midair before it reached the floor, and drew the Map back into Professor Quirrell’s robes.

The Defense Professor spoke. “I should also like to volunteer that Snape was guiding Miss Granger and her underlings toward bullies, and sometimes intervening to protect them.”

“I knew that.”

“Interesting,” said Professor Quirrell. “Did Dumbledore also learn of this? Answer in Parseltongue.”

“Not sso far ass I know,” hissed Harry.

“Fascinating,” said Professor Quirrell. “You may be interested to know this as well: Potionss-maker had to work in ssecret because hiss plot opposed

sschoolmaster's plot."

Harry thought about this, while Professor Quirrell blew on the potion as though to cool it, though the fire still burned under the cauldron; then added a pinch of dirt and a drop of water and a bellflower. "Please explain," Harry said.

"Has it never occurred to you to wonder why Dumbledore chose Severus Snape as the Head of House Slytherin? To say that it was a cover for his work as Dumbledore's spy explains nothing. Snape could have been a Potions Master only, and not the Head of Slytherin at all. Snape could have been made Keeper of Grounds and Keys, if he needed to stay within Hogwarts! Why the Head of House Slytherin? Surely it occurred to you that this could not have good effects upon the Slytherins, according to Dumbledore's moral pretenses?"

The thought hadn't occurred to Harry in exactly those terms, no... "I wondered something like it. I didn't put the dilemma in that precise form."

"And now that you have, is the solution obvious?"

"No," Harry said.

"Disappointing. You have not learned enough cynicism, you have not grasped the flexibility of what moralists call morality. To fathom a plot, look at the consequences and ask if they might be intended. Dumbledore was deliberately sabotaging Slytherin House – don't give me that look, boy, I am sspeaking truth. During the last Wizarding War, Slytherins filled out my ranks of underlings, and other Slytherins in the Wizengamot supported me. Look at it from Dumbledore's perspective, and remember that he has no native understanding of Slytherin's ways. Think of Dumbledore becoming increasingly sad over this Hogwarts House that seems the source of so much ill-doing. And then behold, Dumbledore puts in as Head of Slytherin the person of Snape. Snape! Severus Snape! A man who would teach his House neither cunning nor ambition, a man who would impose lax discipline and make its children weak! A man who would offend students of other Houses, who would ruin Slytherin's name among them! A man whose surname was unknown in magical Britain and certainly not noble, who went about half in rags! Do you think Dumbledore ignorant of the consequence? When Dumbledore was the one who brought it about, and had motive to bring it about? I expect Dumbledore told himself that more lives would be saved during the next Wizarding War if Voldemort's future Death Eaters were weakened." Professor Quirrell dropped into the cauldron a chip of ice, slowly

melting as it touched the surface froth. "Continue the process long enough, and no child would want to go to Slytherin. The House would be retired, and if the Hat kept calling the name, it would become a mark of ignominy among children who would afterward be distributed among the other three Houses. From that day on, Hogwarts would have three upstanding Houses of courage and scholarship and industry, with no House of Bad Children added to the mix; just as if the three Founders of Hogwarts had been wise enough in the beginning to refuse Salazar Slytherin their company. That, I expect, was Dumbledore's intended end-game; a short-term sacrifice for the greater good." Professor Quirrell smiled sardonically. "And Lucius let it all happen without protest or even, I expect, noticing that anything was going awry. I fear that in my absence my former servants have been quite outmatched in this battle of wits."

Harry was having a bit of trouble taking this in, but decided, after some thought, that now was not the time to try to work it out. Whether Lord Voldemort believed it was not decisive; Harry would have to evaluate this accusation on his own.

Professor Quirrell's mention of his servants had reminded Harry of something else that he was... obligated, Harry supposed, to ask. The bad news was predictable. On any other day it would have been horrible. Today it would just wash out in the flood. "Bellatrix Black," Harry said. "What was the truth about her?"

"She was broken inside before I ever met her," Professor Quirrell said. He picked up what looked like a white-grey rubber band and held it over the cauldron; as the rubber was held within the steam, it turned black. "Using Legilimency on her was a mistake. But that glimpse showed me how easy it would be to make her fall in love with me, so I did. Ever after she was the most faithful of all my servants, the only one I could almost trust. I had no intention of giving her what she wanted from me; so I commended her to the Lestrage brothers for their use, and the three of them were happy in their own special way."

"I doubt it," Harry's mouth said, mostly on autopilot. "If that were true, Bellatrix wouldn't have remembered who the Lestrage brothers were, when we found her in Azkaban."

Professor Quirrell shrugged. "You may be right."

"What the hell were we actually doing there?"

"Finding out where Bellatrix had put my wand. I had told the Death

Eaters of my immortality, in the hope – now proven futile – that they would stay together for at least a few days if I appeared to die. Bellatrix's instructions were to recover my wand from wherever my body had been slain; and take that wand to a certain graveyard where my spirit would appear before her."

Harry swallowed. The image came to him of Bellatrix Black waiting, waiting, waiting at the graveyard, in increasing desperation... it was no wonder she hadn't been thinking strategically when she attacked the Longbottom household. "What did you do with Bellatrix once she was out?"

"Ssent her to a peaceful place to recover sstrength," Professor Quirrell said. A cold smile. "I had a use remaining for her, or rather a certain portion of her, and on my future plans I shall not answer questions."

Harry breathed deeply, trying to maintain control. "Were there any other secret plots in this school year?"

"Oh, a fair number, but not many more that concern you, not that I can think of offhand. The true reason I demanded to try to teach the Patronus Charm to first-years was to bring a Dementor before your own person, and then I arranged for your wand to fall where the Dementor could continue to drain you through it. Wass no malice in it, only hopess that you would recover ssome of your true memoriess. That was also why I arranged for certain witches to pull you down from the air during your rooftop episode, so I could appear to save your life; just in case any suspicion fell on me during the Dementor incident I had scheduled for shortly after. Alsso no malice there. I arranged some of the attacks on Miss Granger's group, so that the attacks could be defeated; I do rather dislike bullies. Think that iss all ssecret plotss concerning you from thiss sschool-year, unless I have forgotten ssomething."

Life lesson learned, said his Hufflepart. Try to resist the temptation to randomly meddle in other people's lives. Like, you know, Padma Patil's life. If you don't want to end up like this, that is.

A pinch of red-brown dust was gently sifted into the potions cauldron, and Harry asked his fourth and final question, the one that had seemed to have the lowest priority, but still mattered.

"What was your objective during the Wizarding War?" Harry said. "I mean, what –" His voice wobbled. "What was the point of the entire thing?" His brain repeating endlessly, Why, why, why Lord Voldemort...

Professor Quirrell lifted an eyebrow. "They told you about David Monroe, did they not?"

"Yes you were both David Monroe and Lord Voldemort during the Wiz-

arding War, I understood that part. You killed David Monroe, disguised yourself as him, and wiped out David Monroe's family so they wouldn't notice any differences –"

"Indeed."

"You planned to control whichever side won the Wizarding War, regardless of which side won. But why did one side have to be Voldemort? I, I mean, wouldn't it have been easier to gain public support with someone less... with someone less Voldemort?"

Professor Quirrell's mallet made an unusually loud thud as it crushed white butterfly wings, mixing them with another bellflower. "I planned," Professor Quirrell said harshly, "for Lord Voldemort to lose to David Monroe. The flaw in that strategy was the absolute wretchedness of –" Professor Quirrell stopped. "No, I am telling the tale out of order. Listen, boy, when I had devised my great creation and come into the fullness of my magic, I thought the time had come for me to take political power into my hands. It would be inconvenient, certainly, and take up my time in ways that were not enjoyable. But I knew the Muggles would eventually destroy the world or make war on wizardkind or both, and something had to be done if I was not to wander a dead or dull world through my eternity. Having attained immortality I needed a new ambition to occupy my decades, and to prevent the Muggles from ruining everything seemed a goal of acceptable scope and difficulty. It is a source of continual amusement to me that I, of all people, am the only one really taking action towards that end. Though I suppose it would make sense for the mortal insects not to care about their world's end; why should they, when they are just going to die regardless, and can save themselves the inconvenience of trying to do anything difficult along the way? But I digress. I saw how Dumbledore had risen to power from his defeat of Grindelwald, so I thought I would do the same. I had long ago taken my vengeance on David Monroe – he was an annoyance from my year in Slytherin – so I bethought to also steal his identity, and wipe out his family to make myself heir of his House. And I conceived also a great foe for David Monroe to fight, the most terrifying Dark Lord imaginable, clever beyond reckoning; more dangerous by far than Grindelwald, for his intelligence would be perfected in all the ways that Grindelwald had been flawed and self-destructive. A Dark Lord who would do his cunning utmost to disrupt the alliances who would fight him, a Dark Lord who would command the deepest loyalty from his followers through his oratorical skills. The most

dreadful Dark Lord who had ever threatened Britain or the world, that was who David Monroe would defeat.”

Professor Quirrell’s mallet struck a bellflower and then a different pale flower with two more thuds. “But then, while I had sometimes played the part of Dark Wizard in my wanderings, I had never adopted the identity of a full-fledged Dark Lord with underlings and a political agenda. I had no practice at the task, and I was mindful of the story of Dark Evangel and the disaster of her first public appearance. According to what she said afterward, she had meant to call herself the Walking Catastrophe and the Apostle of Darkness, but in the excitement of the moment she introduced herself as the Apostrophe of Darkness instead. After that she had to ruin two entire villages before anyone took her seriously.”

“So you decided to try a small-scale experiment first,” Harry said. A sickness rose up in him, because in that moment Harry understood, he saw himself reflected; the next step was just what Harry himself would have done, if he’d had no trace of ethics whatsoever, if he’d been that empty inside. “You created a disposable identity, to learn how the ropes worked, and get your mistakes out of the way.”

“Indeed. Before becoming a truly terrible Dark Lord for David Monroe to fight, I first created for practice the persona of a Dark Lord with glowing red eyes, pointlessly cruel to his underlings, pursuing a political agenda of naked personal ambition combined with blood purism as argued by drunks in Knockturn Alley. My first underlings were hired in a tavern, given cloaks and skull masks, and told to introduce themselves as Death Eaters.”

The sick sense of understanding deepened, in the pit of Harry’s stomach. “And you called yourself Voldemort.”

“Just so, General Chaos.” Professor Quirrell was grinning, from where he stood by the cauldron. “I wanted it to be an anagram of my name, but that would only have worked if I’d conveniently been given the middle name of ‘Marvolo’, and then it would have been a stretch. Our actual middle name is Morfin, if you’re curious. But I digress. I thought Voldemort’s career would last only a few months, a year at the longest, before the Aurors brought down his underlings and the disposable Dark Lord vanished. As you perceive, I had vastly overestimated my competition. And I could not quite bring myself to torture my underlings when they brought me bad news, no matter what Dark Lords did in plays. I could not quite manage to argue the tenets of blood purism as incoherently as if I were a drunk in Knockturn Alley. I was

not trying to be clever when I sent my underlings on their missions, but neither did I give them entirely pointless orders –” Professor Quirrell gave a rueful grin that, in another context, might have been called charming. “One month after that, Bellatrix Black prostrated herself before me, and after three months Lucius Malfoy was negotiating with me over glasses of expensive Firewhiskey. I sighed, gave up all hope for wizardkind, and began as David Monroe to oppose this fearsome Lord Voldemort.”

“And then what happened –”

A snarl contorted Professor Quirrell’s face. “The absolute inadequacy of every single institution in the civilization of magical Britain is what happened! You cannot comprehend it, boy! I cannot comprehend it! It has to be seen and even then it cannot be believed! You will have observed, perhaps, that of your fellow students who speak of their family’s occupations, three in four seem to mention jobs in some part or another of the Ministry. You will wonder how a country can manage to employ three of its four citizens in bureaucracy. The answer is that if they did not all prevent each other from doing their jobs, none of them would have any work left to do! The Aurors were competent as individual fighters, they did fight Dark Wizards and only the best survived to train new recruits, but their leadership was in absolute disarray. The Ministry was so busy routing papers that the country had no effective opposition to Voldemort’s attacks except myself, Dumbledore, and a handful of untrained irregulars. A shiftless, incompetent, cowardly layabout, Mundungus Fletcher, was considered a key asset in the Order of the Phoenix – because, being otherwise unemployed, he did not need to juggle another job! I tried weakening Voldemort’s attacks, to see if it was possible for him to lose; at once the Ministry committed fewer Aurors to oppose me! I had read Mao’s Little Red Book, I had trained my Death Eaters in guerrilla tactics – for nothing! For nothing! I was attacking all of magical Britain and in every engagement my forces outnumbered their opposition! In desperation, I ordered my Death Eaters to systematically assassinate every single incompetent managing the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. One paper-pusher after another volunteered to accept higher positions despite the fate of their predecessors, gleefully rubbing their hands at the prospect of promotion. Every one of them thought they would cut a deal with Lord Voldemort on the side. It took seven months to murder our way through them all, and not a single Death Eater asked why we were bothering. And then, even with Bartemius Crouch risen to Director and

Amelia Bones as Head Auror, it was still too little. I could have done better fighting alone. Dumbledore's aid was not worth his moral restraints, and Crouch's aid was not worth his respect for the law." Professor Quirrell turned up the fire beneath the potion.

"And eventually," Harry said through the heart-sickness, "you realized you were just having more fun as Voldemort."

"It is the least annoying role I have ever played. If Lord Voldemort says that something is to be done, people obey him and do not argue. I did not have to suppress my impulse to Cruciate people being idiots; for once it was all part of the role. If someone was making the game less pleasant for me, I just said Avadakedavra regardless of whether that was strategically wise, and they never bothered me again." Professor Quirrell casually chopped a small worm into bits. "But my true epiphany came on a certain day when David Monroe was trying to get an entry permit for an Asian instructor in combat tactics, and a Ministry clerk denied it, smiling smugly. I asked the Ministry clerk if he understood that this measure was meant to save his life and the Ministry clerk only smiled more. Then in fury I threw aside masks and caution, I used my Legilimency, I dipped my fingers into the cesspit of his stupidity and tore out the truth from his mind. I did not understand and I wanted to understand. With my command of Legilimency I forced his tiny clerk-brain to live out alternatives, seeing what his clerk-brain would think of Lucius Malfoy, or Lord Voldemort, or Dumbledore standing in my place." Professor Quirrell's hands had slowed, as he delicately peeled bits and small strips from a chunk of candle-wax. "What I finally realized that day is complicated, boy, which is why I did not understand it earlier in life. To you I shall try to describe it anyway. Today I know that Dumbledore does not stand at the top of the world, for all that he is the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation. People speak ill of Dumbledore openly, they criticize him proudly and to his face, in a way they would not dare stand up to Lucius Malfoy. You have acted disrespectfully toward Dumbledore, boy, do you know why you did so?"

"I'm... not sure," Harry said. Having Tom Riddle's leftover neural patterns was certainly an obvious hypothesis.

"Wolves, dogs, even chickens, fight for dominance among themselves. What I finally understood, from that clerk's mind, was that to him Lucius Malfoy had dominance, Lord Voldemort had dominance, and David Monroe and Albus Dumbledore did not. By taking the side of good, by professing

to abide in the light, we had made ourselves unthreatening. In Britain, Lucius Malfoy has dominance, for he can call in your loans, or send Ministry bureaucrats against your shop, or crucify you in the Daily Prophet, if you go openly against his will. And the most powerful wizard in the world has no dominance, because everyone knows that he is,” Professor Quirrell’s lips curled, “a hero out of stories, relentlessly self-effacing and too humble for vengeance. Tell me, child, have you ever seen a drama where the hero, before he consents to save his country, demands so much gold as a barrister might receive for a court case?”

“Actually there have been a lot of heroes like that in Muggle fiction, I’ll name Han Solo just to start –”

“Well, in magical drama it is not so. It is all humble heroes like Dumbledore. It is the fantasy of the powerful slave who will never truly rise above you, never demand your respect, never even ask you for pay. Do you understand now?”

“I... think so,” Harry said. Frodo and Samwise from Lord of the Rings did seem to match the archetype of a completely non-threatening hero. “You’re saying that’s how people think of Dumbledore? I don’t believe the Hogwarts students see him as a hobbit.”

“In Hogwarts, Dumbledore does punish certain transgressions against his will, so he is feared to some degree – though the students still make free to mock him in more than whispers. Outside this castle, Dumbledore is sneered at; they began to call him mad, and he aped the part like a fool. Step into the role of a savior out of plays, and people see you as a slave to whose services they are entitled and whom it is their enjoyment to criticize; for it is the privilege of masters to sit back and call forth helpful corrections while the slaves labor. Only in the tales of the ancient Greeks, from when men were less sophisticated in their delusions, may you see the hero who is also high. Hector, Aeneas, those were heroes who retained their right of vengeance upon those who insulted them, who could demand gold and jewels in payment for their services without sparking indignation. And if Lord Voldemort conquered Britain, he might then condescend to show himself noble in victory; and nobody would take his goodwill for granted, nor chirp corrections at him if his work was not to their liking. When he won, he would have true respect. I understood that day in the Ministry that by envying Dumbledore, I had shown myself as deluded as Dumbledore himself. I understood that I had been trying for the wrong place all along. You should

know this to be true, boy, for you have made freer to speak ill of Dumbledore than you ever dared speak ill of me. Even in your own thoughts, I wager, for instinct runs deep. You knew that it might be to your cost to mock the strong and vengeful Professor Quirrell, but that there was no cost in disrespecting the weak and harmless Dumbledore.”

“Thank you,” Harry said through the pain, “for that valuable lesson, Professor Quirrell, I see that you are right about what my mind was doing.” Though Tom Riddle’s memories had probably also had something to do with the way he had sometimes lashed out at Dumbledore for no good reason, Harry hadn’t been like that around Professor McGonagall... who admittedly had the power to deduct House Points and didn’t have Dumbledore’s air of tolerance... no, it was still true, Harry would have been more respectful even in his own thoughts if Dumbledore had not seemed safe to disrespect.

So that had been David Monroe, and that had been Lord Voldemort...

It still hadn’t answered the most puzzling question, and Harry wasn’t sure that asking it would be wise. If, somehow, Lord Voldemort had managed not to think of it, and then Professor Quirrell had still managed not to think of it during nine years of contemplation, then it wasn’t wise to say... or maybe it was; the agonies of the Wizarding War had not been good for Britain.

Harry decided, and spoke. “One thing that did confuse me was why the Wizarding War lasted so long,” Harry ventured. “I mean, maybe I’m underestimating the difficulties that were facing Lord Voldemort –”

“You want to know why I did not Imperius some of the stronger wizards who could Imperius others, slay the very strongest wizards who could have resisted my Imperius, and take over the Ministry in, oh, perhaps three days.”

Harry nodded silently.

Professor Quirrell looked contemplative; his hand was sifting grass clippings into the cauldron, bit by bit. That ingredient, if Harry remembered correctly, was something like four-fifths towards the end of the recipe.

“I wondered that myself,” the Defense Professor said finally, “when I heard Trelawney’s prophecy from Snape, and I contemplated the past as well as the future. If you had asked my past self why he did not use the Imperius, he would have spoken of the need to be seen to rule, to openly command the Ministry bureaucracy, before it was time to turn his eyes outward to other countries. He would have remarked on how a quick and silent victory might bring challenges later. He would have remarked on the obstacle presented by Dumbledore and his incredible defensive prowess. And he would have

had similar excuses for every other quick path he considered. Somehow it was never the right time to bring my plans to their final phase, there was always one more thing to do first. Then I heard the prophecy and I knew that it was time, for Time itself was taking notice of me. That the span for hesitation was done. And I looked back, and realised somehow this had been going on for years. I think..." The occasional bit of grass was still dropping down from his hand, but Professor Quirrell did not seem to pay it any mind. "I thought, when I was contemplating my past beneath the starlight, that I had become too accustomed to playing against Dumbledore. Dumbledore was intelligent, he tried diligently to be cunning, he did not wait for me to strike but presented me with surprises. He made bizarre moves that played out in fascinating and unpredictable ways. In retrospect, there were many obvious plans for destroying Dumbledore; but I think some part of me did not want to go back to playing solitaire instead of chess. It was when I had the prospect of creating another Tom Riddle to plot against, someone even more worthy than Dumbledore, that I was first willing to contemplate the end of my war. Yes, in retrospect that sounds stupid, but sometimes our emotions are more foolish than we can bring our reason to admit. I would never have espoused such a policy deliberately. It would have violated Rules Nine, Sixteen, Twenty, and Twenty-two and that is too much even if you are enjoying yourself. But to repeatedly decide that there was one more thing left to be done, one more advantage left to be gained, one more piece that I simply had to move into place, before abandoning an enjoyable time in my life and moving on to the more tedious rulership of Britain... well, even I am not immune to a mistake like that, if I do not realize that I am making it."

And that was when Harry knew what was going to happen at the end of this, after the Philosopher's Stone had been retrieved.

At the end of this, Professor Quirrell was going to kill him.

Professor Quirrell didn't want to kill him. It was possible that Harry was the only person in the world against whom Professor Quirrell wouldn't be able to use a Killing Curse. But Professor Quirrell thought he had to do it, for whatever reason.

That was why Professor Quirrell had decided that it was necessary to brew the potion of effulgence the long way. That was why Professor Quirrell had been so easily negotiated into answering these questions, into finally talking about his life with someone who might understand. Just like Lord Voldemort had delayed the end of the Wizarding War to play longer against

Dumbledore.

Harry couldn't exactly recall what Professor Quirrell had said earlier about not killing Harry. It hadn't been anything straightforward along the lines of 'I am absolutely not planning to kill you in any way, shape, or form unless you positively insist on doing something stupid'. Harry had been reluctant himself to push the promise too far and insist on unambiguous terms because Harry had already known that he would need to neutralize Lord Voldemort and had expected more precise language to reveal that fact, if they tried to exchange truly binding promises. So there certainly would have been loopholes, whatever had been said.

There was no particular shock to the realization, just an increased sense of urgency; some part of Harry had already known this, and had simply been waiting for an excuse to make it known to deliberation. There had been too many things said here that Professor Quirrell would not reveal to anyone with an expected lifespan measured in more than hours. The overwhelming isolation and loneliness of the life Professor Quirrell had described might explain why he was willing to violate his Rules and talk with Harry, given that Harry was going to die soon and that the world did not actually work like a play where the villain disclosing his plans would always fail to kill the hero afterward. But Harry's death certainly had to be in those future plans somewhere.

Harry swallowed, controlling his breathing. Professor Quirrell had just added a tuft of horsetail to the potion of effulgence, and that was very late in the potion, if Harry remembered correctly. There weren't many bellflowers left in the heap to be added, either.

It was probably time to stop worrying so much about risk and play this conversation less conservatively, all things considered.

"If I point out one of Lord Voldemort's mistakes," Harry said, "does he punish me for it?"

Professor Quirrell lifted his eyebrows. "Not if the mistake is a real one. I do not suggest that you moralise at me. But I would not curse the bearer of bad news, nor the subordinate who makes an honest attempt to point out a problem. Even as Lord Voldemort I could never bring myself to that stupidity. Of course, there were some fools who mistook my policy for weakness, who tried to thrust themselves forward by pushing me down in their public counsel, thinking me obliged to tolerate it as criticism." Professor Quirrell smiled reminiscently. "The Death Eaters were better off without

them, and I do not advise you make the same mistake.”

Harry nodded, a slight shiver going through him. “Um, when you told me about what happened in Godric’s Hollow, on Halloween night, in 1981 I mean, um... I thought I saw another flaw in your reasoning. A way you could have avoided disaster. But, um, I think you have a blind spot, a class of strategies you don’t consider, so you didn’t see it even afterward –”

“I hope you are not about to say anything stupid along the lines of ‘don’t try to kill people,’” Professor Quirrell said. “I shall be unhappy if that is the case.”

“Not valuess difference. True misstake, given your goalss. Will you hurt me, if I act the part of the teacher toward you, and teach lessson? Or if misstake is ssimple and obviousss, and makess you feel sstupid?”

“No,” hissed Professor Quirrell. “Not if lessson iss true.”

Harry swallowed. “Um. Why didn’t you test the horcrux system before you actually had to use it?”

“Test it?” said Professor Quirrell. He looked up from the brewing potion, and indignation came into his voice. “What do you mean, test it?”

“Why didn’t you test if the horcrux system was working correctly, before you needed it on Halloween?”

Professor Quirrell looked disgusted. “You ridiculous – I didn’t want to die, Mr. Potter, and that was the only way to test my great creation! What good would it have done to risk my life sooner rather than later? How would I have been better off?”

Harry swallowed a lump in his throat. “There wass way for you to tesst your horcrux ssystem without dying. The general lesson is important. Do you see it now?”

“No,” Professor Quirrell said after a while. The Defense Professor gently crumbled one of the last bellflowers together with a strand of long blonde hair and then dropped it into the potion, which was bubbling brighter, now. Only two more bellflowers remained on the Potions table. “And I do hope your lesson is a sensible one, for your sake.”

“Suppose, Professor, that I learned how to cast the improved horcrux spell and I was willing to use it. What would I do with it?”

Professor Quirrell answered at once. “You would find some person whom you found morally abhorrent and whose death you could convince yourself would save other lives, and murder them to create a horcrux.”

“And then what?”

“Make more horcruxes,” said the Defense Professor. He picked up a jar of what looked like dragon scales.

“Before that,” Harry said.

After a time the Defense Professor shook his head. “I still do not see it, and you will cease this game and tell me.”

“I would make horcruxes for my friends. If you’d ever really cared about one single other person in the entire world, if there’d been just one person who gave your immortality meaning, someone that you wanted to live forever with you –” Harry’s throat choked. “Then, then the idea of making a horcrux for someone else wouldn’t have been such a counterintuitive thought.” Harry was blinking hard. “You have a blind spot around strategies that involve doing nice things for other people, to the point where it stops you from achieving your selfish values. You think... it’s not your style, I suppose. That... particular part of your self-image... is what cost you those nine years.”

The dropper of mint oil that the Defense Professor was holding added liquid to the cauldron, drip by drip.

“I see...” the Defense Professor said slowly. “I see. I should have taught Rabastan the advanced horcrux ritual, and forced him to test the invention. Yes, that is supremely obvious in retrospect. For that matter, I could have ordered Rabastan to try marking himself onto some disposable infant, to see what happened, before I took myself to Godric’s Hollow to create you.” Professor Quirrell shook his head bemusedly. “Well. I am glad I am realizing this now and not ten years earlier; I had enough to chide myself for at that time.”

“You don’t see nice ways to do the things you want to do,” Harry said. His ears heard a note of desperation in his own voice. “Even when a nice strategy would be more effective you don’t see it because you have a self-image of not being nice.”

“That is a fair observation,” said Professor Quirrell. “Indeed, now that you have pointed it out, I have just now thought of some nice things I can do this very day, to further my agenda.”

Harry just looked at him.

Professor Quirrell was smiling. “Your lesson is a good one, Mr. Potter. From now on, until I learn the trick of it, I shall keep diligent watch for cunning strategies that involve doing kindnesses for other people. Go and practice acts of goodwill, perhaps, until my mind goes there easily.”

Cold chills ran down Harry’s spine.

Professor Quirrell had said this without the slightest visible hesitation.

Lord Voldemort was absolutely certain that he could never be redeemed. He wasn't the tiniest bit afraid of it happening to him.

The second-to-last bellflower was dropped into the potion, gently.

"Any other valuable lessons you would like to teach to Lord Voldemort, boy?" said Professor Quirrell. He was looking up from the potion, and grinning as though he knew exactly what Harry was thinking.

"Yes," Harry said, his voice almost breaking. "If your goal is to obtain happiness, then doing nice things for other people feels better than doing them for yourself –"

"Do you really think I never thought of that, boy?" The smile had vanished. "Do you think I am stupid? After graduating Hogwarts I wandered the world for years, before I returned to Britain as Lord Voldemort. I have put on more faces than I bothered counting. Do you think I never tried to play the hero, just to see how it would feel? Have you come across the name of Alexander Chernyshov? Under that guise, I sought out a forlorn hellhole ruled over by a Dark Wizard, and freed the wretched inhabitants from their bondage. They wept tears of gratitude for me. It did not feel like anything in particular. I stayed about and killed the next five Dark Wizards to try taking command of the place. I spent my own Galleons – well, not my own Galleons, but the same principle applies – to prettify their little country and introduce a semblance of order. They groveled all the more, and named one in three of their infants Alexander. I still felt nothing, so I nodded to myself, wrote it off as a fair try, and went upon my way."

"And were you happy as Lord Voldemort, then?" Harry's voice had risen, grown wild.

Professor Quirrell hesitated, then shrugged. "It appears you already know the answer to that."

"Then why? Why be Voldemort if it doesn't even make you happy?" Harry's voice broke. "I'm you, I'm based on you, so I know that Professor Quirrell isn't just a mask! I know he's somebody you really could have been! Why not just stay that way? Take your curse off the Defense Position and just stay here, use the Philosopher's Stone to take David Monroe's shape and let the real Quirinus Quirrell go free, if you say you'll stop killing people I'll swear not to tell anyone who you really are, just be Professor Quirrell, for always! Your students would appreciate you, my father's students appreciate him –"

Professor Quirrell was chuckling over the cauldron as he stirred it. "There are perhaps fifteen thousand wizards living in magical Britain, child. There used to be more. There's a reason they're afraid to speak my name. You'd forgive me that because you liked my Battle Magic lessons?"

Seconded, said Harry's inner Hufflepuff. Seriously, what the hell?

Harry kept his head raised, though it was trembling. "It's not my place to forgive anything you've done. But it's better than another war."

"Ha," said the Defense Professor. "If you ever find a Time-Turner that goes back forty years and can alter history, be sure to tell Dumbledore that before he rejects Tom Riddle's application for the Defense position. But alas, I fear that Professor Riddle would not have found lasting happiness in Hogwarts."

"Why not?"

"Because I still would've been surrounded by idiots, and I wouldn't have been able to kill them," Professor Quirrell said mildly. "Killing idiots is my great joy in life, and I'll thank you not to speak ill of it until you've tried it for yourself."

"There's something that would make you happier than that," Harry said, his voice breaking again. "There has to be."

"Why?" said Professor Quirrell. "Is this some scientific law I have not yet encountered? Tell me of it."

Harry opened his mouth, but couldn't find any words, there had to be something had to be something if he could just find the right thing to say –

"And you," said Professor Quirrell, "have no right to speak of happiness either. Happiness is not what you hold precious above all. You decided that in the beginning, all the way back in the beginning of this year, when the Sorting Hat offered you Hufflepuff. Which I know about, because I received a similar offer and warning all those years ago, and I refused it just as you did. Beyond this there is little more to say, between Tom Riddles." The Defense Professor turned back to the cauldron.

Before Harry could think of any way to reply, Professor Quirrell dropped in the last bellflower, and a burst of glowing bubbles boiled up from the cauldron.

"I believe we are done here," Professor Quirrell said. "If you have further questions, they must wait."

Harry shakily rose to his feet; even as Professor Quirrell took up the cauldron and poured out a ridiculously huge volume of effulgent liquid,

more than seemed like it could fit in a dozen cauldrons, onto the purple fire that guarded the doorway.

The purple fire winked out.

“Now for the Mirror,” said Professor Quirrell, and he drew forth the Cloak of Invisibility from his robes, and floated it to drop before Harry’s shoes.

REFLECTIONS, PART I

Even the greatest artifact can be defeated by a counter-artifact that is lesser, but specialized.

That was what the Defense Professor had told Harry, after dropping the True Cloak of Invisibility to pool in fuliginous folds near Harry's shoes.

The Mirror of Perfect Reflection has power over what is reflected within it, and that power is said to be unchallengeable. But since the True Cloak of Invisibility produces a perfect absence of image, it should evade this principle rather than challenging it.

There had followed a series of questions in Parseltongue establishing that Harry currently did not intend to do anything stupid or try to run away, and further reminders that Professor Quirrell could sense him and had spells to detect the Cloak and was holding hostage hundreds of lives plus Hermione.

Then Harry was told to don the Cloak, open the door that lay beyond the quenched fires, and advance through the door into the final chamber; as Professor Quirrell stood well back, outside of that door's sight.

The last chamber was illuminated in lights of soft gold, and the stone walls were of gentle white and faced with marble.

In the center of the room stood a simple and unornamented golden frame, and within the frame was a portal to another gold-illuminated room, beyond whose door which lay another Potions chamber; that was what Harry's brain told him. The Mirror's transformation of light was so perfect that conscious thought was required to deduce that the room inside the frame was only a reflection, rather than a portal. (Though it might have been easier to intuit if Harry hadn't been invisible, just then.)

The Mirror did not touch the ground; the golden frame had no feet. It didn't look like it was hovering; it looked like it was fixed in place, more solid and more motionless than the walls themselves, like it was nailed to the reference frame of the Earth's motion.

"Is the Mirror there? Is it moving?" came Professor Quirrell's commanding voice from the Potions Chamber.

"Iss there," Harry hissed back. "Not moving."

Again tones of command rang forth. "Walk around to the back of the Mirror."

From behind, the golden frame appeared solid, showing no reflections, and Harry said so in Parseltongue.

"Now take off your Cloak," commanded Professor Quirrell's voice still from within the Potions room. "Report to me at once if the Mirror moves to face you."

Harry took off his Cloak.

The Mirror remained nailed to the reference frame of Earth's motion; and Harry reported this.

Shortly after there came a hissing and seething, and a balefire phoenix melted through the marble wall behind Harry, the ambient light in the room taking on a red tinge as it entered. Professor Quirrell followed behind it, walking out of the new-made corridor that had been carved, his black formal shoes unharmed by the red-glowing molten surface beneath. "Well," Professor Quirrell said, "that is one possible trap averted. And now..." Professor Quirrell exhaled. "Now we will think of possible strategies for retrieving the Stone from the Mirror, and you will try them; for I prefer not to let my own image be reflected. I give you fair warning, this is the part that may prove tedious."

"I take it this isn't a problem you can solve with Fiendfyre?"

"Ha," said Professor Quirrell, and gestured.

The balefire phoenix moved forward in a rush of crimson terror, the red light casting writhing shadows on the remaining marble walls. Harry jumped back before he could think.

The dreadful dark-red blaze rushed past Professor Quirrell, surged into the golden back of the Mirror, and disappeared as fast as it touched the gold.

Then the fire was gone, and the room was tinged scarlet no more.

There was no scratch upon the golden surface, no glow to mark the absorption of heat. The Mirror had simply remained in place, untouched.

Chills went down Harry's spine. If he'd been playing Dungeons and Dragons and the dungeon master had reported that result, Harry would have suspected a mental illusion, and rolled to disbelieve.

Upon the center of the golden back had appeared a sequence of runes in no known alphabet, black absences of light in small lines and curves, arranged in a level horizontal row. The thought occurred to Harry that some minor concealing illusion had been consumed in the Fiendfyre, a far lesser

enchantment that had been added to prevent children from seeing those letters...

"How old is this Mirror?" Harry said in almost a whisper.

"Nobody knows, Mr. Potter." The Defense Professor reached out his fingers toward the runes, a look of something like reverence on his face; but his fingers did not touch the gold. "But my guess is the same as yours, I think. It is said, in certain legends that may or may not be fabrications, that this Mirror reflects itself perfectly and therefore its existence is absolutely stable. So stable that the Mirror was able to survive when every other effect of Atlantis was undone, all its consequences severed from Time. You can see why I was amused when you suggested Fiendfyre." The Defense Professor let his hand fall.

Even in the middle of everything else, Harry felt the awe, if that was true. The golden frame gleamed no brighter than before, for all the revelation; but you could imagine it going back, and back, into a civilization that had been made to never be... "What – does the Mirror do, exactly?"

"An excellent question," said Professor Quirrell. "The answer is in the runes that are written upon the Mirror's golden frame. Read them to me."

"They're not in any alphabet I recognize. They look like randomly oriented chicken-scratches drawn by Tolkien elves."

"Read them anyway. Iss not dangerouss."

"The runes say, noitilov detalo partxe tnere hoc ruoy tu becafruoy ton wo hsi –" Harry stopped, feeling more prickles at his spine.

Harry knew what the rune for noitilov meant. It meant noitilov. And the next runes said to detalo the noitilov until it reached partxe, then keep the part that was both tnere and hoc. That belief felt like knowledge, like he could have answered 'Yes' with confident authority if somebody asked him whether the ton wo was ruoy or becafruoy. It was just that when Harry tried to relate those concepts to any other concepts, he drew a blank.

"Do you undersstand what wordss mean, boy?"

"Don't think sso."

Professor Quirrell gave a soft exhalation, his eyes not leaving the golden frame. "I had wondered if perhaps the Words of False Comprehension might be understandable to a student of Muggle science. Apparently not."

"Maybe –" Harry began.

Really, Ravenclaw? said Slytherin. You're pulling this now?

“Maybe I could try again to understand the words if I knew more about the Mirror?” said Harry’s Ravenclaw part, which had assumed direct control.

Professor Quirrell’s lips quirked up. “As with most ancient things, scholars have written down enough lies that it is hard to be sure of anything by now. It is definite that the Mirror is at least as old as Merlin, for it is known that Merlin used it as a tool. It is also known that after his death, Merlin left written instructions that the Mirror did not need to be sealed away, despite it having certain powers that might normally cause one to worry. He wrote that, given how painstakingly the Mirror had been crafted to not destroy the world, it would be easier to destroy the world using a lump of cheese.”

This statement struck Harry as not entirely reassuring.

“Certain other facts about the Mirror are attested by famous wizards who were reasonably skeptical, and whose word has otherwise proven reliable. The Mirror’s most characteristic power is to create alternate realms of existence, though these realms are only as large in size as what can be seen within the Mirror; it is known that people and other objects can be stored therein. It is claimed by several authorities that the Mirror alone of all magics possesses a true moral orientation, though I am not sure what that could mean in practical terms. I would expect moralists to call the Cruciatus Curse by their name of ‘evil’ and the Patronus Charm by their name of ‘good’; I cannot guess what a moralist would think was any more moral than that. But it is claimed, for example, that phoenixes came into our world from a realm that was evoked inside this Mirror.”

Words like Jeepers and what his parents would have termed inappropriate language were all running through Harry’s head, none very coherently, as he stared at the golden back of the Mirror.

“I have wandered the world and encountered many stories that are not often heard,” said Professor Quirrell. “Most of them seemed to me to be lies, but a few had the ring of history rather than storytelling. Upon a wall of metal in a place where no one had come for centuries, I found written the claim that some Atlanteans foresaw their world’s end, and sought to forge a device of great power to avert the inevitable catastrophe. If that device had been completed, the story claimed, it would have become an absolutely stable existence that could withstand the channeling of unlimited magic in order to grant wishes. And also – this was said to be the vastly harder task – the device would somehow avert the inevitable catastrophes any sane person would expect to follow from that premise. The aspect I found interesting was

that, according to the tale writ upon those metal plates, the rest of Atlantis ignored this project and went upon their ways. It was sometimes praised as a noble public endeavor, but nearly all other Atlanteans found more important things to do on any given day than help. Even the Atlantean nobles ignored the prospect of somebody other than themselves obtaining unchallengeable power, which a less experienced cynic might expect to catch their attention. With relatively little support, the tiny handful of would-be makers of this device labored under working conditions that were not so much dramatically arduous, as pointlessly annoying. Eventually time ran out and Atlantis was destroyed with the device still far from complete. I recognise certain echoes of my own experience that one does not usually see invented in mere tales.” A twist in the dry smile. “But perhaps that is merely my own preference for one tale among a hundred other legends. You perceive, however, the echo of Merlin’s statement about the Mirror’s creators shaping it to not destroy the world. Most importantly for our purposes, it may explain why the Mirror would have the previously unknown capability that Dumbledore or Perenelle seems to have evoked, of showing any person who steps before it an illusion of a world in which one of their desires has been fulfilled. It is the sort of sensible precaution you can imagine someone building into a wish-granting creation meant to not go horribly wrong.”

“Wow,” Harry whispered, and meant it. This was Magic with a capital M, the sort of Magic that appeared in *So You Want To Be A Wizard*, not just a collection of random physics-violating things you could do with a wand.

Professor Quirrell gestured at the golden back. “The final property upon which most tales agree, is that whatever the unknown means of commanding the Mirror – of that Key there are no plausible accounts – the Mirror’s instructions cannot be shaped to react to individual people. So it is not possible for Perenelle to command this Mirror, ‘only give the Stone to Perenelle’. Dumbledore cannot state, ‘Only give the Stone to one who wishes to give it to Nicholas Flamel’. There is in the Mirror a blindness such as philosophers have attributed to ideal justice; it must treat all who come before it by the same rule, whatever rule may be in force. Thus, there must be some rule for reaching the Stone’s hiding-place which anyone can invoke. And now you see why you, called the Boy-Who-Lived, shall implement whatever strategies the two of us devise. For it was said that this thing possesses a moral orientation, and it may have been given commands reflecting the same. I am well aware that on conventional terms you are said to be Good, just as I am said to be

Evil.” Professor Quirrell smiled, rather darkly. “So as our first attempt – though not our last, rest assured – let us see what this Mirror makes of your attempt to retrieve the Stone in order to save the life of Hermione Granger and hundreds of your fellow students.”

“And the first version of that plan,” said Harry, who was beginning to finally understand, “the one you invented on Friday in my first week of Hogwarts, called for the Stone to be retrieved by Dumbledore’s golden child, the Boy-Who-Lived, making a selfless and noble attempt to save the life of his dying Defense teacher, Professor Quirrell.”

“Of course,” said Professor Quirrell.

It was a poetical sort of plot, Harry supposed, but his appreciation of that elegance was being hampered by the surrounding circumstances.

Then another thought occurred to Harry.

“Um,” Harry said. “You think that this Mirror is a trap for you –”

“There is no way beneath the heavens that it is not meant as a trap.”

“That is to say, it’s a trap for Lord Voldemort. Only it can’t be a trap for him personally. There has to be a general rule that underlies it, some generalizable quality of Lord Voldemort that triggers it.” Without conscious awareness, Harry was frowning hard at the Mirror’s golden back.

“As you say,” said Professor Quirrell, who was beginning to frown at Harry’s frowning.

“Well, on the first Thursday of this year, the mad Headmaster Dumbledore, who I’d just seen incinerate a chicken, told me that I had no chance whatsoever of getting into his forbidden corridor, since I didn’t know the spell *Alohomora*.”

“I see,” said Professor Quirrell. “Oh, dear. I wish you had thought to mention this to me a good deal earlier.”

Neither of them needed to state aloud the obvious, that this bit of reverse reverse psychology had successfully ensured that Harry would stay the heck away from Dumbledore’s forbidden corridor.

Harry was still concentrating. “Do you think Dumbledore suspects that I am, in his terms, a horcrux of Lord Voldemort, or more generally, that some aspects of my personality were copied off Lord Voldemort?” Even as Harry asked this aloud, he realized what a dumb question it was, and how much completely blatant evidence he’d already seen that –

“Dumbledore cannot possibly have missed it,” said Professor Quirrell. “It is not exactly subtle. What else is Dumbledore to think, that you are an actor

in a play whose stupid author has never met a real eleven-year-old? Only a gibbering dullard would believe that – ah, never mind.”

The two of them stared at the Mirror in silence.

Finally Professor Quirrell sighed. “I have outwitted myself, I fear. Neither you nor I dare be reflected in this Mirror. I suppose I must command Professor Sprout to undo my Obliviations of Mr. Nott and Miss Greengrass... You see, the other great difficulty of the Mirror is that the rule by which it treats those reflected will disregard external forces, such as False Memories or a Confundus Charm. The Mirror reflects only those forces arising from within the person themselves, the states of mind they arrive at through their own choices; so it is said in several places. That is why I had Mr. Nott and Miss Greengrass, believing different stories about why the Stone’s extraction was necessary, ready to appear before this Mirror.” Professor Quirrell rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “I constructed other stories for other students, ready for me to set into motion with the chosen trigger... but as this day approached, I began to feel pessimistic about the project. Such as Nott and Greengrass still seem worth trying, if we cannot think of something better. But I wonder if Dumbledore has tried to construct this puzzle to specifically resist Voldemort’s cunning. I wonder if he might have succeeded. If you devise an alternative plan which I approve enough to try, I promise that whatever pawn I send forth shall not be harmed by me, then or ever; nor do I expect to break that promise. And I remind you again of the hostages I hold to my failure, both Miss Granger and all the others”

Again they stared at the mirror in silence, the elder Tom Riddle and the younger.

“I suspect, Professor,” Harry said after a time, “that your entire class of hypotheses about somebody needing to want the Stone for good or honest purposes is mistaken. The Headmaster wouldn’t set a retrieval rule like that.”

“Why?”

“Because Dumbledore knows how easy it is to end up believing that you’re doing the right thing when you’re actually not. It’d be the first possibility he imagined.”

“Is it truth or trickery that I hear?”

“Am being honest,” Harry said.

Professor Quirrell nodded. “Then your point is well taken.”

“I’m not sure why you think this puzzle is solvable,” Harry said. “Just set a rule like, your left hand must hold a small blue pyramid and two large

red pyramids, and your right hand must be squeezing mayonnaise onto a hamster –”

“No,” Professor Quirrell said. “No, I think not. The legends are unclear on what rules can be given, but I think it must have something to do with the Mirror’s original intended use – it must have something to do with the deep desires and wishes arising from within the person. Squeezing mayonnaise onto a hamster will not qualify as that, for most people.”

“Huh,” Harry said. “Maybe the rule is that the person has to not want to use the Stone at all – no, that’s too easy, the story you gave Mr. Nott solves it.”

“In some ways you may understand Dumbledore better than I,” said Professor Quirrell. “So now I ask you this: how would Dumbledore use his notion of the acceptance of death to guard this Stone? For that above all he thinks I cannot comprehend, and he is not far wrong.”

Harry thought about this for a while, considering several ideas and discarding them. And then, having thought of something, Harry considered remaining silent... before mapping out the obvious part of the future conversation where Professor Quirrell asked him to say in Parseltongue if he’d thought of something.

Reluctantly, Harry spoke. “Would Dumbledore think that this Mirror could reach the afterlife? Could he put the Stone into something that he thinks is an afterlife, so that only people who believe in an afterlife can see it?”

“Hm...” Professor Quirrell said. “Possibly... yes, there is a certain plausibility to it. Using this setting of the Mirror to show people their heart’s desires... Albus Dumbledore would see himself reunited with his family. He would see himself united with them in death, wanting to die himself rather than wishing for them to be returned to life. His brother Aberforth, his sister Ariana, his parents Kendra and Percival... it would be Aberforth to whom Dumbledore gave the Stone, I think. Would the Mirror recognize that Aberforth particularly had been given the Stone? Or will any person’s dead relative do, if that person believes their relative’s spirit would give them back the Stone?” Professor Quirrell was pacing in a short circle, keeping well away from Harry and the Mirror as he moved. “But all this is only one idea. Let us devise another.”

Harry began to tap his cheek, then stopped abruptly as he realized where he’d picked up that gesture. “What if Perenelle is the one who put the Stone

in here? Maybe she keyed the Mirror to give the Stone only to the one who put it in originally.”

“Perenelle has lived this long by knowing her limitations,” said Professor Quirrell. “She does not overestimate her own intellect, she is not prideful, if that were so she would have lost the Stone long ago. Perenelle will not try to think of a good Mirror-rule herself, not when Master Flamel can leave the matter in Dumbledore’s wiser hands... but the rule of only returning the Stone to the one who remembers placing it, also works if Dumbledore himself has placed the Stone. It would be a hard rule to bypass, since I cannot simply Confund someone into believing that they put in the Stone... I would have to create a false Stone, and a false Mirror, and arrange the drama...” Professor Quirrell was frowning, now. “But it is still something that Dumbledore would imagine Voldemort being able to arrange, given time. If at all possible, Dumbledore will want to make the key to the Mirror a state of mind he thinks I cannot arrange in a pawn – or a rule that Dumbledore thinks Voldemort can never comprehend, such as a rule involving the acceptance of one’s own death. That is why I considered your previous idea plausible.”

Then Harry had an idea.

He was not sure if it was a good idea.

... it wasn’t like Harry had a lot of choice here.

“Arguendo,” Harry said. “We’re not sure what’s necessary to retrieve the Stone. But a sufficient condition should involve Albus Dumbledore, or maybe someone else, in a state of mind where they believe that the Dark Lord has been defeated, that the threat is over, and that it is time to take out the Stone and give it back to Nicholas Flamel. We aren’t sure which part of that person’s state of mind, let’s say Dumbledore’s, will be the necessary part that he thinks Lord Voldemort can’t understand or duplicate; but under those conditions Dumbledore’s entire state of mind will be sufficient.”

“Reasonable,” said Professor Quirrell. “So?”

“The corresponding strategy,” Harry said carefully, “is to mimic Dumbledore’s state of mind under those conditions, in as much detail as possible, while standing in front of the mirror. And this state of mind must have been produced by internal forces, not external ones.”

“But how are we to get that without Legilimency or the Confundus Charm, both of which would certainly be external – ha. I see.” Professor Quirrell’s ice-pale eyes were suddenly piercing. “You suggest that I Confund myself, as you cast that hex upon yourself during your first day in Battle

Magic. So that it is an internal force and not an external one, a state of mind that comes about through only my own choices. Say to me whether you have made this suggestion with the intention of trapping me, boy. Say it to me in Parseltongue.”

“My mind that you asked to devise sstrategy may perhapss have been influenced by ssuch an intent – who knowss? Knew you would be ssusspi-ciouss, assk thiss very question. Decission is up to you, teacher. I know nothing you do not know, about whether thiss iss likely to trap you. Do not call it betrayal by me if you choosse thiss for yourssself, and it failss.” Harry felt a strong impulse to smile, and suppressed it.

“Lovely,” said Professor Quirrell, who was smiling. “I suppose there are some threats from an inventive mind that even questioning in Parseltongue cannot neutralize.”



Harry put on the Cloak of Invisibility, at Professor Quirrell’s orders, to sstop the man who sshall believe himssself to be sschoolmasster from sseeing you, as Professor Quirrell said in Parseltongue.

“Wearing the Cloak or no, you will stand in range of the Mirror yourself,” Professor Quirrell said. “If a gush of lava comes forth, you will also burn. I feel that much symmetry should apply.”

Professor Quirrell pointed to a spot near the right of the door through which they’d entered the room, before the Mirror and well back of it. Harry, wearing the Cloak, went to where Professor Quirrell had pointed him, and did not argue. It was increasingly unclear to Harry whether both Riddles dying here would be a bad thing, even with hundreds of other student hostages at stake. For all of Harry’s good intentions, he’d mostly shown himself so far to be an idiot, and the returned Lord Voldemort was a threat to the entire world.

(Though either way, Harry couldn’t see Dumbledore doing the lava thing. For one thing, it wouldn’t permanently stop an entity that Dumbledore believed to be a discorporate soul.)

Then Professor Quirrell pointed with his wand, and a shimmering circle appeared around where Harry was standing on the floor. This, Professor Quirrell said, would soon become a Greater Circle of Concealment, by which nothing within that circle could be heard or seen from the outside. Harry

would not be able to make himself apparent to the false Dumbledore by taking off the Cloak, nor by shouting.

"You will not cross this circle once it is active," Professor Quirrell said. "That would cause you to touch my magic, and while Confunded I might not remember how to halt the resonance that would destroy us both. And further, since I do not want you throwing shoes –" Professor Quirrell made another gesture, and just within the Greater Circle of Concealment, a slight shimmer appeared in the air, a globe-shaped distortion. "Thiss barrier will explode if touched, by you or other material thing. The resonance might lash at me afterward, but you would also be dead. Now tell me in Parseltongue that you do not intend to cross this circle or take off your Cloak or do anything at all impulsive or stupid. Tell you me you will wait quietly here, under the Cloak, until this is over."

This Harry repeated back.

Then Professor Quirrell's robes became black tinged with gold, such robes as Dumbledore might wear upon a formal occasion; and Professor Quirrell pointed his own wand at his head.

Professor Quirrell stayed motionless for a long time, still holding his wand to his head. His eyes were closed in concentration.

And then Professor Quirrell said, "Confundus."

At once the expression of the man standing there changed; he blinked a few times as though confused, lowering his wand.

A deep weariness spread over the face Professor Quirrell had worn; without any visible change his eyes seemed older, the few lines in his face calling attention to themselves.

His lips were set in a sad smile.

Without any hurry, the man quietly walked over to the Mirror, as though he had all the time in the world.

He crossed into the Mirror's range of reflection without anything happening, and stared into the surface.

What the man might be seeing there, Harry could not tell; to Harry it seemed that the flat, perfect surface still reflected the room behind it, like a portal to another place.

"Ariana," breathed the man. "Mother, father. And you, my brother, it is done."

The man stood still, as if listening.

“Yes, done,” the man said. “Voldemort came before this mirror, and was trapped by Merlin’s method. He is only one more sealed horror now.”

Again the listening stillness.

“I would that I could obey you, my brother, but it is better this way.” The man bowed his head. “He is denied his death, forever; that vengeance is terrible enough.”

Harry felt a twinge, watching this, a sense that this was not what Dumbledore would have said, it seemed more like a strawman, a shallow stereotype... but then this wasn’t the real Aberforth’s spirit either, this was who Professor Quirrell imagined Dumbledore imagined Aberforth was, and that doubly-reflected image of Aberforth wouldn’t notice anything amiss...

“It is time to give back the Philosopher’s Stone,” said the man who thought he was Dumbledore. “It must go back into Master Flamel’s keeping, now.”

Listening stillness.

“No,” said the man, “Master Flamel has kept it safe these many years from all who would seek immortality, and I think it will be safest in his hands... no, Aberforth, I do think his intentions are good.”

Harry couldn’t control the tension that was running through him like a live wire; he was having trouble breathing. Imperfect, Professor Quirrell’s Confundus Charm had been imperfect. The underlying personality of Professor Quirrell was leaking through and seeing the obvious question, why it was okay for Nicholas Flamel himself to have the Stone if immortality was so awful. Even if Professor Quirrell conceptualized Dumbledore as being blind to the question, Professor Quirrell hadn’t included a clause in the Confundus saying that Dumbledore’s image of Aberforth wouldn’t think of it; and all of this was ultimately a reflection of Professor Quirrell’s own mind, an image from within the intelligence of Tom Riddle...

“Destroy it?” said the man. “Maybe. I am not sure it can be destroyed, or Master Flamel would have done it long since. I think, many times, that he has regretted making it... Aberforth, I promised him, and we are not so ancient or so wise ourselves. The Philosopher’s Stone must go back into the keeping of the one who made it.”

And Harry’s breath stopped.

The man was holding an irregular chunk of scarlet glass in his left hand, the size perhaps of Harry’s thumb from fingernail to the first joint. The sheened surface of the scarlet glass made it seem wet; the appearance was of blood, suspended in time and made into a jagged surface.

“Thank you, my brother,” the man said quietly.

Is that what the Stone should look like? Does Professor Quirrell know what the true Stone should look like? Will the Mirror give back the real Stone under these conditions, or make an imitation and return that?

And then –

“No, Ariana,” the man said, smiling gently, “I fear I must go now. Be patient, my dearest, it will be soon enough that I join you in truth... why? Why, I am not sure why I must go... when I hold the Stone I am to step aside from the Mirror and wait for Master Flamel to contact me, but I am not sure why I need to step aside from the Mirror to do that...” The man sighed. “Ah, I am getting old. It is well this dreadful war ended when it did. I suppose there is no harm if I speak to you for a time, my dearest, if you wish it so.”

A headache was starting behind Harry’s eyes; some part of Harry was trying to send a message about not having breathed in a while, but no one was listening. Imperfect, Professor Quirrell’s Confundus Charm had been imperfect, Professor Quirrell’s image of Dumbledore’s image of Ariana wanted to talk to Dumbledore, and maybe didn’t want to wait because Professor Quirrell knew on some level that there wasn’t really an afterlife, and the previously implanted impulse to leave after getting the Stone wasn’t standing up to Riddle-Ariana’s arguments...

And then Harry felt himself become very calm. He started breathing again.

Either way, there wasn’t much Harry could do about it. Professor Quirrell had stopped Harry from intervening; well, Professor Quirrell was welcome to reap the consequences of that decision. If the consequences caught Harry as well, so be it.

The man who thought he was Dumbledore was mostly nodding patiently, sometimes replying to his dearest sister. Sometimes the man cast an uneasy look to one side; as if feeling a strong impulse to go, but suppressing that impulse with the great patience and politeness and concern for his sister that Professor Quirrell imagined Albus Dumbledore having.

Harry saw it the instant the Confundus wore off, and the man’s expression changed, becoming again the face of Professor Quirrell.

And in the same instant the Mirror changed, no longer showing Harry the reflection of the room, showing instead the form of the real Albus Dumbledore, as though he were standing just behind the Mirror and visible through it.

The real Dumbledore's face was set, and grim.

"Hello, Tom," said Albus Dumbledore.

REFLECTIONS, PART II

THE grimness on Albus Dumbledore's face lasted only an instant before giving way to bewilderment. "Quirinus? What –"

And then there was a pause.

"Well," said Albus Dumbledore. "I do feel stupid."

"I should hope so," Professor Quirrell said easily; if he had been at all shocked himself at being caught, it did not show. A casual wave of his hand changed his robes back to a Professor's clothing.

Dumbledore's grimness had returned and redoubled. "There I am, searching so hard for Voldemort's shade, never noticing that the Defense Professor of Hogwarts is a sickly, half-dead victim possessed by a spirit far more powerful than himself. I would call it senility, if so many others had not missed it as well."

"Quite," said Professor Quirrell. He lifted his eyebrows. "Really, am I that hard to recognise without the glowing red eyes?"

"Oh, yes indeed," Albus Dumbledore said in level tones. "Your acting was perfect; I confess myself utterly deceived. Quirinus Quirrell seemed – what is the term I am looking for? Ah yes, that is the word. He seemed sane."

Professor Quirrell chuckled; he looked for all the world as though the two of them were just having a casual conversation. "I never was insane, you know. Lord Voldemort was just another game for me, the same as Professor Quirrell."

Albus Dumbledore did not look like he was enjoying a casual chat. "I thought you might say that. I regret to inform you, Tom, that anyone who can bring himself to act the part of Voldemort is Voldemort."

"Ah," said Professor Quirrell, raising an admonishing finger. "There is a loophole in that reasoning, old man. Anyone who acts the part of Voldemort must be what moralists call 'evil', on this we agree. But perhaps the real me is completely, utterly, irredeemably evil in an interestingly different fashion from what I was pretending with Voldemort –"

"I find," Albus Dumbledore ground out, "that I do not care."

"Then you must think yourself to be rid of me very soon," said Professor Quirrell. "How interesting. My immortal existence must depend on discovering what trap you have set, and finding a way to escape from it, as soon as possible." Professor Quirrell paused. "But let us pointlessly delay to talk of other matters first. How did you come to be waiting inside the Mirror? I thought you would be elsewhere."

"I am there," Albus Dumbledore said, "and also inside the Mirror, unfortunately for you. I have always been here, all along."

"Ah," said Professor Quirrell, and sighed. "I suppose my little distraction was for naught, then."

And the rage of Albus Dumbledore was no longer leashed. "Distraction?" roared Dumbledore, his sapphire eyes tight with fury. "You killed Master Flamel for a distraction?"

Professor Quirrell looked dismayed. "I am wounded by the injustice of your accusation. I did not kill the one you know as Flamel. I simply commanded another to do so."

"How could you? Even you, how could you? He was the library of all our lore! Secrets you have forever lost to wizardry!"

There was an edge to Professor Quirrell's smile, now. "You know, I still do not comprehend how your twisted mind can consider it acceptable for Flamel to be immortal, but when I try for the same it makes me a monster."

"Master Flamel never descended into immortality! He –" Dumbledore choked. "He only stayed awake past his evening, for our sakes, through his long, long day –"

"I don't know if you recall this," Professor Quirrell said, his voice airy, "but do you recall that day in your office with Tom Riddle? The one where I begged you, where I went down on my knees and begged you, to introduce me to Nicholas Flamel so that I could ask to become his apprentice, to someday make for myself the Philosopher's Stone? That was my last attempt to be a good person, if you are curious. You told me no, and gave me a lecture on how unvirtuous it was to be afraid of death. I went from your office in bitterness and in fury. I reasoned that if I was to be called evil in any case, just for not wanting to die, then I might as well be evil; and one month later I killed Abigail Myrtle to pursue immortality by other means. Even when I knew more of Flamel, I remained quite put out with your hypocrisy; and for that reason I tormented you and yours more than I otherwise would have done. I have often felt that you ought to know this, but we never had a chance

to talk frankly.”

“I decline,” said Albus Dumbledore, whose gaze did not waver. “I do not accept the tiniest shred of responsibility for what you have become. That was all, entirely, you and your own decisions.”

“I am not surprised to hear you say that,” said Professor Quirrell. “Well, now I am curious as to what responsibilities you do accept. You have access to some unusual power of Divination; that much I deduced long ago. You made too many nonsensical moves, and the paths by which they worked out in your favor were too ridiculous. So tell me. Were you forewarned of the result, that night of All Hallow’s Eve when I was vanquished for a time?”

“I knew,” said Albus Dumbledore, his voice low and cold. “For that, I accept responsibility, which is something you will never understand.”

“You arranged for Severus Snape to hear the Prophecy that he brought to me.”

“I allowed it to happen,” said Albus Dumbledore.

“And there I was, all excited at having finally gained my own foreknowledge.” Professor Quirrell shook his head as though in sadness. “So the great hero Dumbledore sacrificed his unwitting pawns, Lily and James Potter, merely to banish me for a few years.”

Albus Dumbledore’s eyes were like stones. “James and Lily would have gone willingly to the death, if they had known.”

“And the little baby?” Professor Quirrell said. “Somehow I doubt the Potters would have been so eager to leave him in the path of You-Know-Who.”

You could scarcely see the flinch. “The Boy-Who-Lived came out of it well enough. Tried to turn him into you, did you? Instead you turned yourself into a corpse, and Harry Potter became the wizard you should have been.” Now there was something like the usual Dumbledore behind the half-moon glasses, a tiny twinkle in those eyes. “All of Tom Riddle’s icy brilliance, tamed to the service of James and Lily’s warmth and love. I wonder how you felt when you saw what Tom Riddle could have become, if he had grown up in a loving family?”

Professor Quirrell’s lips quirked. “I was surprised, even shocked, by the abyssal depths of Mr. Potter’s naivete.”

“I suppose the humor of the situation would be lost on you.” It was then, finally, that Albus Dumbledore smiled. “How I laughed when I realised it! When I saw you had made a Good Voldemort to oppose the evil one – ah, how I laughed! I never had the steel for my role, but Harry Potter shall be

more than equal to it, when he comes into his power.” Albus Dumbledore’s smile disappeared. “Though I suppose Harry shall have to find some other Dark Lord to vanquish for it, since you will not be there.”

“Ah, yes. That.” Professor Quirrell made to walk away from the Mirror, and seemed to halt just before reaching the point where the Mirror would no longer have reflected him, if it had been reflecting him. “Interesting.”

Dumbledore’s smile was colder, now. “No, Tom. You are not going anywhere.”

Professor Quirrell nodded. “What have you done, exactly?”

“You have refused death,” said Dumbledore, “and if I destroyed your body, your spirit would only wander back, like a dumb animal that cannot understand it is being sent away. So I am sending you outside Time, to a frozen instant from which neither I nor any other can return you. Perhaps Harry Potter will be able to retrieve you someday, if prophecy speaks true. He may wish to discuss with you just who is at fault for the deaths of his parents. For you it will only be an instant – if you ever return at all. Either way, Tom, I wish you the best of it.”

“Hm,” said Professor Quirrell. The Defense Professor had paced past where Harry stood, watching mute and with something like horror, only to halt again at the other edge of the mirror. “As I suspected. You are using Merlin’s old method of sealing, what the tale of Tophérius Chang names as the Process of the Timeless. If legend speaks true, not even you can stop the process, now that it has been in motion this long.”

“Indeed,” said Albus Dumbledore. But his eyes were suddenly wary.

And Harry, from where he stood just before and to the right of the door, waiting in silence and controlled terror, could feel it in the air; he could feel the sense of a presence gathering within the Mirror’s field. Something more alien than magic, everything about it incomprehensible except for the fact of its strangeness and the fact of its power. It had been slow but now it was waxing faster, that presence.

“But you could still reverse the effect, if Chang’s account is true,” said Professor Quirrell. “Most powers of the Mirror are double-sided, according to legend. So you could banish what is on the other side of the Mirror instead. Send yourself, instead of me, into that frozen instant. If you wanted to, that is.”

“And why would I do that?” Albus Dumbledore’s voice was tight. “I suppose you are going to tell me that you have taken hostages? That was

futile, Tom, you fool! You utter fool! You should have known that I would give you nothing for any hostages you had taken.”

“You always were one step too slow,” said Professor Quirrell. “Allow me to introduce you to my hostage.”

Another presence invaded the air around Harry, a crawling sensation all over his flesh as another Tom Riddle’s magic passed very close to his skin. The Cloak of Invisibility was torn away from him, and the shimmering black Cloak flew away from him, through the air.

Professor Quirrell caught it, and swiftly drew it over himself; in less than a second he had pulled down the Cloak’s hood over his head, and disappeared.

Albus Dumbledore staggered, as though some essential support had been removed from him.

“Harry Potter,” the Headmaster breathed. “What are you doing here?”

Harry stared at the image of Albus Dumbledore, on whose face utter shock and utter dismay were warring.

The guilt and the shame were too much, too much, hitting Harry all at once, and he could feel the incomprehensible presence around him rising to a peak. Harry knew without words that there was no time left, and that he was done.

“It’s my fault,” Harry said in a tiny voice, from whatever part of him had taken over his throat in the final extremity. “I was stupid. I’ve always been stupid. You mustn’t rescue me. Goodbye.”

“Why, look at that,” sang out Professor Quirrell’s voice from the empty air, “I don’t seem to have a reflection any more.”

“No,” said Albus Dumbledore. “No, no, NO!”

Into the hand of the Albus Dumbledore flew from his sleeve his long, dark-grey wand, and in his other hand, as though from nowhere, appeared a short rod of dark stone.

Albus Dumbledore threw these both violently aside, just as the building sense of power rose to an unbearable peak, and then disappeared.

The Mirror returned to showing the ordinary reflection of a gold-lit room of white stone, without any trace of where Albus Dumbledore had been.

FAILURE, PART I

THE Dark Lord was laughing.

From the empty air came the voice of the Defense Professor laughing wildly, so high and terrible his laughter; it was Voldemort's laughter now, the Dark Lord's laughter beyond all hiding or restraint.

Harry's mind was disarrayed. His eyes kept staring at where Albus Dumbledore had been. There was a horror in him that was too huge for understanding or reflection. His mind kept trying to fall back through time and undo reality, but that wasn't a sort of magic that existed, and reality stayed the same.

He had lost, he had lost Dumbledore, there were no take-backs, and that meant he had lost the war.

And the Dark Lord went on laughing.

"Ah, ah hah, ah hah hah ha! Professor Dumbledore, ah, Professor Dumbledore, such a fitting end to our game!" Another burst of wild laughter. "The wrong sacrifice even at the finish, for the piece you gave up everything to save was already in my possession! The wrong trap even from the beginning, for I could have abandoned this body at any time! Ah, hahahahaha, aha! You never did learn cunning, you poor old fool."

"You –" A voice was coming from Harry's throat. "You –"

"Ahahahaha! Why, yes, little child, you were always along on this adventure as my hostage, it was your whole purpose in being here. Ha, hahahaha! You are decades too young to play this game against the real Tom Riddle, child." The Dark Lord drew back the hood of the Cloak, his head becoming visible, and began to remove the rest of the Cloak. "And now, boy, you have helped me, yess indeed, and so it iss time to ressurect your girl-child friend. To keep promise." The Dark Lord's smile was cold, cold indeed. "I suppose you have doubts? Mark well, I could kill you this instant, for there is no longer a Headmaster of Hogwarts to be informed of it. Doubt me all you wish, but remember that." The hand was once more holding the gun. "Now come along, foolish child."

And they left.

They went back out through the door into the Potions room, the Dark Lord banishing the returned purple fire with a stroke of his wand. They went through the chamber where the boggart had been, and the chamber of ruined chess statues, and through the burned door of the chamber of keys. The Dark Lord floated up through the trapdoor, and Harry struggled up afterward through the spiral staircase of leaves, the tendrils of the Devil's Snare twitching and then moving back as though afraid. The Boy-Who-Lived was trying hard not to burst into tears, and his dark-side patterns weren't helping, maybe because Voldemort had never known or dealt with guilt.

They passed the huge three-headed Ineri, and at a whispered word from the Dark Lord it collapsed over the trapdoor and became a corpse again.

They passed Severus Snape standing guard, who told them both that he was guarding the door, and that they must leave or he would deduct House points.

The Dark Lord spoke the words "Hyakuju montauk" without pausing in his stride, accompanied by a jab of his wand; and Severus staggered before he lifelessly drew himself up beside the door once more.

"What –" Harry said, as he followed. "What did you –"

"Just fulfilling my obligation to my faithful servant. It shall not kill him, as I promised you." The Dark Lord laughed again.

"The hostages –" Harry said. It was hard to keep his voice steady. "The students, you said you'd stop whatever is going to kill them –"

"Yess. Sstop worrying. Will do on our way out."

"Out?"

"We are leaving, child." The Dark Lord was still smiling.

The bad feeling this raised was lost in a sea of other bad feelings.

The Dark Lord was now consulting what he'd called the Hogwarts Map, the handwritten lines upon it seeming to move as they walked. Some part of Harry's mind that had been considering what to do if they ran into Aurors on patrol (whom the Dark Lord could kill, or Obliviate, in an instant) gave up that hope as well.

They went down the Grand Staircase to the second floor, encountering no one.

The Dark Lord made a turn Harry did not know, and went down another stair-flight. As they descended past one floor and another, the windows stopped and the torches began, they were within the Slytherin dungeons now.

Ahead, the form of a person in Hogwarts robes appeared.

The Dark Lord kept walking toward that person.

Harry followed.

A sixth or seventh-year Slytherin was waiting by a section of wall that was set with an artistic carving of Salazar Slytherin wielding his wand, against what looked like a giant covered in icicles. The witch made no comment at seeing Professor Quirrell walking upright, or seeing Harry in his company, or seeing the gun in the Defense Professor's hand. If her eyes were blank, Harry couldn't tell the difference.

The Dark Lord reached into his robes, took out a Knut, and flipped it to her. "Klaudia Alicja Tabor, I command you thus. Take this Knut to the spell circle I showed you beneath the Quidditch stands and put it in the center. Then Oblivate yourself of the last six hours."

"Yes, lord," the witch said, bowing to him, and went on her way.

"I thought –" Harry said. "I thought you needed the Stone to –"

The Dark Lord was still smiling, he had never stopped smiling. "I did not say that part in Parseltongue, child. All I said in Parseltongue was that I had set events in motion to kill students, events that I would stop if I obtained the Stone. The rest was in human speech. I would also have stopped the Blood Fort sacrifice if I had not obtained the Stone, so long as I was not discovered and restrained. The students of Hogwarts are a valuable resource, whom I have already spent much time training." Then the Dark Lord hissed to the wall, "Open."

Harry's eyes saw the tiny snake that had been set in the upper-left of the carving, even as the wall slowly swung backward, revealing the opening of a huge pipe. Moss grew on its sides and a musty dusty smell welled up from it; the interior was also covered with cobwebs in multiple sheets.

"Spiders..." murmured the Dark Lord. He sighed, and for that brief moment he sounded once more like Professor Quirrell.

The Dark Lord walked into the huge pipe, the cobwebs burning away before him. Harry, not seeing any other better options, followed.

The pipe branched in a Y-shape, then branched again. The Dark Lord went left, then right.

The pipe came to a solid metal wall. "Open," the Dark Lord hissed, and a crack appeared in the metal; it seemed to fold into itself.

Beyond was the middle of a long, stone tunnel.

“We shall be walking a while,” said the Dark Lord. “Did you have more questions to ask, little child?”

“I – I can’t think of any – right now –”

Another cold laugh replied to this, and they walked into the tunnel, turning right.

Harry didn’t know, then or ever, how long he walked; the light of burning spiderwebs was too dim to read his mechanical watch, and Harry had not thought to look at the time before entering. It felt like they walked for miles, miles beneath the ground.

Slowly, Harry’s mind tried to recover itself a final time. Very possibly final, if he was right about the Dark Lord killing him after this... though the Dark Lord had said that he would resurrect Hermione, which seemed pointless if that was true... was that simply the Dark Lord following through on a promise he would not otherwise have been able to make in Parseltongue... why had he not just shot Harry on the spot...

Seriously, some last functioning part of his brain said to all the other parts, this would be a good time to think of something, something that the Dark Lord has not already thought of, something we can do without our pouch or our wand or our Time-Turner, something that Professor Quirrell has not imagined we can do... think, think, pretty pretty please think of something? Don’t shut down now, even if you’re scared, even if we’ve never really really faced death before in the sense of being about to die in the next hour, THIS IS NOT THE TIME TO SHUT DOWN –

Harry’s mind stayed blank.

Suppose, said that last remaining part, suppose we try to condition on the fact that we win this, or at least get out of this alive. If someone TOLD YOU AS A FACT that you had survived, or even won, somehow made everything turn out okay, what would you think had happened –

Not legitimate procedure, whispered Ravenclaw, the universe doesn’t work like that, we’re just going to die.

Someone realises we’re missing, thought Hufflepuff, and Mad-Eye Moody shows up with a squad of Aurors and rescues us. I think the time has come to admit we’re not more competent than the standard authorities.

The saving factor does have to be something we do somehow, said the last voice. Otherwise there’s no point in our thinking about it.

Problem two, said Gryffindor. Harry Potter isn’t missing, he’s right there at the Quidditch match where everyone can see him. Professor Quirrell

thought of that too, it's part of why he sent that fake note. Problem three. I don't think Mad-Eye Moody and an Auror squad can beat the Dark Lord, and certainly not before he kills us. I'm not sure the entire DMLE can beat the Dark Lord if he's fighting seriously and Dumbledore is gone. Problem four. The Quidditch match was not disrupted, that's probably the only reason why Professor Quirrell was willing to try something as complicated as bringing us along on this trip in the first place.

Thinking along different lines, ventured Slytherin, maybe Professor Quirrell calls in someone else to Memory-Charm us. Legilimency, Imperius, Confundus, who knows what else, we're not a perfect Occlumens. Then the Dark Lord would have a smart – well, sort-of smart lieutenant that he could use. That could be another reason why Professor Quirrell was so willing to tell us secrets, if he knew that the memory would disappear. It's also a reason to leave the Hogwarts wards, so the Dark Lord can call Bellatrix to Apparate in and do the work...

This entire reasoning process is illegitimate and I refuse to participate, said Ravenclaw.

What lovely last words, said the last voice. Now shut up and think.

Rough stone tunnel went by underfoot, Harry's shoes sometimes dipping into moisture or nearly slipping on a curved surface. The neurons in his brain, which kept on firing, imagined voices talking to each other, yelling at each other, even as the Listener stayed numb with horror and shame.

Gryffindor and Hufflepuff were conducting a debate about suicide by charging the Dark Lord's gun, or by swallowing the little jewel on Harry's steel ring. It seemed unclear whether the fate of the world was better or worse if the Dark Lord had Harry as a mind-slave; if the Dark Lord was going to win anyway, it might be better if he won faster.

And the last voice kept talking through it all; even in the depths of failure that last voice remained. What else did the Dark Lord always say in human speech and never in Parseltongue? Do we remember? Anything like that, anything at all?

It was all too distant in time, too distant in time even though it had all happened this very day. The Dark Lord had told him in Parseltongue just now that it was time to revive Hermione, and then he'd said other things all in English, Harry could hardly remember for all that they'd just been spoken. Before then... before then there'd been the Circle of Concealment, when Professor Quirrell had hissed that the barrier would explode if touched. And

the Defense Professor had said in English for Harry not to take off his Cloak or try crossing the Circle, said in English that the resonance might strike Professor Quirrell afterwards but Harry would be dead. Said in English that if Harry touched the magic and Professor Quirrell didn't remember how to halt the resonance, it would kill them both...

Suppose it doesn't kill us both, said the last voice. On Halloween in Godric's Hollow, the Dark Lord's body was burned and we only ended up with a scar on our forehead. Suppose the resonance between us is deadlier to the Dark Lord than to us. What if this entire time we've been able to kill the Dark Lord at any time, just by dashing forward and touching our hands to any part of his exposed skin? And then it makes our scar bleed again, but that's all. The sense of 'stop, don't do that' is inherited from the Dark Lord's worst memory of his mistake in Godric's Hollow, it may not actually apply to the Boy-Who-Lived.

A small note of hope rose.

Rose, and was quashed.

The Dark Lord can just throw away his wand, droned Ravenclaw. Professor Quirrell can turn into his Animagus form. Even if he dies the Dark Lord will possess someone else and return, and then torture our parents, to punish us.

We might be able to get to our parents in time, said the last voice. We might be able to hide them. We might be able to get the Philosopher's Stone away from the Dark Lord if we killed his current body now, and that Stone could provide the nucleus of a counter-army.

The Dark Lord was moving on through the stony corridor. His hand still held the gun. He was at least four meters away from Harry.

If we dart forward, he will sense us approaching through the resonance, said Hufflepuff. He will fly forward rapidly, he can do that, he has the broomstick-enchantments that let him fly. He will fly forward, turn around, and fire the gun. He knows about the resonance, he's thought of this already. This is not something the Dark Lord has failed to consider. He will be ready for it, and waiting.

Continuing the same line of argument, said the last voice. Suppose we can freely cast magic on Professor Quirrell but he can't cast it on us.

Why would that be true? demanded Ravenclaw. In fact, we have evidence that it's false. In Azkaban, when Professor Quirrell's Avada Kedavra hit our Patronus Charm, it felt like our head was splitting apart –

Suppose that was all his magic going out of control. Suppose if we'd just cast, say, a Luminos targeting him, nothing bad would have happened.

But why? said Ravenclaw. Why suppose that?

Because, thought Harry, it explains why Professor Quirrell didn't warn me not to cast any magic on him in Azkaban. Because Professor Quirrell never said in Parseltongue, that I can remember, that I'd hurt myself if I tried to cast magic on him. He could have given me that warning, but he didn't, even though he gave me a lot of other warnings. Absence of evidence is weak evidence of absence.

There was a pause while Harry's parts considered this.

We don't actually have our wand, said Ravenclaw.

We might get it back at some point, thought the last voice.

But even then, Harry thought, and the grey hopelessness returned, the resonance is something the Dark Lord knows about. He's already thought of everything I can do with that, he already has a response prepared. That was my mistake from the beginning. I didn't respect the Dark Lord's intelligence, I didn't think that maybe he knew everything I knew and could see everything I saw and had already taken it into account.

Then, said the last voice, conditional on our winning, we must have hit him with something he doesn't know about.

Dementors, offered Gryffindor.

The Dark Lord knows we can destroy, deflect, and possibly control Dementors, said Ravenclaw. He doesn't know how, but he knows we have the capability, and where the heck would we get a Dementor anyway?

Maybe, ventured Hufflepuff, the Dark Lord's whole horcrux system would short out via the resonance if we grabbed him and held him, sacrificing our own life to destroy him forever.

Bullhockey, said Ravenclaw. But I guess it doesn't hurt to engage in some pleasant fantasy before we die, no matter how stupid.

If Lord Voldemort had a strong enough fear of death, Hufflepuff argued, if he wanted strongly enough to just not need to think about death again, then the horcrux system could have design flaws like that. It never occurred to Voldemort to test his horcruxes on someone else, that could indicate he wasn't able to think about the subject clearly –

So his fear of death is his fatal weakness? said Ravenclaw. Yeah, no. I'm thinking someone with over a hundred horcruxes might have a few failsafe mechanisms in there.

And Harry's brain went on thinking.

A genuine asymmetry in the magical resonance between them... seemed improbable, there was no reason for the magical effect to work like that. But the magical backlash could hit the stronger wizard harder, the more powerful magic resonating more dangerously. That could explain the observed event in Godric's Hollow (Voldemort explodes, baby survives), and also explain the observed event in Azkaban (Voldemort severely impaired by backlash of his strong magic, first-year Boy-Who-Lived hit by lighter backlash of his weak magic). Or if it was only the caster's magic that resonated, that could also explain both those two observations. That might even explain why Professor Quirrell had been in no rush to warn Harry against casting any magic on him. Though there was another obvious reason why Professor Quirrell would avoid raising the subject of the resonance; it was a gigantic hint about the mystery of Godric's Hollow, if Harry had ever made the connection.

The part that was numb with grief and guilt took this opportunity to observe, speaking of obliviousness, that after events at Hogwarts had turned serious, they really really really REALLY should have reconsidered the decision made on First Thursday, at the behest of Professor McGonagall, not to tell Dumbledore about the sense of doom that Harry got around Professor Quirrell. It was true that Harry hadn't been sure who to trust, there was a long stretch where it had seemed plausible that Dumbledore was the bad guy and Professor Quirrell the heroic opposition, but...

Dumbledore would have realised.

Dumbledore would have realised instantly.

The wise old wizard with the true phoenix on his shoulder would have known, and Harry hadn't trusted him, Harry hadn't told him all the relevant facts, and the reason for this had been sheer neglect to reconsider a cached decision made four days into the start of the school year. It had been marked 'something not to tell Dumbledore' and even after Azkaban, even after Hermione died, even after everything, Harry had simply forgot to promote the question to deliberation and reconsider the tradeoff.

Another wave of grief and shame washed over Harry, and for a time he walked on in the silence of the last voice, other voices being happy enough to fill the gap.

After what was at least several miles, and many grey thoughts, the stone tunnel ended.

The Dark Lord climbed up stone steps, and Harry followed after.

The two of them came into a dark, dank stone building. Dirty old stone doors swung open without being touched.

Before them lay marble slabs, rising up from bare ground, upon them names and dates. The tombstones were scattered in nothing like neat rows, and the rest of the graveyard ran wild.

The moon above was over three-quarters full, already seeming bright with night not fully fallen.

Harry had stopped walking upon seeing the graveyard. There was a blaring alarm in his brain saying to be anywhere other than here, but there weren't any options for accomplishing that. So that alarm cried unanswered, even as behind Harry the stone doors of the mausoleum swung shut again and sealed themselves.

The Dark Lord came into the center of the scattered graveyard. He stopped walking, and waved his wand above his head in a small circle.

There was a rumbling sound, and smoothly from the ground rose an altar, at least two meters wide and of black stone carved with grey sigils. And then surrounding the altar groaned up six dark-marble obelisks, regularly spaced, gleaming darkly beneath the fading twilight sky.

The unanswerable alarm in Harry's brain grew louder.

"This," said the Dark Lord in Professor Quirrell's cadences, "is a workspace I made for myself, convenient to either Hogwarts or Hogsmeade." The Dark Lord flourished a hand at the altar. "That is where Miss Granger shall revive, and also where I shall be reborn into my true body. I shall remake myself first, of course. Magicss to revive girl-child eassier with true body." A strange snakish laughter accompanied these words. "Resst assured that though ssome aspects of girl-child'ss ressurrection sshall be what otherss conssider Dark, girl-child will not be harmed or made ugly by it. Sshall sstill look like hersself, mind sshall be her own, nor sshall I or mine harm her after."

Harry's tongue was dry and his mind was having trouble functioning. "Please, Professor, would you say in Parseltongue what is your real purpose in resurrecting Miss Granger?"

"To resstore to you girl-child friend'ss counssel and resstraint. To make ssure sshe iss part of the world for you to care about. That, boy, iss truly the greater part of the reasson I am doing thiss deed." Again snakish laughter accompanied these words, conveying sardonic awareness of some vast irony.

A small spark of hope kindled inside Harry, alongside the much greater

note of confusion, and the fear that a perfect Occlumens could indeed lie in Parseltongue. Harry didn't understand why the Dark Lord was doing this, if the next step was just to kill the Boy-Who-Lived or enslave him...

Maybe he'd just never understood Professor Quirrell at all, maybe somehow Harry's model of Tom Riddle was just that wrong... maybe the Boy-Who-Lived would be Obliviated of the last day and dropped off somewhere with a confused Hermione Granger, while Lord Voldemort went on to conquer the world...?

Hope flared up in Harry, but it was a confused hope that didn't make any sense. It didn't square with the Dark Lord who had mocked Dumbledore and laughed at his defeat. Harry couldn't come up with any consistent account of Professor Quirrell's motives that allowed for something like that.

I do not know what is meant to happen next.

The Dark Lord had moved forward to the altar. He knelt there, and seemed to reach deep into the stone of the altar itself, drawing forth a vial of liquid that looked black in the fading twilight.

When the Dark Lord spoke again his voice was clipped and precise. "Blood, blood, blood so wisely hidden," said the Dark Lord.

And the obelisks surrounding the altar began to speak, voices like a chanting chorus coming from the motionless stones, cadences older than Latin.

Apokatastethi, apokatastethi, apokatastethi to soma mou emoi.

Apokatastethi, apokatastethi, apokatastethi to soma mou emoi.

The obelisks' chant echoed after the end of each line, as if they were speaking out of synchrony with each other. The blood was poured from the vial, and it seemed to catch and hang over the altar, slowly expanding through the air, taking on a shape.

Apokatastethi, apokatastethi, apokatastethi to soma mou emoi (emoi).

Apokatastethi, apokatastethi, apokatastethi to soma mou emoi (emoi).

A tall form rested upon the altar, and even in the dimming twilight it looked too pale.

The Defense Professor reached his hand into his robe, and drew forth a small irregular chunk of red glass.

He placed that upon the tall pale body.

The Stone stayed there for a time, minutes at least. The irregular chunk of red glass did not glow, or flash, or give any other indication of power.

Then the Stone moved, just a little, turning slightly upon the body.

The Defense Professor took back the Stone into his robes, and prodded the tall form that lay motionless upon the altar, touching the eyes with his fingers, poking the chest with his wand.

He threw back his head, then, and laughed.

"Incredible," said the Dark Lord, in the voice of the Defense Professor that Harry had known. "Fixed, it is fixed in form! A mere construct sustained by magic, become the true substance at the Stone's touch! And yet I sensed nothing! Nothing! I feared I had been deceived, that I had obtained a false Stone, but the substance proves true to my every test!" The Defense Professor tucked the red glass back into his robes. "That is eldritch even by my standards, I admit."

Then the Defense Professor walked around the altar, five times he walked around it, chanting something too low for Harry to hear.

The Dark Lord placed his wand in the hand of the figure lying on the altar.

He placed his hands, both of them, over the body's forehead.

The Dark Lord spoke. "Fal. Tor. Pan."

Without any warning there was a flash like lightning that lit up the entire graveyard, and Harry staggered back a step, his hands involuntarily going to his forehead. It felt as if he had been shot there, or a wasp stung him, upon his scar.

The Defense Professor collapsed.

And the too-tall figure sat up upon the altar.

It swung around smoothly, and stood tall upon the ground, at least a head higher than a normal man. The form's limbs were lean and pale, little-muscled but giving an impression of terrible strength.

Harry took another staggering step back, his hands still clasped to his scar. Though the distance between them was wide, Harry felt a sense of terrifying apprehension in the air, as though the sense of doom had always been out of focus and had now clarified, concentrated into a physical pain in the scar on Harry's forehead.

Was that what Voldemort was supposed to look like? The nose looked like, it looked like it had malfunctioned during the resurrection process –

The too-tall figure threw back his head and laughed, raising his hands and wand to look at them. The left hand opened wide and it was like a pale half-spider with four over-long legs, fingers caressing the wand held in the other hand. Leaves stirred up from the graveyard, approaching to dance

around the too-tall figure, surrounding him and clothing him, reforming into a high-necked shirt and flowing robes; and Lord Voldemort was laughing. Exactly the mirthless laughter that Harry remembered coming from his own throat inside the Dementor's nightmare, precise in tone and timbre.

Red eyes gleamed beneath the fading twilight, their pupils slitted like a cat's.

The form that Voldemort had abandoned raised itself, quivering, from the ground; and in a voice that Harry could barely hear, Quirinus Quirrell gasped, "Free – oh, free –"

"Stupefy," said the high cold voice of Voldemort, and Quirinus Quirrell was blasted down into the ground; then, with a wave of Voldemort's other hand, Quirinus Quirrell was picked up and flung away from the altar.

Voldemort walked away from the altar, then turned and looked at Harry; and the pain in Harry's scar flared at it.

"Frightened, child?" Voldemort hissed, like there was an undercurrent of Parseltongue even to the Dark Lord's human speech. "Good. Place the girl on the altar, and break your Transfiguration. Iss time for me to revive her."

Is this really going to happen? Are we really going to do this?

Harry swallowed, mastering his fear through that note of impossible hope amid the confusion, and walked over to the altar. Then Harry took off his left shoe, and his left sock, and took off the toe-ring that was Hermione Granger, the Transfigured shape identical to the toe-ring that had been given Harry as an emergency portkey. There was a twinge of regret in Harry for not having the real portkey now, but only a twinge; an inner-circle Death Eater would routinely put up boundaries against portkeys, if Severus had been right. Behind Harry, Voldemort laughed again in what sounded like surprised appreciation.

"I need my wand to Finite her," Harry said aloud.

"You do not." High the voice and cruel. "You learned to sustain a Transfiguration by touch alone, without further use of the wand. You can likewise break your own Transfiguration wandlessly, by commanding your sustaining magic to drain away. Do so now."

Harry swallowed, and touched the toe-ring. He had to try three times, and clear his mind, before he could push his magic out of the toe-ring, as before he had learned to make a tiny stream of magic flow in.

The breaking of the spell went much more slowly that way than a Finite Incantatem, almost like the sped-up reverse of watching something being

Transfigured. The toe-ring distorted, flowing together, expanding. Colors changed, textures changed.

Two-thirds of a dead girl lay strewn across the altar, on her side with one arm falling off the altar's edge, the position in which the reversion had chanced to place her. No blood flowed now from the chewed stumps of her thighs. The dead girl wore Hermione Granger's face, but twisted and pale. It was as Harry had seen before in the hospital's back room, the image burned into his brain during thirty long minutes of Transfiguration, the image he had reproduced during four even longer hours to Transfigure the decoy. The dead girl was naked, for her clothes were not part of her, and had not been Transfigured.

The sight brought back flashbacks, of the hours spent in the infirmary room, of the nightmares afterward, all of which Harry suppressed.

"Go back," said Voldemort's high voice. "This is my work, now."

Harry swallowed, and retreated from the altar, to the mouth of the long corridor where he'd stood before. "Her body is, should be, around five Celsius, I cooled her so, so there wouldn't be brain damage –" Harry's own voice was wavering in pitch. Is he really going to do this? Really? There had to be a catch and Harry just couldn't see it. Voldemort had said that neither he nor any of his would harm Hermione, that her body and mind would be her own – why?

Voldemort walked forth to the altar once more, orienting the body before him with a wave of his hand to lie straight across the altar. The Dark Lord spoke with high monotone precision, "Flesh, flesh, flesh so wisely hidden."

The obelisks began chanting once more.

Apokatastethi, apokatastethi, apokatastethi to soma hou emoi (emoi).

Apokatastethi, apokatastethi, apokatastethi to soma hou emoi (emoi).

New flesh flowed out of the stumps of the girl's thighs, creeping forward like an ooze and solidifying.

The obelisks ceased chanting. A complete form lay naked upon the altar.

It didn't look like Hermione. A Hermione Granger should be standing up and talking, she should have her Hogwarts uniform.

Voldemort raised a hand, then hissed, as though in annoyance. With a violent gesture, the robes around Quirinus Quirrell's sleeping form were torn in half, his purple-and-green tie shredded, and his suit-jacket drawn from him to where Voldemort stood. Some part of Harry flinched, as if seeing the Dark Lord Voldemort attacking Professor Quirrell.

Voldemort plunged his hand deliberately into the suit jacket, which jerked as though something were being broken; then Voldemort shook out the suit jacket onto the ground beside him, emptying out the contents. Harry's pouch fell from it, and his Time-Turner, and a broomstick, and Voldemort's gun, and the Cloak, and a number of amulets and rings and stranger devices that Harry did not recognize.

And finally a chunk of red glass, which was laid upon Hermione Granger's form, and allowed to stay there for a time.

Minutes passed. The Dark Lord donned an amulet from the heap of things beside the altar; also from the heap, Voldemort took four short wooden rods with straps upon them, and reached beneath his robes to attach them, it looked like they went on his upper arms and upper thighs. The Dark Lord rose into the air, moved left, right, up and down, seeming to wobble slightly at first; then his flight stabilized.

The chunk of red glass turned, slightly.

The Dark Lord Voldemort floated to the ground, and prodded Hermione Granger's body with his wand.

"There iss an obsstacle," hissed Voldemort.

In Harry's mind the expectation of betrayal or other failure had already been so strong that the confirmation came only as a dull shock, not a sharp one. "What obsstacle?"

"Girl'ss body iss resstored. Ssubstance iss repaired. But not magic, or life... thiss iss body of dead Muggle." Voldemort turned from the altar, began to pace. "The full ritual would solve this. But that would require time... time and the blood of Granger's enemy, and I do not think Draco Malfoy still qualifies, nor can I take my own blood unwillingly... foolish." Voldemort's voice was a lower hiss. "Foolish, I should have foreseen this, and prepared. Her brain might awaken with an electrical shock, I know that much of Muggle medicine... but would her magic return to her? That I do not know, and I suspect if she awakens as a Muggle she will be a Muggle forever. Still, I can think of nothing better." The Dark Lord raised his wand –

"Wait!" Harry blurted, feeling hope return. She needs a spark of life and magic, just a spark to get her started...

Voldemort turned and looked at him. The snakelike face showed some slight degree of surprise.

"Think I have ssomething that might work," Harry hissed. "Needss wand. Have no intentionss to usse it againsst you." Harry said nothing about ex-

pecting his intentions wouldn't change; he'd simply blurted out the idea fast enough that he hadn't formed any specific intentions yet.

"This," Voldemort hissed, "I desire to see." The Dark Lord reached into the heap of things by the altar, and picked up the wrapped form of Harry's wand. It was thrown, gliding through the air and then dropping at Harry's feet; and then the Dark Lord floated back, the heap of things moving smoothly backwards with him.

Harry unwrapped his wand, and moved forward.

We have our wand back, that's step one, said the last voice, the voice of hope.

No part of Harry had any idea what step two might be, but it was still step one accomplished.

And Harry stood before the reformed body of Hermione Granger, who was still naked and dead, on a twilight-lit stone altar.

"Lord Voldemort," Harry said, "I beg you, please give her some clothes. It might help me do this."

"Granted," hissed Voldemort. The pain in Harry's scar flared as the naked girl's body lifted into the air, then flared again as dead leaves danced around her and she was clothed in the seeming of a Hogwarts uniform, though the trim was red instead of blue. Hermione Granger's hands folded over her chest, her legs straightened, and her body drifted back down.

Harry looked at her.

Focused on her, now that she looked human again.

She looks like she is sleeping, not dead. It took a conscious effort to look for breathing, fail to see it, and make the deduction. So far as naked perception was concerned... Hermione might as well be alive, right now.

That Hermione Granger would not approve of this situation, taken as a whole, seemed beyond question. But it didn't mean that she would rather stay dead than be alive, other things being equal, though they might not be.

Because you wish to live, because my best guess is that you would wish to live...

Harry reached out his shaking left hand, and touched Hermione's forehead. It was warm now, not the chill of five degrees Celsius; either Voldemort had increased her body temperature to normal, or the magic of the ritual had done it automatically. Which meant that Hermione's brain was currently warm and without oxygen, come to think.

That did it, the sense of urgency rising in him.

Harry's feet assumed the stance, his wand swung up to point at Hermione Granger's dead body. The only thing wrong with Hermione's body was that it was dead; everything else about that body was right, only one thing needed changing.

You don't belong here, death.

"Expecto," Harry shouted, feeling the magic and the life rise up into the Patronus Charm that was fueled by both, "PATRONUM!"

The girl in the Hogwarts uniform was surrounded by a blazing aura of silver fire, as the Patronus was born inside her.

Harry staggered, as he felt a dip, a bite. Intuition or Tom Riddle's memory told Harry that the life and magic that had just flowed into Hermione would never return to him, either one. It hadn't been all his life or all his magic, not by a long shot, there hadn't been time to expend that much, but whatever he'd just expended was gone forever.

And Hermione Granger was breathing, just like she was sleeping, rhythmic inhalations and exhalations. The twilight sky had dimmed further, and Harry could not see if color was returning to her, but it should have been, it certainly should have been. She looked to be sleeping peacefully, and it wasn't because being dead looked like sleeping, it was because she was asleep and her body was fine and nothing was hurting her while she slept.

Some part of Harry, that had somehow managed not to speak up earlier, quietly pointed out that they were still in a graveyard, the recently victorious Lord Voldemort was still in control of the situation, and that his guess about Hermione wanting to be alive was just a guess.

Harry was still smiling, as he slowly lowered his wand. The celebratory fireworks going off inside his mind were restrained, Harry wasn't screaming and running around in little circles like Professor Flitwick, but that –

That –

THAT, Harry said aloud inside his mind, THAT is what I call Step Two.

"Interesting," said the cold high voice. "Your Patronus draws upon your life as well as your magic... I guessed that much, for it was too powerful for a first-year to fuel with magic alone. And yet there must be more to the puzzle, since not just any life-fueled spell would have done... was your happy thought the image of her returning to life? Was that all it took?" Lord Voldemort was again toying with his wand, a dark interest in those red-slitted eyes. "I suspect I will feel quite stupid when I finally comprehend that spell, someday in my eternity. Now step away from the girl. There is more work I intend

to do, to give her besst chance of continued life.”

Harry stepped back, reluctantly, the sense of tension starting to return to him. He almost tripped over one haphazard grave marker, as the Dark Lord continued to walk forward.

Standing before the altar, the Dark Lord laid one finger upon Hermione Granger’s forehead.

Then the Dark Lord tapped his finger upon Hermione Granger’s forehead, and said, in a voice so low Harry almost did not hear, “Requiescus.”

Voldemort waved his hand at an obelisk, which began to rotate, turning itself to lay flat upon the ground, pointing outward. “Fascinating indeed,” Voldemort hissed. “She is alive, and magical, and not another Tom Riddle as I feared you might have made her.”

The tension was rising again in Harry. He’d put his wand away into the back belt of his pants, he did not want to remind Voldemort that he still had the wand on him. “What are you doing to her now?”

Another obelisk turned, lay flat upon the ground. “There iss old, losst ritual to ssacrifice magical creature, transsfer magical nature to ssubject. Limitationss are great. Transsfer iss temporary, only few hourss. Ssubject ssometimess diess when transsfer wearss off. But Sstone will make permanent.”

Four obelisks lay flat upon the ground, evenly spaced; the other two obelisks had been floated away.

Voldemort began to reach into his own mouth, checked himself, hissed with annoyance again. He gestured at the sleeping mouth of Quirinus Quirrell, and from Quirrell’s mouth floated up two teeth, almost invisible in the falling night. One of these went to the pile of items, the other floated to before the altar.

Moments later, Harry cried out and took a step back.

Huge and misshapen, lumpy skin, legs thick as tree-trunks, a small head that looked like a coconut perched upon a boulder.

A mountain troll stood within the circle of obelisks, motionless as though asleep while standing.

“What are you doing?”

Voldemort’s mouth was stretched in a wide smile; it looked horrible on him, like his face had too many teeth. “Sshall ssacrifice my fallback weapon, and girl-child sshall gain troll’ss power of regeneration. Transsfiguration ssicknesss iss nothing before that, if perchance it wass not fixed by previous

ritual. And no knife sshall sslay girl-child, nor cutting cursse, nor ssickness take her."

"Why – why are you doing this?" Harry's voice shook.

"Have not the tiniest intention of letting girl-child die again, after going to ssuch lengthss to ressurrect her."

Harry swallowed. "I'm very confused." Was Voldemort practicing being nice? This hypothesis did not seem like a sufficient explanation.

"Stay well back," Voldemort said coldly. "This ritual is Darker than the last." The Dark Lord began a new chant, softer syllables that seemed to seethe through the air like living things; and Harry, feeling a new surge of apprehension, stepped backwards.

Then Harry cried aloud, as pain flared again within his scar. The mountain troll crumbled in on itself, becoming ashes hanging in the air, then dust, and then the dust seemed to blow away without going anywhere; it was gone.

Hermione Granger slept on peacefully, whatever spell of repose Voldemort had cast on her being sufficient to the task.

"Um," Harry said in a small voice. "Did it work?"

"Diffindo."

Harry stepped forward with a choked yell, and then halted, both as the stupidity of his motion caught up with him, and as the sudden cut that the Severing Charm had opened on Hermione's leg closed almost as quickly as it had been made. In seconds there was only a light stain of blood on the surrounding flesh.

The Stone was laid again on Hermione, and after a time it turned. Voldemort laughed once more, as he passed his hand over her. "Marvelous."

Then another tiny tooth was floating within the circle of obelisks; and an instant later, a unicorn stood where the troll had stood before, eyes dull and head lowered.

"What?" Harry said. "Why a unicorn?"

"Power of unicorn'ss blood to presserve life makess excellent combination with troll'ss healing. Only Fiendfyre and Killing Cursse sshall girl-child fear, from thiss day." A flicker of snakish laughter. "Bessidess, had sspeare unicorn left over, might ass well usse."

"Unicorn's blood has side effects –"

"That iss only when power of unicorn'ss blood iss sstolen by another. Thiss ssPELL will make power of unicorn belong insside girl-child, ass if sshe wass alwayss born that way."

The grim chant and its seething words began again.

Harry watched, not understanding in the slightest.

Forget understanding, what am I seeing?

I'm seeing the Dark Lord Voldemort going to enormous lengths to resurrect Hermione Granger and keep her alive. It's like he thinks that his own life depends on Hermione Granger being alive, somehow.

The confused parts of Harry looked around for a procedure to follow. 'Make a prediction based on your best current hypothesis' was the first thought that came to mind, but it didn't seem to lead anywhere. The plot of the story wasn't going how it ought to, after the villain had won.

Again the blaze of pain in his scar, like a blow to Harry's forehead. The unicorn swayed, and then disintegrated as the troll had done.

The Dark Lord laid the Stone upon Hermione's form once more, clasping her hands around it.

Voldemort watched the unremarkable process for a time, then turned while the Stone still laid on her, making a high humming sound in his throat. "Ah, yes," hissed Voldemort. "That would be most appropriate. Do you still have the diary I gave you, boy? The diary of the famous scientist?"

Harry's brain took a moment to place what Voldemort was talking about. It had been in Mary's Room, in Mary's Place, in October, that precious gift from a friend. The thought should have triggered a wave of awful sadness, for the Professor Quirrell that had been lost or never real; but there had been enough of that emotion already, and his brain had set it aside for now.

"Yes," Harry said aloud. "I think it's in my pouch, can I check?" Harry knew it was in the pouch. He'd loaded it up with everything that he might possibly conceivably need, that he owned or had bought; everything that could have been a quest item.

From the heap of items by the altar, Harry's moleskin pouch was drawn out, tossed to Harry's feet.

"Roger Bacon's diary," Harry said as he reached in a hand, and the diary appeared. Professor Quirrell had said that the diary would emerge unscathed from a fire, so Harry threw it toward Voldemort's altar. Harry did not wince; there were more important things to worry about than polite treatment of books, even that one.

Voldemort picked up the diary, examining it, appearing quite absorbed.

Harry, as quietly and unobtrusively as he could, attached the pouch to his belt loop in back, where it wouldn't be visible, near where Harry had put

his wand.

Step three, the pouch.

"Yes," Voldemort hissed as he flipped pages of the diary, "this will do quite well." The Stone moved slightly, and the Dark Lord's other hand stored the Stone again within his robes.

"What was your hidden purpose behind the diary?" Harry said when the pouch was attached to his belt, and he'd put both of his empty hands where Voldemort could see them again. "I tried translating a little at the beginning, but it was going slowly –" Actually, it had been excruciatingly slow and Harry had found other priorities.

"Diary was exactly what it seemed, a gift meant to seduce you to my side." Voldemort made intricate gestures in the air with his wand, not even looking at what his hand was doing, as he held the diary in his other hand. For a moment Harry thought he could see a trail of darkness in the air, but the moonlight was too faint for certainty. "And now, my dear boy," Voldemort's high voice was laced with grim amusement, as his wand briefly tapped Hermione Granger's forehead with a casual gesture, "I make this diary into a far more precious gift, a sign of how much wisdom I have learned from you. For I would never want you to be deprived of Hermione Granger's counsel and restraint, not ever while the stars yet live. Avadavedavra."

The green bolt of the Killing Curse blazed out faster than Harry could possibly have cast the Patronus Charm, faster than he could possibly have moved, it was already over even as Harry cried out and went for his wand.

Quirinus Quirrell's unconscious body did not even jerk, in death. The green light struck into it without other sign.

Darkness glowed in the air, anti-light in the trails that Voldemort had made before, and the Diary of Roger Bacon darkened as though corruption were creeping over it, even as a shiver appeared in the air around Hermione Granger's form.

The pain in Harry's scar flared overwhelmingly, like a brand driven into his forehead, it sent Harry dodging unthinkingly to one side as Tom Riddle's reflexes took over.

And Voldemort was also screaming, shrieking as he dropped the diary to the ground, holding his own head and screaming.

Chance –

The last voice of hope said that, as Harry tried frantically to think, to understand. There wasn't any point in trying to kill Voldemort now, it might

only annoy him, weapons couldn't kill him while any of his hundreds of horcruxes remained –

But it still seemed worth it to temporarily discarnate Voldemort, take the Stone and Hermione and run.

Harry's right hand had already taken his wand. His left hand went around to his back, reached awkwardly into his pouch, began to make a silent sign, three English letters.

"No!" cried Voldemort. He'd dropped his hands from his head, was staring at Hermione's body as though bewildered. "No, no!"

The item came up from Harry's pouch into his hand, and Harry began to step forward as smoothly as he could, diminishing the range between them to what his brief trials had shown was doable.

"My great creation –" gasped Voldemort. His voice was high, sounding panicked. "Two different spirits cannot exist in the same world – it is gone, it is severed! A horcrux, I must make a horcrux at once –" Voldemort's gaze fell on Hermione Granger's still-sleeping form, and he began to raise his wand in the air, executing the same gestures as before.

Harry raised his gun and pulled the trigger three times.

FAILURE, PART II

EVEN as Harry had raised the gun, he'd known he was making a mistake, his forebrain saw it and tried to stop his hand, but somehow the sick certainty didn't propagate fast enough to prevent his finger from pulling the trigger –

The echo of the shots died away within the graveyard.

A fraction of a second before Harry had pulled the trigger, Voldemort had jabbed his wand downward, and a wide wall of dirt had shot up between them from the graveyard earth, intercepting all three bullets.

An instant after that, pain flared in Harry's scar, a crawling feeling came close to his skin; and then Harry's pouch, clothes, gun, everything except his wand disappeared, leaving him naked but for the wand still in his right hand, and the glasses he'd Charmed to stick to his nose. The steel ring upon his left pinky finger was yanked off hard enough to scrape skin, taking the Transfigured jewel with it.

"That," said the voice of Voldemort from behind the dirt wall, "was absolutely predictable. Do you really think I would shout it aloud for you to hear, if my immortality were disrupted? Really, stupid child? Lower your wand, do not raise it up again at any time, or you die upon the spot."

Harry swallowed, and pointed his wand downward. "You would have been disappointed in me," Harry said, his own voice now unusually high, "if I'd missed an opportunity like that, I mean." There was no time to think, and Harry's mouth was operating on autopilot for trying to placate evil overlords that might have paternal feelings for you and whom you'd just failed to assassinate.

Voldemort stepped around from behind the dirt wall, smiling that horrible smile that seemed to contain too many teeth. "I promised not to raise my hand or wand against you, child, if you did not raise your hand or wand against me."

"I used bullets," Harry said, his voice still high. "That's not a fist or a spell."

"My curse thinks differently. That is the puzzle piece that you missed. Did you think I would leave the peace between us to mere fortune? Before I

created you, I invoked a curse upon myself and all other Tom Riddles who would descend from me. A curse to enforce that none of us would threaten the others' immortality, so long as the other made no attempt upon our own. Typical of that ridiculous fiasco, the curse seems to have ended up binding me, but taking no hold upon the infant with his self so lost." A low, lethal chuckle. "But you tried to end my true life jusst then, ssstupid child. Now curse iss lifted, and I may kill you any time I wissh."

"I see," Harry said. He did see; that was why Voldemort had told him about his horcrux system in the first place, just to set up the moment when Harry knowingly tried to violate his immortality. Harry's mind was frantically churning through options, none of which seemed helpful. His pouch, his clothes, Harry saw by the moonlight that they all now lay in another heap by the altar, out of reach. "And now you kill me?" Harry still had his wand, presumably the Dark Lord couldn't cast his own magic on that, or his glasses, because of the disharmony. Cast my own spell first? No, Voldemort just jabs his wand downward to make another shield, then shoots me – what else is there? WHAT ELSE?

"Still a fool. If no further matters remained between us, I would already have killed you." The dirt wall crumbled at another gesture of the wand, and Voldemort moved smoothly back toward the heap of items by the altar. The Dark Lord stretched out a hand, and the diary of Roger Bacon flew to him. "Thiss iss, indeed, horcrux of girl-child, my ssuperior verssion." In his other hand appeared a parchment. "Thiss iss ritual for ressurrecting her, if it musst be done again. Insstructionss are honessst, no trapss. Remember that girl-child'ss sspirit cannot float free like ghosst, Ressurrection Sstone iss my horcrux, not herss. Do not losse her horcrux, or her sspirit may be trapped within it." Voldemort reached down, picked up Harry's pouch, fed both the diary and the parchment into it. "Remember that, in casse something goess wrong with next movess."

"I don't understand what is happening," Harry said. There was nothing else left. "Please explain to me."

The Dark Lord was now regarding Harry with a grim look. "When girl-child died, wass in company of sschool'ss Sseer, heard prophecy ssoken that you would become force of vasst desstruction. You would become threat beyond imagination, beyond apocalypsse. That iss why I went to ssuch lengthss to undo my killing of girl-child, keep it undone."

"Are," what "are you sure," what.

"Dare not ssay sspecificss to you. Prophecy I heard of myself led me to fulfill it. Have not forgotten that dissasster." Voldemort backed further away from Harry, red slitted eyes fixed upon the Boy-Who-Lived, gun unwavering in the left hand. "All thiss, all I have done, iss to ssmassh that desstiny at every point of intervention. If ssome fate makess me fail in what comess next, idiot-child of foretold desstruction, then you musst kill yourself to ssave girl-child. Elsse all you claim to value diess by your own hand."

"I," Harry's voice went up an octave, "I," another octave, "I really really wouldn't do that, seriously!"

"Ssilence, fool. Remain ssilent unlessss given leave by me to sspeak. Keep your wand pointed down and do not raiisse it unlessss told. Elsse you die upon the sspot, and mark that I ssaid that in Parsseeltongue." Voldemort reached into the altar again.

For a second Harry's mind couldn't process what he was seeing, and then he saw that Voldemort was holding a human arm, severed near the shoulder; it seemed too thin, that arm.

The Dark Lord pressed his wand to the flesh above the severed arm's elbow, and the fingers twitched, twitched like they were alive; by dim moonlight Harry saw a darker mark appear on that flesh, just above the elbow.

Seconds later the first hooded figure appeared inside the graveyard with the popping sound of an Apparition. A moment after that came another pop, and then another.

The hooded figures wore silver skull masks, and moonlight fled from the robes beneath them.

"Master!" cried one of the black robes, the third to arrive. The voice was of peculiar timbre, from behind the silver skull mask. "Master – it has been so long – we had lost hope –"

"Silence!" shouted the high voice of the Dark Lord Voldemort. Every trace of Professor Quirrell was now gone from the too-tall figure. "Train your wand upon the Boy-Who-Lived, and watch him! Do not be distracted, not by anything! Stun him at once if he moves, if he begins to speak!"

More pops. Between graves, behind a tree, in all the shadowy spaces, more black robes were Apparating, all hooded and masked. Some of them voiced exclamations of joy, many of those sounding rather forced; others moved forwards as though to greet their Master. Voldemort gave them all the same instruction, except that some were commanded to Cruciare Harry Potter if he moved, others to restrain the Boy-Who-Lived if he moved, others

told to fire hexes and curses, others told to cancel his magic.

Thirty-seven pops, Harry counted before the black robes and skull masks seemed to stop arriving.

All of them were now holding their wands pointed at Harry, aligned in a semicircle before him, where they wouldn't get into each other's lines of fire.

Harry continued pointing his wand downward, insofar as he had been told that, if he tried to raise it, he would die. He remained silent, insofar as he had been told that if he tried to speak, he would die. He tried not to shiver in the falling night temperatures, for he was naked, and it was getting colder.

You know, said the last voice within Harry, the voice of hope, I think this is getting pretty bad even by my standards.

FINAL EXAM

THE gibbous moon riding higher in the cloudless sky, the stars and wash of the Milky Way visible in all their majesty within the darkness: All these illuminated thirty-seven skull masks gleaming above black robes, and the darker-clad Lord Voldemort, whose eyes shone red.

"Welcome, my Death Eaters," spoke Lord Voldemort's voice, smooth and high and terrible. "No, do not look at me, you fools! Eyes upon the Potter child! Ten years, it has been, ten years since we last met. Yet you answer my call as though it were yesterday..." The Dark Lord Voldemort came near to one hooded figure, tapped fingers upon the mask. "In a hastily Transfigured mockery of a Death Eater's true armor, with a childish Charm to distort your voice. Explain, Mr. Honor."

"Our old masks and robes..." said the robe whose mask the Dark Lord had tapped. Even through the distorting timbre of the mask, the fear in it was audible. "We... we were not fighting in them, Master, with you gone... so I did not maintain their enchantments... and then you summoned me to appear here, masked, and I... I always held faith in you, Master, but I did not know you would return this very day... I am truly sorry to have displeased you..."

"Enough." The Dark Lord moved on to stand behind another figure, that seemed to tremble, though it kept its mask facing the Boy-Who-Lived, and its wand held level. "I might think more kindly of such neglect, if you had pursued my agenda by other means... Mr. Counsel. Yet I return to find – what? A country conquered in my name?" The high voice climbed higher. "No! I find you playing ordinary politics in the Wizengamot! I find your brothers still abandoned in Azkaban! It is a disappointment to me... I confess myself disappointed... You thought I was gone, the Dark Mark dead, and you forsook my purpose. Is that right, Mr. Counsel?"

"No, Master!" cried that masked figure. "We knew you would return – but, but we could not fight Dumbledore without you –"

"Crucio."

A horrible scream tore out of the mask, piercing the night, it continued

for long, long seconds.

"Get up," the Dark Lord said to the figure that had collapsed upon the ground. "Keep your wand on Harry Potter. Do not lie to me again."

"Yes, Master," sobbed the figure, as it pushed itself to its feet.

Voldemort resumed pacing behind the black-robed figures. "I suppose you are also wondering what Harry Potter is doing here... Why he is a guest at my rebirthing party."

"I know, Master!" said one of the robes. "You mean to prove your power by killing him, in front of us all, to leave no doubt as to which of you is stronger! To show how your Killing Curse can slay even this so-called Boy-Who-Lived!"

There was a pause. None of the cloaked figures dared to speak.

Slowly, the Dark Lord Voldemort, in his high-collared shirt and dark robes, turned to face the Death Eater who had spoken.

"That," whispered Voldemort in a voice chill as death, "is a little too much folly for me to credit, Mr. Sallow. You heard that theory of how I died, and tried to provoke me into repeating a mistake?" Lord Voldemort was floating, rising high off the ground. "I suppose you came to prefer your laziness to my mastery, Macnair?"

The Death Eater who'd spoken was suddenly surrounded by a blue haze. He spun, slashed his wand at the Dark Lord, and cried "Avada Kedavra!"

Voldemort simply tilted to one side in midair, dodging the green bolt.

"Avada Kedavra!" cried the Death Eater. His hand that didn't hold a wand was making other gestures, further colors and layers building up in his shielding haze with each gesture completed. "Help me, my brothers! If we all –"

The Death Eater fell in seven flaming pieces to the ground, chunks of flesh with the cauterized edges still glowing.

"Eyes and wands on Harry Potter, all of you," Voldemort repeated, his voice low and dangerous. "And Macnair acted in sheer stupidity just then, for I command your Marks, as I always shall. I am immortal."

"Master," said another robe. "The girl upon the altar – is she to serve us for a Dark Revel? She seems unworthy of such a joyous occasion. I could find better, Master, if you give me leave for just a short time –"

"No, Mr. Friendly," said Voldemort, sounding rather amused. "The little witch you see upon the altar is none other than Hermione Granger –"

"What?" cried one of the black robes, and then, "I'm sorry, Master, I'm sorry, I beg your –"

“Crucio.” This screaming only lasted a few seconds, and Voldemort had performed it as though it were perfunctory. Afterward Voldemort’s voice returned to low amusement. “I have resurrected this mudblood through the Darkest of magics, for my own purposes. You shall not offer her the slightest trouble, any of you. You are better off dead than if I learn my little experiment came to harm at your hands. This order is absolute, regardless of other circumstances – even if she escapes, let us say.” A cold high laugh, as if at some joke that nobody else understood.

“Master,” one of the robes said in a faltering voice distorted by his skull mask. “Master, please – I would never defy you, I am obedient as you see – but Master, I beg you, let me return, the better to serve you later – I came here in haste, forsaking – Master, with so many of us being gone, others will wonder, they will mark the absences, who has disappeared. Soon there shall be no alibi I can offer.”

A cold high laugh. “Ah, Mr. White, the most delinquent of my servants. I have not yet decided if you will survive your punishment. I have less need of you than I once did, Mr. White. In two days’ time the Death Eaters shall walk openly. My powers have increased, and I have just this day disposed of Dumbledore.” More gasps of shock arose from the Death Eaters, Voldemort paid them no heed. “Tomorrow I shall slay Bones, Crouch, Moody, and Scrimgeour, if they have not fled. The rest of you shall go into the Ministry and the Wizengamot, and cast Imperius Curses as I direct you. We are finished waiting. By tomorrow’s nightfall I shall have declared myself Lord Ruler of Britain!”

Intakes of breath rose from the gathered masks, but one figure was laughing.

“You find me amusing, Mr. Grim?”

“Apologies, Master,” said the robed figure who had laughed, his wand perfectly level upon where Harry stood. “I was glad to hear you had dispatched Dumbledore. I fled from Britain in cowardly fear of him, having lost faith in your return.”

Voldemort’s chuckle resounded within the graveyard. “Your candor earns you my mercy, Mr. Grim. I was surprised to see you here tonight; you are more competent than I suspected. But before we turn our attention to happier matters, there is a certain affair to which we must attend. Tell me, Mr. Grim, if the Boy-Who-Lived swore an oath to you, might you trust him?”

“Master... I don’t understand...” said Mr. Grim. One or two of the other

Death Eaters turned their masks toward Voldemort before quickly fixing the skull gaze on Harry.

"Answer me," Voldemort hissed. "This is not a trick, Mr. Grim, and you will answer truthfully or bear the consequences. You knew the boy's forebears, did you not? Knew them for straightforward folk? If the boy freely chose to swear to you an oath, even knowing you for a Death Eater, might you trust in his words? Answer me!" Voldemort's voice rose to a shriek.

"I... yes, Master, I suppose I might..."

"Good," Voldemort said coldly. "The potential for trust must exist, to be sacrificed. And for the bonder of the Unbreakable Vow... which of you shall sacrifice their magic? It shall be quite the long Vow... much longer than usual... much magic shall be required for that..." Voldemort smiled his awful smile. "Mr. White shall do."

"No, please! Master, I beg you! I served you better than any – as best I could –"

"Crucio," said Voldemort, and Mr. White screamed through his mask's distortion for what seemed like a full minute. "Be grateful if I leave you your life! Now approach the boy, Mr. Grim, Mr. White. From behind him, idiot! You must not block the others' wands! And the rest of you, you must fire if Harry Potter tries to run, even if it means striking at your fellow Death Eaters."

Mr. White took time to approach, the black robes seeming to shake, even as Mr. Grim moved smoothly into position.

"What is to be the Vow, Master?" came the voice of Mr. Grim.

"Ah, yes," Voldemort said. The Dark Lord went on pacing behind the semicircle of Death Eaters. "Today – though I hardly expect even you to believe me – today we are doing Merlin's work, my Death Eaters. Yes! Before us stands a great danger, who in his blundering folly has been prophesied to wreak destruction such as even I can scarcely imagine. The Boy-Who-Lived! The boy who frightens Dementors! The cattle who believe they own this world should have been more worried when they saw that. Useless, all of them!"

"Forgive me –" said one black robe in a halting voice. "Master – surely, if that is so – Master, why don't we just kill him right away?"

Voldemort laughed, a strange bitter laugh. When he spoke on his high voice was precise. "Here is the oath's intent, Mr. Grim, Mr. White, Harry Potter. Listen well and comprehend the Vow that must be sworn, for its

intent is also binding, and you three must share an understanding of its meaning. You will swear, Harry Potter, not to destroy the world, to take no risks when it comes to not destroying the world. This Vow may not force you into any positive action, on account of that, this Vow does not force your hand to any stupidity. Do you understand that, Mr. Grim, Mr. White? We are dealing with a prophecy of destruction. A prophecy! They can fulfill themselves in twisted ways. We must be cautious that this Vow itself does not bring that prophecy about. We dare not let this Vow force Harry Potter to stand idly after some disaster is already set in motion by his hand, because he must take some lesser risk if he tries to stop it. Nor must the Vow force him to choose a risk of truly vast destruction, over a certainty of lesser destruction. But all Harry Potter's foolishness," Voldemort's voice climbed, "all his recklessness, all his grandiose schemes and good intentions – he shall not risk them leading to disaster! He shall not gamble with the Earth's fate! No researches that might lead to catastrophe! No unbinding of seals, no opening of gates!" Voldemort's voice lowered again. "Unless this very Vow itself is somehow leading into the destruction of the world, in which case, Harry Potter, you must ignore it in that particular regard. You will not trust yourself alone in making such a determination, you must confide honestly and fully in your trusted friend, and see if that one agrees. Such is this Vow's meaning and intent. It forces only such acts as Harry Potter might choose himself, having learned that he is a prophesied instrument of destruction. For the capacity for choice must also exist, to be sacrificed. Do you understand, Mr. White?"

"I – I think so – oh, Master, please, do not let the Vow be so long –"

"Silence, fool, you do a more useful thing this day than you have ever done. Mr. Grim?"

"I think, Master, that it must be repeated to me."

Voldemort smiled that too-wide smile, and said it all again using different words.

"And now," Voldemort said coldly, "Harry Potter, you will keep your wand low, and permit Mr. Grim to touch his wand to yours; and you will speak such words as I direct you. If Harry Potter speaks any other word, then cut him down, the rest of you."

"Yes, Master," came the thirty-four-fold chorus.

Harry was chilled, and shivering, and not only because he was naked in the night. He didn't understand why Voldemort was not just killing him.

There seemed to be only a single line leading into the future, and it was Voldemort's chosen line, and Harry did not know what came after this.

"Mr. White," said Voldemort. "Touch your wand to Harry Potter's hand, and repeat these words. Magic that flows in me, bind this Vow."

Mr. White spoke those words. Even through the distortion effect of his mask, it sounded as though his heart were breaking.

Behind Voldemort the obelisks chanted, a language that Harry did not know; three times they repeated their words, then fell silent.

"Mr. Grim," said Voldemort. "Think of the reasons why you might trust this boy, if he had given this oath freely. Think of that potential for trust, and sacrifice it as you say..."

"By my trust that I hold for you," said Mr. Grim, "be you held."

And then it was Harry Potter's turn to repeat Lord Voldemort's words, and Harry did so.

"I vow..." Harry said. His voice shook, but he spoke. "That I shall not... by any act of mine... destroy the world... I shall take no chances... in not destroying the world... if my hand is forced... I may take the course... of lesser destruction over greater destruction... unless it seems to me that this Vow itself... leads to the world's end... and the friend... in whom I have confided honestly... agrees that this is so. By my own free will..." Harry could feel it, as the rite was invoked, the shining cords of power wrapping around his wand and Mr. Grim's wand, wrapping around his hand where Mr. White's wand touched it, wrapping around his self on some disturbingly abstract level. Harry could feel himself invoking his power of free choice, and he knew that his next words would sacrifice it, that this was absolutely the last chance to turn back.

"... so shall it be," said the coldly precise voice of Lord Voldemort.

"... so shall it be," Harry repeated, and he knew in that moment that the content of the Vow was no longer something he could decide whether or not to do, it was simply the way in which his body and mind would move. It was not a vow he could break even by sacrificing his life in the process. Like water flowing downhill or a calculator summing numbers, it was just a thing-Harry-Potter-would-do.

"Did the Vow take, Mr. White?"

Mr. White sounded like he was weeping. "Yes, Master... I have lost so much, please, I have been punished enough."

“Return to your places...” said Voldemort. “Good. All eyes on the Potter child, prepare to fire the instant he tries to flee, or raise his wand, or speak any word...” The Dark Lord floated high in the air, the black-clad figure overlooking the graveyard. Again he held a gun in his left hand, and his wand in his right. “Better. Now we shall kill the Boy-Who-Lived.”

Mr. White staggered. Mr. Grim was laughing again, and so were others.

“I did not do that to be funny,” Voldemort said coldly. “We are dealing with a prophecy, fools. We are snipping the threads of destiny one by one; carefully, carefully, not knowing when we may first encounter resistance. This is the order in which the next acts shall be done. First Harry Potter shall be stunned, then his limbs severed and the wounds cauterized. Mr. Friendly and Mr. Honor will examine him for any trace of unusual magics. One of you shall shoot the boy many times with my Muggle weapon, and then as many of you as can shall strike him with the Killing Curse. Only then will Mr. Grim crush his skull and brains with the mundane substance of a tombstone. I shall verify his corpse, then his corpse shall be burned with Fiendfyre, then we will exorcise the surrounding area in case he has left a ghost. I myself will guard this place until six hours have passed, for I do not fully trust the wards I have set against Time’s looping; and four of you shall search the surroundings for signs of anything noteworthy. Even after that we must remain vigilant for any sign of Harry Potter’s renewed presence, in case Dumbledore has left some unimagined trick in play. If you can think of any trick that I have missed in being sure that Harry Potter’s threat is ended, speak now and I shall reward you handsomely... speak now, in Merlin’s name!”

There was stunned silence amid the cemetery; no one made to speak.

“Useless, the lot of you,” Voldemort said with bitter scorn. “Now I shall ask Harry Potter one final question, and he is to answer that question for my ears alone, in Parseltongue. Strike the boy down at once if he answers with anything but hisses, if he tries to speak one word of human speech.” Then Voldemort hissed, “Power I know not, it was said that you would have. The Muggle Arts I have now learned of from you, and I am already studying them. Your power over life-eaters must be comprehended for oneself, or so you say. If there is any other power you possess, that I may come to have, tell me of it now. Else, I intend to torment certain of those you care for. Some lives I have already promised you, but others I did not. Your mudblood servants in your little army. Your precious parents. All shall suffer for what will seem to them like eternity; and then I shall send

them, broken, into the life-eater prison to remember it, until they waste and die. For each unknown power you tell me how to master, or other secret you tell me that I desire to know, you may name one more of those to instead be protected and honored under my reign. This also I promise and intend to keep." Voldemort's smiling expression now came through as if it were a snake's gaping fangs, and the meaning that expression bore among snakes, a promise that whoever beheld the teeth was to be consumed by them. "Waste not time in thoughts of escape, if you care for those ones. You have sixty seconds to begin telling me something I wish to know, and then your death begins."

SHUT UP AND DO THE IMPOSSIBLE, PART I

THE gibbous moon riding higher in the cloudless sky, the stars and wash of the Milky Way visible in all their majesty within the darkness, all these shone down upon the graveyard to bear witness from their unimaginable distances.

In the instant when Harry had realised there was no way at all left to save everyone, his mind's voices had fallen away, become one, a single purpose taking up every fraction of his mind.

Fifty seconds.

Forty seconds.

Harry's eyes tracked slowly across the air, until his gaze landed on the first Death Eater, the one closest to him.

Thirty seconds?

Twenty seconds?

"Time'ss almosst up –" hissed Voldemort.

"I do know ssecretss you would like to know," Harry hissed. He didn't look directly at the Dark Lord as he spoke. "But mosst valuable knowledge to you, I think, would be my ideass ass to how world might be desstroyed. Yet, to tell you ssuch thoughtss might lead to desstruction of world. Do not know prophecy, but if there iss prophecy, that makess it more than usually probable that any action I take might have that effect. Or to tell you ssuch might prevent desstruction of world, ssince you do sseem motivated to avoid it. Not allowed to make ssuch a decission myssself. Would need to awaken and consult girl-child friend. Vow requiress."

There was a long pause. The Dark Lord, floating above and behind the curve of Death Eaters with leveled wands, began to laugh as Salazar Slytherin had thought a snake would laugh, cold amusement in the form of a hiss. "Do you know how to desstroy world, then?"

"Cannot deliberately try to imagine method. You might have way for sservant to ssteal my thoughtss. Vow prohibitss. But ssusspect I could devisse method, if girl-child ssaid to try."

Harry's eyes drifted slowly to another Death Eater, and another.

More snakish laughter. "Clever. You have my complimentss for thinking of ssuch tacticss. But no."

"Know it iss annoying, but with world and your eternity at sstake, would you not –"

"Greater rissk to world in introducing ssuch complicationss, delaying your end. I will sstudy Muggle ssciencess mysself, think of all you might imagine. Now sspeak ssuch ssecretss as you may tell me, or thiss endss."

Slowly Harry's vision tracked across the graveyard in careful arcs, ignoring the Dark Lord except as a floating blackness in his peripheral vision. His mouth went on speaking with only half his attention. "Have thought of idea you might not have considered, teacher. Your attempt to kill me might fail in certain sspecific way deppite all your precautionss, perhapss lead into my desstroying world later. Would not ordinarily deem probable, but with prophecy at hand, may well be sso."

Voldemort went still, in the air. "How?"

"Am not obligated to tell you."

A cold anger began to seethe through the snakish reply. "Though I undersstand well your dessperation and attempted clevernesss, thiss begins to annoy me. I will not withhold from killing you, for that iss sstill greater rissk. To fail to tell me your thought rissks desstroying world. Sspeak!"

"No. Vow deoss not obligate me to any possitive action."

The Dark Lord stared down at Harry Potter, who glanced up at the angry face only briefly before his eyes went back to the next Death Eater. Some of them were shifting their stances slightly, but they stood still, and said no words as they leveled their wands. The silver skull masks could not be read.

Then the Dark Lord began to chuckle again. "Ssurvive your death, you think you might? No, child, my horcruxess are not linked to you alssso. I would know if they were. Or iss there other reasson you think you might ssurvive beyond my ways of enssuring your death?"

Harry didn't allow himself to be distracted. The repeated failures didn't matter, they only led into the next action in the chain – but he still needed a next action –

"Now sspeak a ssecret," the Dark Lord hissed, "or I –"

"Life-eaterss will purssue you alwayss, hate you alwayss, sseek you out wherever you go, if what I have juusst done wass ssuccessssful, I have caused them to be set upon you! Guardian Charm ssecret will be beyond you for

long time to come, perhapss forever! Besst defensse againsst life-eaterss would die with me!"

"Thiss iss sstarting to become ssad..." the Dark Lord's voice trailed off. "Ah. I ssee. Life-eaterss resspnd to expectationss. You tell me I will be hunted, I expect to be hunted, they hunt me. Ssuch iss rare, but not unheard-of. Valuable ssecret, yess. Can ssee many ussess." A cruel smile. "I sshall allow you to sselect one persson to be ssaved."

"Myssself."

"Would tell you to die with dignity, but knowing myssself, I know it for futility. You have wassted my kindly gift jusst then by annoying me, and I retract it. Any other ssecretss?"

"Yess. Really interessting oness, too. Ssome you are unlikely to figure out on your own, not for very long time if ever. If I ssay I have told you all that do not rissk world, will you not torment any of my friendss or family? All of thiss sspeech sstarted because you left me no way at all to ssave everyone."

The Dark Lord stood still in the air for a long moment.

And Harry's eyes went on tracking slowly across the graveyard, as his hand remained tight upon his wand.

In the instant when Harry had realized there was no way left to save everyone –

He couldn't speak any incantation in English. But Transfiguration was wordless.

There was no material in contact with his wand's end except air, which couldn't be Transfigured. But Voldemort didn't know about partial Transfiguration, which Harry could use to Transfigure a tiny bit of the material from his wand itself.

"You're sstalling," the Dark Lord said. "Jusst to delay death? Or with other purposse?"

Harry said nothing, his other work slowing as his mind sought a continuation of the conversation that would work even against the Dark Lord's will –

"Sspeak and tell me purposse, or thiss endss now and your friendss suffer for lifetiness!"

"Lower Muggle weapon and do not point wand in my direction," Harry hissed, putting as much cold danger as he could into the snake's voice. "Sspeak no commandss to sservantss. I do possesse capabilityess of which you are ignorant. Can usse one ssuch capacity to causse huge explossion almosst

insstantly, without sspeaking incantation. Sslay your new body, all sservantss, Sstone sscattered to who knowss where.”

At his current level of practice Harry could Transfigure one cubic millimeter as fast as he could apply his will and magic.

One cubic millimeter of antimatter.

It wasn't a world-ending threat.

Voldemort could have been carved from stone. “You bluff, ssomehow.”

“Not bluffing. Sspeaking in ssnaketalk, I tell you, I can do it almosst insstantly, before any sspell can be cast at me, I think. You know very little of ssience ass yet. Power I would command iss sstronger than processs that fuelss sstarss.”

“Vow will sstop you,” hissed Voldemort. “You cannot rissk world. Take no risskss, none, with clever ideass!”

“Would not rissk world. I esstimated ssize of explossion, nowhere near that large.”

“You do NOT know, fool! Cannot be SURE!” Voldemort's hiss was climbing higher.

“I am reassonably certain. Vow will not sstop me.”

There was an increasing fury in Voldemort's expression, and yet his hiss carried a tinge of fear. “I sshall wreak pain beyond imagining on all you care for –”

“Sshut up. I dissregard all ssuch threatss now, as theory of gamess ssayss I sshould. Only reasson you make threatss iss that you expect me to resspend.” That, too, Harry had truly understood in the last extremity. “Offer me ssomething I want, teacher. For your new body, for your continued holding of Sstone, for livess of your sservantss.”

Harry's mouth was running on automatic, his real attention elsewhere.

Beneath the moonlight glints a tiny fragment of silver, a fraction of a line...

From a tiny spot on the end of Harry's wand, a cubic millimeter of anchor, stretched out a thin line of Transfigured spider-silk. It would have broken at once, if tested; it would have gone unremarked, if any had noticed its glint. Less than a tenth of a millimeter in cross-section, the tiny shape represented by the extended line of spider-silk was something Harry could Transfigure swiftly, ten centimeters of length to a cubic millimeter of total volume; and Harry could Transfigure a cubic millimeter in a fraction of a second. He was

forcing the Transfiguration outward, extending it through the air as fast as he could without risking the transformation.

The tracing line of spider-silk looped around a Death Eater's hood at neck level, returned to the pattern of threads.

Voldemort's face was now impassive. "You must not leave here alive. Sensitive people called good would also agree, this I tell you in snake's speech. But all your friends I will treat kindly and protect under my reign, if you agree to die now as good persons should."

The last Death Eater was looped. The pattern of spider-silk was complete. The web had been drawn with loops around all the Death Eater's necks. The ends of those loops had been anchored to a central circle; and that central circle in turn had three threads stretching across its center. The entire pattern still touching the anchor-line stretching out of Harry's wand.

Over the next seconds, those near-invisible threads of reflected moonlight turned black.

Filaments narrower, stronger, and sharper than steel wire; braided carbon nanotubes, each individual tube all a single molecule.

Harry hissed, "Want you to also promise to treat nations kindly under your rule. Will not accept less."

Voldemort hovered still in the air, snake-face showing a dawning fury.

The last two threads stretched out from the dark pattern, black threads already in the form of nanotubes. They moved lightly through the air toward the Dark Lord himself, toward the sleeve just above Voldemort's left hand that held the gun, toward the sleeve above the right hand that held the yew wand, threads placed high at first to give them time to drift slowly downward through the air. The threads looped around, went over themselves, tied slippable knots. Began to tighten, coming closer to the sleeve, as Harry Transfigured them shorter –

Harry felt the tickle of Voldemort's power beginning to touch his own in the back of his mind; at the same time the Dark Lord's eyes widened, his mouth opened.

And Harry Transfigured the black threads stretching across the black pattern's center to a quarter their previous size, shrinking the circle, yanking hard on everything attached, tightening loops.

(Black robes, falling.)

Harry wasn't looking there, he didn't see the falling masks, the blood, in the back of his mind he felt some explosions of magic like he'd felt when

Hermione died but he ignored them, Harry's eyes only saw the Dark Lord's hands and wand and gun dropping downward, and then Harry's wand was rising, pointing –

Harry screamed, "STUPORFY!"

The red bolt the color of the Stunning Hex winged toward Voldemort, blazing across the graveyard almost faster than the eye could see.

Without any hesitation despite his wounds the Dark Lord jerked down and right through the air.

And the red bolt from Professor Flitwick's secret Swerving Stunner turned in midair and slammed into Voldemort.

The pain that flashed through Harry's scar was searing, it made him cry out and a red haze appear across his vision, despite everything Harry dropped his wand in pain and sheer fatigue.

As Harry let go of his wand, the pain began to clear –

SHUT UP AND DO THE IMPOSSIBLE, PART II

SOMETHING like a fugue state had come over Harry's mind. The absolute state had partially worn off him, partially stayed with him. Elements of his mind were numb, maybe deliberately numbed by some part that was smart enough to predict what would happen otherwise. What he'd just done –

The thought was shut off, making space for an awareness of other things.

Harry was standing in the middle of a haphazard graveyard, tombstones scattered without order.

By moonlight and starlight, it could be seen that black robes littered the ground, surrounded by textures that didn't match the surrounding graveyard earth, wetness tinged red in the moonlight. Some heads had come loose from the surrounding hoods of the robes, revealing hair that was long or short, dark or bright, which was all that could be seen beneath the moon. The silver masks stayed on, making all the hair originate in skulls instead of human faces –

The thought was shut off, making space for awareness of other things.

A girl in a red-trimmed Hogwarts uniform slept upon an altar. Near the altar, Harry's things lay in a heap.

Upon the ground lay a too-tall pale man of inhuman face, blood pouring from the stumps of his wrists.

As soon as the Dark Lord Voldemort awakens, he will destroy everything you love. Dumbledore is no longer there to stop him.

He cannot be imprisoned, for he can abandon his body at any time.

He cannot be killed permanently, not without destroying more than a hundred horcruxes, one of which is the Pioneer plaque.

Materials: One wand, you are allowed to point it and speak this time.

You have five minutes.

Solve.

Harry stumbled toward the altar, knelt at its side, and picked up his pouch.

He walked toward where Voldemort lay.

The sense of apprehension had diminished, after Voldemort had been hexed unconscious. Now, as Harry approached, it rose to a terrifying height, flaring also into pain in his scar.

Harry ignored the inner shriek. That had been the last memory of Tom Riddle seared into Harry's brain, the last cognitive pattern to be transferred over into the infant baby before Tom Riddle had exploded: a sense of mounting horror and dismay associated with the resonance that had spun out of control. Harry knew the meaning of it now, that sense of apprehension, and that made it easier to disregard. He'd guessed that the effect of the resonance mostly hit the caster, with power proportional to the caster's power, and the bet had paid off.

Harry looked upon Voldemort's body, and breathed deeply – through his mouth, because coppery smells Harry was not thinking about were coming in through his nose.

Harry knelt by Voldemort's side, took out his medical kit from his pouch, and placed a self-tightening tourniquet around the body's left wrist, then another tourniquet about the right.

It felt wrong, showing Voldemort that concern. Some part of Harry was aware, in the back of his mind, that some number of people had just had something extremely bad happen to them. What would have been balance, what would have been justice, was if Voldemort had suffered the same fate without an instant's more hesitation. What Harry was doing now felt like Batman showing more concern for the Joker than for the Joker's victims; it felt like a comic book where the writers wrung their hands endlessly about the morality of killing the Big Named Villains while innocents went on dying in the background. To show more solicitousness for the head villain than his minions, to pay more attention to his fate than the fates of his lower-status followers, was a flaw in human nature.

So it felt wrong when Harry rose up from beside the body, the tourniquets having tightened upon Voldemort's wrists; it felt like Harry was doing something ethically monstrous.

Even though any sane strategic thinking said that Voldemort's body must not die. The soul he'd created for himself had to be anchored in this brain, it mustn't be allowed to float free.

Harry stepped back, back from Voldemort's unconscious body, breathing deeply through his mouth. He went to the pile of his things, to put on his robes and other items, starting with placing the Time-Turner around his

throat once more, readying his own escape and return if that was required...

More than a hundred horcruxes.

That had been insane, there wasn't any other word for it, a sign of Voldemort's damaged thinking about death. A Muggle security expert would have called it fence-post security, like building a fence-post over a hundred metres high in the middle of the desert. Only a very obliging attacker would try to climb the fence-post. Anyone sensible would just walk around the fence-post, and making the fence-post even higher wouldn't stop that.

Once you forgot to be scared of how impossible the problem was supposed to be, it wasn't even difficult, not by comparison to the last one.

Neville's parents, for example, had been Crucioed into permanent insanity. Two hundred advanced horcruxes wouldn't prevent that insanity, they would all just echo the same damaged mind.

It would be an ethically justified use of the Cruciatus Curse, if that were the only way to stop Voldemort permanently. It would be justice, balance, it would show that the Joker's life wasn't worth more than his meanest henchman...

All Harry needed to do was cast the Patronus Charm, send it to... Alastor Moody?... and tell him to come here. Well, no, it was a pretty good guess the Patronus Charm wouldn't work if it was cast with that intent. Maybe just resolve to tell Moody that, and use his Time-Turner once he was out of range of Voldemort's wards.

And then Voldemort could be Crucioed into permanent insanity.

It wasn't even the least merciful fate. That would have been throwing Voldemort's wand into the pit at Azkaban, if the wand stayed connected to Voldemort's life and magic no matter where his ghost tried to flee.

Harry turned to face where Voldemort lay. He walked forward, and continued to control his breathing, ignoring the burning feeling in his throat. Some part of him knew that Voldemort was also Professor Quirrell, even though his body now was different. Even though the shift of personality had been perfect and that meant that Professor Quirrell had been just another mask...

Though Voldemort hadn't planned to kill Harry painfully. Hadn't thought to strike Harry with his followers' Cruciatus, when Harry was being annoying before. That meant something, when your opponent was Voldemort. Maybe he'd had some remaining shred of fellow-feeling for the other Tom Riddle after all.

... it would be wrong to take that into account.

Wouldn't it?

Harry looked back up at the stars. Here below the atmosphere the stars twinkled, they were embedded in the false dome of the night sky, stretched out across the wash of the Milky Way that glowed like a long ribbon, as if they were all close enough that you could fly up to them on a broomstick and touch them.

What would they want him to do now at this juncture, the children's children's children?

The answer to that also felt obvious, if it wasn't just the part of Harry that still cared about Professor Quirrell doing the real talking.

Harry had needed to do the thing he'd done, it had prevented greater evils, Harry couldn't have stopped Voldemort if the Death Eaters had fired first. But that thing Harry had done wasn't something that could be balanced by a not-necessary tragedy happening to one more sentient being, even if that being was Voldemort. It would just be one more element of the sorrows of ancient Earth so long ago.

The past was past. You did what you had to do, and you didn't do one scrap of harm more than that. Not even to balance things out, and make it all symmetrical.

The children's children's children wouldn't want Voldemort to die, even if his minions had. They wouldn't want Voldemort to hurt, if it didn't accomplish anything compared to him not hurting.

Harry breathed deeply, and let go of – not his hate – not quite his hate – he hadn't been able to hate his creator even at the very end – but even so, Harry let go of something. Of the sense that he ought to hate Voldemort, that it was a hate he was obligated to feel, for the endless list of crimes that Voldemort had committed for no good reason, not even his own happiness...

It's all right, the stars whispered down at him. It's all right not to hate him. It doesn't make you a bad person.

In the end, there was only one option he would take, and since Harry already knew that, there was no point agonizing about it. Whether it was the best option, only time would tell.

Harry breathed deeply, building up the magic inside himself. The spell he was going to cast didn't need to be precise, but it was still one of the most powerful spells he'd mastered.

Harry thought again of how unjust it was that Voldemort could not die with his followers, felt the slight trace of coldness in his blood that came with thoughts of ruthlessness. And then Harry let it go, let it all drain away beneath the starlight, because his dark side had never been anything except an inherited pattern of cognition, just one more bad habit of thinking to break.

Instead Harry looked at Hermione's breathing form atop the altar, and let the tears finally start from his eyes. What would become of Hermione now, what path she would choose after this, Harry couldn't guess; but she would be there to have a choice, their friendship wouldn't have destroyed her existence. He hadn't realised how shaky his hope had been, until he'd noticed how surprised he'd been after the hope had come true. Sometimes things did go better than expected.

And Harry took that thought, too, and put it into the magic he was building.

The power he was storing up was vibrating in him, like his whole body was part of his wand, either Harry's eyes were blurring or there was a luminous white quiver running over the holly. And Harry thought the shape of the spell he would cast, he didn't have much fine control but the pattern he needed was simple, it just needed to include –

Everything, forget everything, Tom Riddle, Professor Quirrell, forget your whole life, forget your entire episodic memory, forget the disappointment and the bitterness and the wrong decisions, forget Voldemort –

And at the last moment before Harry cast the spell, he had one final thought, a note of grace –

But if you ever had any truly happy memories, not hurting people or laughing at their pain, but the warm feeling of helping someone or being helped, there won't be many, maybe just when you were a child, but if you had any truly happy memories then keep only those –

Something bright in him unfolded at the decision, knowing he'd made the right choice, and Harry pushed that too into his wand –

“OBLIViate!”

And it all poured out of Harry into the spell.

Harry fell over on his side, dropping his wand, gritted screams coming from his throat, his hands going helplessly to his scar, even as the sudden blast of pain in his head began to fade. Only dimly did his eyes see that the air was filled with glowing snowflakes, drifting motes of silver light like tiny

specks of Patronus Charm.

Only a moment the silver light lasted, and then it was gone.

Professor Quirrell was gone.

Nothing left but a remnant.

And that spirit, what remained of it, wouldn't be so different now from Harry's own.

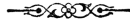
The Prophecy was complete.

They had each remade the other in their own image.

Harry started sobbing, then, from where he was curled up in the dirt.

He cried for a while.

And then eventually Harry staggered to his feet and picked up his wand again, because this day's work wasn't quite done.



Harry laid his wand directly on Voldemort's wrist-stump; it made his scar throb with an ongoing pain, but neither of them exploded.

And Harry began a Transfiguration.

Slowly – though faster than Harry had been able to Transfigure Hermione's body, last time – the stunned form of the snake-man changed, reshaped itself. As the Transfiguration progressed, especially as the snake-man's head began to turn glassy and shrunken, the pain in Harry's scar faded.

It would be a spell to maintain whether Harry was waking or sleeping; and later, when Harry was older and more powerful and maybe had some help, he would un-Transfigure the mindwiped Tom Riddle and heal his body with the power of the Stone. After future-Harry had figured out what to do with an almost-completely-amnesiac wizard who still had some bad habits of thought and some highly negative emotional patterns – a dark side, as 'twere – plus a great deal of declarative and procedural knowledge about powerful magic. Harry had tried his best not to Oblivate that part, because he might need it, someday.

And meanwhile, just like magic hadn't defined a Transfigured unicorn as dead for purposes of setting off wards, Voldemort's horcruxes wouldn't define a Transfigured Voldemort as dead and try to bring him back.

That was the hope, anyway.

Harry's scar twinged one last time when the steel ring went on his pinky finger, holding the tiny green emerald in contact with his skin. Then his scar subsided, and did not hurt again.

An upthrust rock served Harry for a chair, when he staggered over it and sat down motionless, resting after a fashion, shoving back the exhaustion that threatened the corners of his mind. It was not done, there was more to do.

Harry took another deep breath, still inhaling through his mouth, said "Lumos," and looked around the graveyard.

Black robes and severed skull masks, surrounded by pools of blood –
Hermione Granger, asleep on an altar.

Voldemort's empty robes and bloody hands, lying where the Dark Lord had fallen.

Quirinus Quirrell with his shredded robes, fallen in a heap where the Killing Curse had stricken him.

Harry imagined someone else looking at this scene, trying to understand it, and shook his head, because that wouldn't do, it wouldn't do at all.

Then Harry shoved himself up from his rock, grimacing as his mind, if not body, protested. He hadn't been bloodied or beaten much today, but somehow Harry's body was managing to feel like all the stress had hit it directly.

Harry staggered over toward where Voldemort had fallen, and picked up Voldemort's left hand from where it lay upon the ground.

Even in just the left hand, you could see the faint trace of snake's scales; it was very distinctively Voldemort. That was good.

Harry went to the altar where the sleeping Hermione lay, and gently placed the detached hand around Hermione's neck, carefully moving the fingers to clutch at her throat. It was hard to do, Hermione seemed so peaceful and innocent when she was sleeping, and Voldemort's severed hand seemed so ugly; Harry bluntly overrode whatever part of his mind was thinking that, since it made no sense in context.

A few weak Severing Charms served to mess up the almost perfectly fine cut the nanofiber had made, which was critical; it would not do to have the hand-stump look like the neck-stumps. The multiple Diffindos scattered small bits of Voldemort-wrist all over Hermione's shirt, which, Harry had to remind himself, was also part of the plan.

Harry repeated this with the right hand, arranging it symmetrically with the left.

Harry used *Inflammaro* to singe Voldemort's robes where they lay, and then arranged the singed clothing around Hermione.

Voldemort's gun, and his wand, went into Harry's pouch. Harry placed the Stone of Permanency in an ordinary pocket, he wasn't sure what the Stone might do to his pouch.

The heap of things from inside Quirrell's robe, also near the altar, yielded the wand that the Defense Professor had used when he was being Quirrell. Harry went to where Quirrell lay, and straightened out the body as best he could, and put Quirrell's wand into his hand. Tears predictably came to Harry's eyes, and Harry wiped them away on his sleeve.

Harry took another deep breath, still inhaling through his mouth, said "*Lumos*" again, and once more looked around the graveyard.

Black robes, severed skull masks, and Hermione Granger lying on an altar with Voldemort's severed hands clutched around her throat, and Voldemort's singed clothing scattered around her. Quirinus Quirrell lay dead with his clothes torn and shredded, his wand in his right hand.

That would do.

There remained the problem of calling attention to it.

Harry was very nearly out of magic at this point. But he still had enough left to Transfigure a leaf into the deflated form of a three-meter weather balloon.

Harry's pouch produced a bottle of oxyacetylene, and a stick of dynamite, and a spool of fuse-cord. Be prepared, that's the Boy Scout's marching song, be prepared for a life that includes mountain trolls and who knows what else...

Harry inflated the weather balloon with the oxyacetylene. That would produce a very sharp overpressure when it detonated, maybe as loud as a sonic boom.

He attached the stick of dynamite – it was overkill, for detonation, but it would do.

He attached a 60-second fuse to the stick of dynamite, but did not light it yet.

Harry put on his Cloak of Invisibility, that had been among the piles by the sacrificial altar.

He obtained his broomstick from his pouch, and mounted it.

Harry cast a Quieting Charm around Hermione Granger – it wouldn't stop all the noise, not even close, and it wasn't like she'd be permanently hurt if her eardrums burst, but it still seemed polite.

And then that was it. The Quieting Charm had done it. Harry was drained of magic for at least the next hour.

Harry mounted the broomstick, slowly rising into the air, lifting the weather balloon filled with oxyacetylene with him. The castle Hogwarts came into view, distantly gleaming in moonlight a few kilometers away, as Harry rose above the trees; and Harry did his best to figure the distance, and the angle as it would be seen from Hogwarts.

When he had risen high above the forest, Harry used a lighter to ignite the fuse on the dynamite attached to the weather balloon full of oxyacetylene. Then Harry spun the broomstick and darted away – though not directly toward the castle, that might take him too close to the route past-Harry and Professor Quirrell had traversed, it wouldn't do to have the Professor sense another Harry –

Harry felt a leaden stab of sadness, and refused it.

Thirty-one one-thousand, thirty-two one-thousand, thirty-three one-thousand...

When Harry reached forty, not wanting to take chances with his own eardrums, he glanced at his wristwatch, noting the exact time, and spun his Time-Turner once.

AFTERMATH, SOMETHING TO PROTECT

At first Anna had been gratified to see the final Quidditch Cup go on so long – as a Gryffindor she was a bystander at the House Cup thing, it wasn't like Gryffindor ever won. In contrast, last year's World Cup of Quidditch, to which her family had bought some very expensive tickets, had been over in ten minutes which was awful. Modern Quidditch games had become too short, the Snitch caught much too quickly. It was a widely-talked problem among aficionados: broomstick enchantments had advanced, while the Snitch stayed the same regulation speed, with the result that Quidditch games had become shorter and shorter. At professional levels the sport of Quidditch had been reduced to a contest of who had the deepest pockets for their Seeker's experimental racing broom, and the rest of the players might as well have been watching from the stands.

Everyone knew something had to be done, the situation had been getting worse for centuries and now it was intolerable. But the International Confederation of Wizards' Quidditch Committee was mired in all the usual acrimony of the I.C.W., screaming disputes between Germans and Bulgarians, and somehow nobody could agree on exactly how to fix the rules. To Anna the correct course seemed obvious, just make the Snitch fast enough to restore the four-hour or five-hour games of the early nineteenth century and the Golden Age of Quidditch. Except the Belgians thought the duration of a professional game should be two hours like in *La Belle Époque* when Belgium had dominated Quidditch, and the lunatic Italians wanted to go back to the week-long Quidditch games of the fourteenth century, and Britain's even crazier blood purists kept on talking up the occasional day-long Quidditch match as proof that broomsticks couldn't really have improved since everything was better in the old days which was not how the Interdict of Merlin worked.

She was one hundred percent on the side of Harry Potter that it was time for Hogwarts to give up on those gibbering slowpokes and just change the rules, starting here and now. But not by eliminating the Snitch, that was going all the way back to eleventh century Kwidditch. It didn't matter if

Headmistress Hufflepuff had first introduced the innovation because one of her students had wanted to play the game but not been suited to the usual roles. Snitches had caught on internationally because it was more exciting when the game could always end in the next minute.

Anna had been arguing this viewpoint at the top of her lungs for the last thirty minutes, quite forgetting to pay attention to the game. Thanks to a lucky coincidence of seating she'd been near the Boy-Who-Lived and his sign, and hence she'd managed to stake out her position right from the start.

She was aware, in the back of her mind, that if the Quidditch rules really did change starting here and now, then this was the most important thing she'd ever do. She could almost feel the pressure of Time twisting around her as though the fate of Quidditch Itself were being settled this very day, and she was standing close to the center of it... though she hadn't gotten high-enough scores in Divination to actually sense anything like that, of course.

She hardly noticed when at one point the Boy-Who-Lived stood up to go to the bathroom.

The Boy-Who-Lived did catch her eye when he trudged back; Harry Potter looked a bit tired and wobbly, though his uniform appeared as trim as if he'd just changed into a new one.

She noticed half an hour later on, when Harry Potter seemed to sway a bit, and then hunch over, his hands going to cover up his forehead; it looked like he was prodding at his forehead scar. The thought made her slightly worried; everyone knew there was something going on with Harry Potter, and if Potter's scar was hurting him then it was possible that a sealed horror was about to burst out of his forehead and eat everyone. She dismissed that thought, though, and continued to explain Quidditch facts to the historically ignorant at the top of her lungs.

She definitely noticed when Harry Potter stood up, hands still on his forehead, and dropped his hands to reveal that his famous lightning-bolt scar was now blazing red and inflamed. It was bleeding, with the blood dripping down Potter's nose.

She stopped talking mid-sentence. Other people turned to look at what she was staring at.

"Professor McGonagall?" Harry Potter said in a wavering voice. There were tears in the corners of his eyes, which shocked her; the Boy-Who-Lived did not seem like the sort of person who would burst into tears. Harry Potter raised his voice further, as though it were hard for him to speak. "Um,

Professor McGonagall?"

Professor McGonagall turned away from where she was arguing with the Hufflepuff Quidditch team. The Head of Gryffindor's eyes widened in shock, and then she was moving people out of her way, almost running. "Harry!" she said. "Your scar!"

Silence was spreading, in a widening circle.

"I think," Harry said, his voice still wavering but louder, "I think he's back. I think I'm seeing – through Voldemort's mind –"

Anna took a step back at You-Know-Who's name and nearly fell over a bleacher. An older boy standing next to her gave a cry of dismay, and then the Boy-Who-Lived shrieked even louder.

"HE'S KILLING THEM!" screamed Harry Potter.

Half the Quidditch stadium turned to look at him.

"The ritual!" cried Harry Potter. "Blood of his servants! The blood, the life! He summoned them, he took their heads, their blood, the life, to renew his own – THE DARK LORD RISES, VOLDEMORT IS RETURNED!"

Madam Hooch blew a shrill whistle, and the Quidditch brooms that hadn't already stopped in midair began to slow. For herself she wasn't sure if this was a joke; if it was, Boy-Who-Lived or not, he was in more trouble than she could even imagine.

Professor McGonagall raised her wand into position for a Quieting Charm and Harry Potter caught her hand.

"Wait –" Harry Potter gasped, his voice lower, but still loud enough that she and the people near her could hear clearly. "He can be stopped – I see his mind, his mistake – he can be stopped now – THE WAY IS STILL OPEN! SHE'S FOLLOWING HIM! SHE WHO VOLDEMORT SLEW!" Harry's voice rose further, as Anna's own mouth fell open in sudden confusion. "RETURN! RETURN, RETURN, REVIVE AND STOP HIM! STOP HIM, HERMIONE!"

And then Harry Potter fell silent. He looked around at the people staring at him.

She'd just about decided that this had to all be a prank in unbelievably poor taste, when a distant but sharp CRACK filled the air.

Harry Potter swayed, and fell to his knees, even as her heart jumped into her throat. An explosion of excited babble rose around them.

She could still hear the words from Harry Potter's mouth, as Professor McGonagall knelt next to him. "It worked," Harry Potter gasped aloud, "she got him, he's gone."

“What?” cried Professor McGonagall, then glanced around. “Quiet! Quiet, all of you! Harry, what happened?”

Harry Potter was speaking rapidly but loudly. “Voldemort – tried to revive – he summoned Death Eaters and he killed them, stole their blood and life – Hermione’s body was there, I don’t know why, maybe Voldemort was planning to use it for something – Voldemort came back, he resurrected himself, but Hermione followed him back and she destroyed him, he’s gone, it’s over. It happened in a graveyard near Hogwarts, it’s,” Harry Potter rose to his feet, still swaying, “I think it’s in that direction.” Harry Potter pointed in the rough direction the CRACK had come from, “I’m not sure how far. The sound from there took twenty seconds to get here, so maybe two minutes on a broomstick –”

With a motion so smooth it looked unconscious, Professor McGonagall shifted into a stance and said “Expecto Patronum.” She addressed the glowing cat that then appeared. “Go to Albus, tell him he must come at once –”

“Dumbledore’s gone!” cried Harry Potter. “The Headmaster is gone, Professor McGonagall! The Dark Lord trapped him, he reversed some kind of trap the Headmaster planned and Dumbledore was caught outside Time, he’s gone!”

The horrified babble around them rose in pitch.

“Go to Albus!” Professor McGonagall said to her Patronus.

The moonlit cat only looked at McGonagall sadly, and Anna sucked in her breath in sudden horror, feeling like someone had punched her in the stomach. It was real, it was all real, this wasn’t a joke.

“Professor McGonagall, Hermione is alive!” Harry Potter raised his voice again. “She’s really alive and not an Inferius or anything, and she’s still there in the graveyard!”

“A broomstick!” Professor McGonagall shouted. She turned to the players hovering motionless over the Quidditch field. “I need a broomstick. Now!”

Despite everything, Anna raised a hand in mute protest, then caught herself, even as the Ravenclaw and Slytherin Seekers came zooming over (with excellent strategic sense, since they weren’t actually doing anything).

Harry Potter was already retrieving another broomstick from his pouch, a multi-person one.

Professor McGonagall saw this, and nodded firmly. “You stay here, Mr. Potter, unless there is some excellent reason you must be there. I will go at once.”

"You mustn't!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, who'd shoved his tiny way through the crowd, occasionally running under someone's legs. His eyes were wide, he looked as though he wanted to faint. "You have to stay at Hogwarts, Minerva! You – you're the –" Professor Flitwick seemed to be having trouble speaking.

Professor McGonagall spun around to face Professor Flitwick, and then stopped, blood draining from her face.

Then she seized the broomstick from Harry Potter's hand, and presented it to the tiny half-goblin Professor. "Filius," she said crisply. All the incipient panic had disappeared from her voice, she now spoke in her crisp Scottish accent as though addressing lessons on Monday. "Look for the graveyard of which Mr. Potter spoke, find Miss Granger. Apparate her to St. Mungo's and then stay by her."

"I think –" Harry Potter said hoarsely. "I think Transfiguration might have been used in combat there – Professor Quirrell tried to fight Voldemort – take precautions –"

Filius Flitwick nodded without halting in getting on the broomstick.

"Professor Quirrell's dead!" wailed Harry Potter. The anguish in his voice carried clearly. "He's dead! The Dark Lord killed him! His body –" Harry Potter choked up. "It's there, in the graveyard."

She stumbled back again, feeling it like another punch in her gut. Professor Quirrell had been – one of her favorite Professors, ever, he'd made her rethink everything she'd believed about Slytherin, she'd known in some distant way that he was probably going to die very soon but to hear that he was really, truly dead...

The Boy-Who-Lived sat down on the bench, as if his legs couldn't support him anymore.

Professor McGonagall turned to the crowd, touching her wand to her throat. "QUIDDITCH IS OVER," her amplified voice boomed out. "GO BACK TO YOUR DORMITORIES –"

"Don't!" screamed Harry Potter.

Professor McGonagall turned to look at him.

Tears were leaking down the Boy-Who-Lived's cheeks, he looked like the interruption had surprised himself as much as it had surprised anyone else. "It was Professor Quirrell's last plot," Harry Potter said, his voice breaking. The Boy-Who-Lived looked at the Quidditch players who had now flown to nearby, as though speaking to them directly. "His last plot."

Harry Potter was floated off by Professor McGonagall to the infirmary. The other Professors ran off to oversee who-knew-what, leaving only Professors Sinistra and Hooch behind. At the stadium, rumors ran wild; Anna repeated everything she could remember hearing as best she could. Something had happened to Dumbledore, some Death Eaters had been summoned and killed (no, Harry Potter hadn't said which ones), Professor Quirrell had gone out to face the Dark Lord and died for it, You-Know-Who had returned and died again, Professor Quirrell was dead, he was dead.

In time most of the students wandered off back to their dormitories, to sleep if they could.

Anna stayed in the stadium, and watched the rest of the game, ignoring her body's need for sleep, and her eyes that often blurred with tears.

The Ravenclaw team put up a valiant fight.

But there was no Quidditch team anywhere that could've defeated the Slytherins that day.

Dawn was tinging the sky when the Slytherins won their final game, the Quidditch Cup, and the House Cup.

SOMETHING TO PROTECT: MINERVA McGONAGALL

THE morning after had come, and all the students had gathered silently around the four Tables of Hogwarts, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres among them. He had collapsed in exhaustion last night and been awoken in the infirmary next morning, still muzzy, with the Philosopher's Stone underneath his left sock.

The Head Table looked like a plague had swept it.

Dumbledore's throne was gone from the Head Table, without replacement, leaving the center of the Head Table empty.

Severus Snape was sitting in a floating seat, the magical equivalent of a wheelchair.

Professor Sprout was missing. According to what Harry had been told last night, a court Legilimens would examine her to see if any further compulsions remained, but probably no charges would be filed. Harry had emphasized to Professor McGonagall and the Aurors, as hard as he could, that Professor Sprout was probably just a victim. The Boy-Who-Lived had pronounced that he'd seen no evidence of Sprout's intentional guilt in Voldemort's mind.

Professor Flitwick was missing, presumably still staying by Hermione's side.

Professor Sinistra was missing and Harry didn't know why or where.

The numbness that surrounded Harry's mind was like a Mylar blanket, protective if not comforting. There were scenes in his mind of black robes falling and blood spilling, appearing for an instant before being shoved back. He'd process it later, not now. Some other time would be better, future-Harry would have a comparative advantage at coping.

Somewhere inside Harry was the fear that it wouldn't hurt, that there would be no price to be paid. But that fear also could be put off into the future.

No breakfast had appeared on the tables. The students sitting near Harry were waiting in frightened silence. Owls had been prohibited from entering

or leaving Hogwarts since early last night.

The doors of the Great Hall opened once more, and forth came Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall. She wore robes of formal black, and her head was bare, denuded of its usual witch's hat. Her grey-brown-blond hair was done up in a coiled braid, as if in preparation for a hat to be placed later; but for now Harry saw her head bare for the first time.

Minerva McGonagall came to the lectern that stood before the Head Table.

All eyes were upon her.

"I am afraid that I have much news," Minerva said. Her voice was sad, within its Scottish precision. "And most of it is terrible. First. The reason I am the one to speak to you is that the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus," her voice stopped, "Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, has been lost. You-Know-Who trapped him outside Time, and we do not know if he ever can be brought back to us. We, we have lost, what may have been, the greatest Headmaster, that Hogwarts has ever had."

A susurrant of horror arose across the tables, no audible gasps or moans, just the sound of many intaken breaths; most from Gryffindor, and some from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw as well. The ill news had already been known, but now it had also been said by authority.

"Second. You-Know-Who returned briefly, but is once again dead. All that remained of him was his hands clutched around Miss Granger's throat. There is no more threat from him, or so we think." Minerva McGonagall drew in another breath. "Third. Professor Quirrell died with his wand in his hand, facing You-Know-Who. He was found not far from where You-Know-Who perished again, a victim of You-Know-Who's Killing Curse." Another susurrant of verified horror, now from all four tables.

Minerva drew another breath. "Last night we also lost what may have been the greatest Defense Professor in the history of Hogwarts. His scholastic merits alone... Our Defense Professor has gone by many names, but his true name was David Monroe. As he was the last of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Monroe, his funeral – his second funeral, and the true one – will be held before the Most Ancient Hall of the Wizengamot, in two days. Yet a wake shall also be held for the Defense Professor of Hogwarts, for our own Professor Quirrell, in this castle. That man also died a Hogwarts teacher, as nobly as a Hogwarts teacher ever did."

Harry listened in silence, shoving down the tears that again rose to his

eyes. It wasn't even true, let alone unexpected; and yet hearing it still hurt. From where he sat beside, Anthony Goldstein put a comforting hand over Harry's hand, and Harry left it there.

"Fourth. One piece of exceedingly unexpected and happy news. Hermione Granger is alive and in full health, sound of body and mind. Miss Granger is being observed at St. Mungo's to see if there are any unexpected aftereffects from whatever happened to her, but she appears to be doing astonishingly well considering her previous condition."

It should have produced wild cheers from Ravenclaw and Gryffindor, if the news had come as part of any other package, or if it had been more unexpected. As it stood, Harry saw a few smiles, but they were brief. Maybe they'd jumped for joy earlier, but at the moment there was only silence. Harry understood that. He wasn't cheering either, not right now.

"Finally –" Minerva McGonagall faltered, then raised her voice. "I fear that I have the gravest possible news to share with some of our students. It seems that You-Know-Who summoned those who were once his followers; and many of them obeyed, whether from terribly misguided loyalty, or out of fear for their families if they refused. A sacrifice was required, it seems, to complete You-Know-Who's resurrection; or perhaps You-Know-Who blamed his former followers for his defeat. Thirty-seven bodies were found, more followers outside Azkaban than You-Know-Who was thought to have. I am afraid –" Minerva McGonagall faltered again. "I am afraid that among the deceased are the parents of many of our students –"

no no no no no no no no no no

As though by some terrible magnet, Harry's eyes were drawn to the picture of absolute horror that was Draco Malfoy's face, even as the comforting cotton wrap around Harry's thoughts was torn away like thin tissue.

How could he have not thought, how could he have not realised –

Somewhere in the background, someone was already screaming, and yet the room seemed very silent.

"Sheila, Flora, and Hestia Carrow. Lost both their parents last night. Students who have lost their fathers include Robert Jugson. Ethan Jugson. Sara Jugson. Michael MacNair. Riley and Randy Rookwood. Lily Lu. Sarah Sproch. Daniel Gibson. Jason Gross. Elsie Ambrose –"

Maybe Lucius realised, maybe he was smart enough to stay away, maybe he realised that Voldemort was the one who struck at Draco –

“– Theodore Nott. Vincent Crabbe. Gregory Goyle. Draco Malfoy. This concludes the list.”

One student sitting at the Gryffindor table let out a single cheer, and was immediately slapped by the Gryffindor witch sitting nearby hard enough that a Muggle would have lost teeth.

“Thirty points from Gryffindor and detention for the first month of next year,” Professor McGonagall said, her voice hard enough to break stone.

“Lies!” shrieked a tall Slytherin, who’d risen up from that table. “Lies! Lies! The Dark Lord will return, and he’ll, he’ll teach you all the meaning of –”

“Mr. Jugson,” said Severus Snape’s voice. It was also faltering, it didn’t sound like the Potions Master at all, it wasn’t loud and yet the Slytherin fell silent. “Robert. The Dark Lord killed your father.”

Robert Jugson let out a scream of terrific fury and turned to run out of the room, and Draco Malfoy folded in on himself like a collapsing house and made sounds that nobody heard, because the babble was starting up now.

Harry rose six inches from the bench and then stopped.

what would you say to Draco there is nothing you can say to Draco you can’t go over there now and pretend to be his friend

you want to make it right you want to make it better but you cannot make it right there is no way you can make right what you have done to him what you did to Vincent to Gregory what you did to Theodore

The world blurred around Harry, he barely saw Padma Patil rise up and make her way toward the Slytherin table and Draco, or Seamus heading towards Theodore.

And because Harry had read his father’s science fiction and fantasy collection, because he had already read this scene a dozen times over when it happened to other protagonists, there was an image in Harry’s mind of Mad-Eye Moody, of the scarred man called Alastor. And Mad-Eye’s image was saying, in just the same voice he’d used to speak to Albus Dumbledore in memory, that the Death Eaters had been pointing their wands at Harry, that they had already chosen to take the Dark Mark, that they had been guilty of sins beyond reckoning and maybe beyond Harry’s imagination, that they had foregone the deontological protection of good people and made themselves targetable if there was a strong reason to sacrifice them. That it had been necessary to save Harry’s innocent parents from torture and Azkaban, that it had been necessary to protect the world from Voldemort. That plain old ordinary

Aurors and judges had to do much more morally questionable things than killing sworn and blooded Death Eaters who were pointing wands at them, in the course of carrying out ordinary justices that were less clear-cut but still necessary to society. If it were not right to do what Harry had done, if it were not right to do much more morally ambiguous things than what Harry had done, then society as human beings knew it could not exist. Nobody with common sense would blame Harry for doing it, Neville wouldn't blame him, Professor McGonagall wouldn't blame him, Dumbledore wouldn't blame him, even Hermione would tell him it had been the right thing to do once she knew.

And all of this was true.

Just as it was also true that some part of Harry's mind had calculated that wiping out the blood purist political elite would make it easier and more convenient to rebuild magical Britain afterward. It hadn't been an important consideration, but it had still been calculated in those instants of rapid thought, a check on the long-term consequences to see if they rated as catastrophic, and a decision that they actually rated as pretty much okay. And that check had forgotten that Death Eaters had children at Hogwarts or that one of them wore the face of Draco's father. It wouldn't have changed anything. It wouldn't have changed anything at all. But that was the truth of the calculation Harry's mind had performed, given only seconds to think.

At least Harry could, if the Death Eaters' survivors were in any sort of financial trouble, do something about that easily enough. Transfigure gold, and use the Stone to make it permanent – unless making that much gold would be troublesome to the wizard economy at large, or cause objections from goblins who didn't understand market monetarist economics – though it wasn't as though Harry didn't also have useful services to sell –

Other cotton wrap was also being torn off Harry's thoughts, now.

"It seems likely," Minerva said, her voice was not loud but it cut through all other sounds, "that some of our students will also have been stripped last night of those named as their guardians. Should you end up a ward of Hogwarts, please know that I will take the responsibilities of my position with extreme seriousness. You will be extended every courtesy. Your family's vault will be managed well and truly. As best I can, I will treat every one of you as I would my own children – and I will protect you as much as I would protect my own children, no more, no less. I hope that is clear to EVERYONE AT HOGWARTS."

Students nodded rapidly.

“Good,” Minerva said. Her voice sank back. “Then there is one more thing that must be done.”

With a sad, solemn air, Professor Sinistra emerged from a side entrance. She was wearing white robes instead of her usual brown, and instead of her customary witch’s hat, she was wearing a many-tasseled square hat whose colors had faded into mostly gray.

In her hands, Professor Sinistra carried the Sorting Hat.

With the air of someone carrying out a ceremony that had not changed in centuries, Aurora Sinistra knelt, on one knee, before Minerva McGonagall, presenting to her the Sorting Hat in both hands.

Minerva McGonagall took the Sorting Hat from Professor Sinistra’s hands, and placed it on her own head.

There was a long silence.

“HEADMISTRESS!”

“As Albus Dumbledore is not dead,” Minerva said, her voice so low that students strained to hear it, “but only taken from us, I accept this position in the capacity of Acting Headmistress only – until Dumbledore’s return.”

A piercing cry split the Great Hall, and Fawkes was there, overflying all Four Tables in a slow spiral arc. He passed over each of the tables, humming in his bird’s voice, a hum of absolute loyalty that would outlast the death of merely physical fires. Wait, the hum seemed to say. Wait until his return, and be true.

Fawkes circled Minerva McGonagall three times, feathered wings brushing around her as the tears began to creep down her cheeks; then the bird flew out a window above the Hall, and was gone.

SOMETHING TO PROTECT: PROFESSOR QUIRRELL

THE Sun shone down on the Scottish green, striking sparks of reflected white from every passing dewdrop or reflective leaf that happened to position itself correctly, a clear blue sky for a funeral.

Harry had declined to give the eulogy. He'd declined for the second time. Professor Flitwick had asked him about it weeks ago in May, to give Harry time to write his lines before it would become necessary to speak; and Harry had said no then, too.

So it fell to a sixth-year Gryffindor, Oliver Habryka, who had the fourth-highest total of Quirrell points among all the students, and who had been General of an army. The seventeen-year-old boy was tall and not especially handsome in solid black robes; instead of a red tie, he was wearing a purple tie such as Professor Quirrell had sometimes favored.

Speaking, under the circumstances, *ex tempore*. The previous eulogies, written well in advance, had been discarded; Oliver Habryka had a parchment in his left hand, but he wasn't looking at it at all.

"Professor Quirrell was very sick," the tall boy said, his wavering voice falling into a hush of students, occasionally broken by a muffled sob. "I think if Professor Quirrell had been able to fight in the fullness of his power, You-Know-Who couldn't have beat him easily, and maybe not at all. They say that David Monroe was the only one that You-Know-Who was ever afraid of, in his day. But," Oliver's voice broke, "Professor Quirrell wasn't in the fullness of his power. He was very sick. He had trouble walking by himself. And he went to face the Dark Lord, alone."

There was a pause, then, while the students cried for a while.

Oliver wiped away his tears with his sleeve, and spoke again. "We don't know exactly what happened," said Oliver. "I imagine the Dark Lord laughed at him. Maybe made fun of the Professor, for challenging him when he couldn't stand up. Well, he's not laughing now, is he."

There were fierce nods from the students; all of them that Harry could

see, from Gryffindor to Slytherin.

“Maybe the Dark Lord knew some way of curing Professor Quirrell, You-Know-Who did come back from the dead after all. Maybe he offered Professor Quirrell his life if Professor Quirrell would serve him. Professor Quirrell smiled, and told the Dark Lord it was time for them to play a game called Who’s The Most Dangerous Wizard In The World.”

If you don’t know, don’t just make stuff up. But Harry didn’t say anything. It was what Lord Voldemort might have tried, it was what Professor Quirrell might have said back.

“And they aren’t telling us everything,” Oliver said, “but we can guess what happened next. We all know that Hermione Granger, who was one of the Professor’s best students, was killed by a troll earlier this year, it must have been the Dark Lord who made it happen, just like he framed her for the Blood-Cooling Charm. Professor Quirrell knew the Dark Lord was behind it, so he stole Miss Granger’s body and preserved it, kept it safe –”

Couldn’t blame him for that one.

“Then Professor Quirrell went out to face the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord killed Professor Quirrell. And Hermione Granger came back to life. They say she’s alive and whole now, and maybe something more. When the Dark Lord tried to seize her, all that was left of him afterward was his burned robes and his hands around Miss Granger’s throat. Just as Harry Potter was protected from the Killing Curse by his mother’s love and sacrifice, Professor Quirrell willingly going out, to face, the Dark Lord alone, must have called, Hermione Granger’s spirit, back from, from wherever, she was –” Oliver’s voice was breaking.

“Not just like that,” Harry said from the front row of seats, his own voice hoarse. He had to say something at this point, before it got out of control. If it wasn’t already out of control. “David Monroe was a powerful wizard, more powerful than anyone knew except him and me. I don’t think you can bring someone back from the dead just by sacrificing yourself. No one should try doing it that way.”

Such a beautiful story. It should have been true. It should have been true.

“I don’t know very much about the person behind the Professor,” Oliver Habryka said, after he got himself under control again. “I know David Monroe wasn’t a happy man. He never could cast a Patronus Charm.”

Tears were gathering in Harry’s eyes again. It wasn’t right, it wasn’t fair, Voldemort had killed so many people, he should have died along with his

followers, he didn't deserve special treatment. But it hadn't just been Harry's weakness, it had been the horcruxes, Voldemort couldn't have been killed outright. So Harry could admit it, he was glad, he was glad Professor Quirrell wasn't all gone...

"But I, know," said Oliver, tears glistening on his own cheeks, "Professor Quirrell, is happy, wherever, he is now."

On Harry's left hand, a tiny emerald glowed bright beneath the morning sun.

Not Heaven, not some faraway star, not a different place but a better person, I'll show you, someday I'll show you how to be happy –

The tall boy glanced down at a parchment he held in his other hand, the first time he'd consulted it. "Professor Quirrell," Oliver said, his voice now fiercer and faster, "was, by far, the best Professor of Battle Magic that Hogwarts ever had. Salazar Slytherin couldn't have been half as good a teacher, no matter what spells he knew. Professor Quirrell told us at the beginning of this year that what he taught us would always be our firm foundation in the arts of Defense. And it will be. Forever. We'll teach it to the new students next year, no matter who we have for a professor. The older students will teach the younger ones. That's the solution to the curse on the Defense position. We won't sit around waiting for authority to teach us. And we'll make sure that Professor Quirrell's teachings never die out of Hogwarts."

Harry looked at where Professor – no, Headmistress McGonagall – was sitting, and saw the Headmistress nodding silently, a look that was sad and stern and proud.

"They haven't let us see Miss Granger yet," Oliver said. His voice quavered. "The Girl-Who-Revived. But I'll always think of the Defense Professor when I see her. His sacrifice lives on in her, just as his teachings live on in us." Oliver glanced at where Harry sat, then looked down again at the parchment. "Here's to Professor Quirrell, then, the best Slytherin that ever was, what every Slytherin should be! Three cheers for him!"

"Huzzah! Huzzah! Huzzah!"

No one stayed silent this time, not a single student that Harry could see.

SOMETHING TO PROTECT: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

HARRY stood now before the gargoyles that guarded the Headmaster's – no, the Headmistress's office. He had been summoned by Professor Sinistra, told that it was an emergency, but the gates were not opening for him.

Experiment had showed that the Stone made one Transfiguration permanent every three minutes and fifty-four seconds, irrespective of the size of object Transfigured. Just once, holding the Philosopher's Stone up to the light of Harry's most powerful flashlight in an otherwise darkened closet, Harry had thought he'd seen an array of tiny points inside the chunk of crimson glass; but Harry hadn't been able to see it again, and now suspected himself of having imagined it. The Stone had no other powers that Harry could detect, nor did it respond to any attempted mental commands.

Harry had given himself until noon tomorrow to figure out how to begin using the Stone without it being grabbed by someone else, trying not to think about what was still happening, what had always been happening, in the meanwhile.

Ten minutes late, Minerva McGonagall approached, moving in a swift stride. Her arms were full of papers, she was once again wearing the Sorting Hat.

The gargoyles, with a brief sound of grinding stone, bowed low before her.

"The new password is 'Impermanence,'" Minerva said to the gargoyles, and they stepped aside. "I'm sorry, Mr. Potter, I was delayed –"

"Understood."

Minerva mounted the long spiral stairs, climbing instead of waiting to be carried, Harry following behind her.

"We are meeting with Amelia Bones, Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; with Alastor Moody, whom you have met; and with Bartemius Crouch, Director of the Department of International Magical

Cooperation,” Minerva said as she climbed. “They are Dumbledore’s heirs as much as you or I.”

“How – how’s Hermione doing?” Harry hadn’t had a chance to ask until now.

“Filius said she seemed rather in shock, which I suppose is not surprising. She asked where you were, was told you were at a Quidditch game, asked where you really were, and refused to speak with anyone about what happened until she was allowed to talk with you. She was taken to St. Mungo’s, where,” the Headmistress now sounded slightly perturbed, “a standard diagnostic Charm showed Miss Granger as a healthy unicorn in excellent physical condition except that her mane needs combing. Charms to detect active magic have each time detected her as being in the process of transforming into another shape. There was an Unspeakable who showed up before Filius, ah, removed him. He performed certain spells he probably ought not to have known, and declared that Hermione’s soul was in healthy condition but at least a mile away from her body. At that point the senior healers gave up. She’s currently alone in a cell with the rats and flies –”

“She’s what?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Potter, that’s Transfiguration jargon. Miss Granger is in an isolation chamber with a cage of tame rats, and a box of flies that will bear offspring in a single day. Logic suggests that whatever mystery underlies her resurrection, it left behind an emanation that is causing the healers’ Charms to produce gibberish. But if nothing happens to the rats or to the flies’ offspring, Miss Granger will be declared safe to return to Hogwarts after she wakes up again tomorrow morning.”

Harry still wasn’t sure... wasn’t sure at all, what Hermione would think of having been resurrected, at least under these particular circumstances. He didn’t actually think Hermione would yell at him for doing it wrong. That was just Harry’s brain trying to imagine her as a stereotype. Harry had been legitimately exhausted and not thinking very straight when he’d come up with that cover story, and Hermione would probably understand that part. But he couldn’t imagine what Hermione would think...

“I wonder how Miss Granger will feel about having also vanquished You-Know-Who,” Minerva said reflectively, climbing the moving stairs fast enough that Harry felt out of breath trying to keep up. “And people believing the most interesting things about her.”

“You mean, because she’s always self-identified as a normal academic

genius, and now a bunch of people think of her as the Girl-Who-Revived and everyone wants to shake her hand?" Harry said. Even though she doesn't remember doing anything to earn it. Even though it was all someone else's work and other people's sacrifices, and she's getting the credit. Even though she doesn't feel like she's actually done anything worthy of the way other people treat her, and she's not sure if she can ever live up to the person they imagine. "Gosh, I don't know, I can't imagine what that feels like."

Maybe I shouldn't have subjected her to it. But people had to be given something to believe or heaven knows what they'd have made up. Feeling guilty about this would be stupid. I think.

The two of them reached the top of the stairs, and came into the office filled with dozens of strange objects, all facing a great desk and a mighty throne behind it.

Minerva's hand passed over one of those objects, the one with golden wibblers, her eyes closing briefly. Then Minerva took off the Sorting Hat and put it on a hatrack that held three slippers for left feet. She transformed the mighty throne into a simple cushioned chair and the great desk into a round table, around which four other chairs rose up.

Harry watched it all with a strange pang in his throat. He knew, without either of them saying anything, that there should have been more ceremony for the changing of the chairs, the changing of the table. Much more ceremony, for the first time the Headmistress sat down in her new office. But for whatever reason, there wasn't time, and Minerva McGonagall was discarding all that for speed.

A wave of Minerva's wand lit the Floo-fire in the fireplace, even as Minerva sat down into the chair that had been Dumbledore's.

Harry quietly took one of the chairs around the table, sitting at Minerva's left.

Almost at once, the Floo-fire burned emeraldine and whirled out Alastor Moody, who spun around with his wand raised, taking in the whole room at a seeming glance, and then pointed his wand directly at Harry and said "Avada Kedavra."

It happened so fast, and took him so completely by surprise, that Harry's wand wasn't even half-raised by the time Alastor Moody finished the incantation.

"Just checking," Alastor said to the Headmistress, whose own wand was now pointed at Alastor, her mouth open as if to say words she couldn't find.

“Voldie would’ve tried to dodge, if he’d taken over the boy’s body last night. I’ll still need to check the Granger girl, though.” Alastor Moody went to Minerva’s right and sat down.

Harry had thought, in that split second, to try producing a wordless silver Patronus glow from his wand; but his wand hadn’t been in place to intercept in time, not even close.

Well, if I was feeling invincible before, that does for that. What a valuable life lesson, Mr. Moody.

Then the Floo-fire burned green again, and spat out the oldest, grimmest, toughest-looking witch Harry had ever seen, like beef jerky given human shape. The old witch did not have her wand in her hand, but she projected an air of authority that was stronger and stricter than Dumbledore’s.

“This is Director Amelia Bones, Mr. Potter,” said Headmistress McGonagall, who’d regained her poise. “We are still waiting on Director Crouch –”

“The corpse of Bartemius Crouch Jr. was identified among the dead Death Eaters,” the old witch said without preamble, even as she continued toward the chairs. “It took us entirely by surprise, and I’m afraid Bartemius is in considerable grief about it, on both counts. He will not be with us today.”

Harry kept the flinch inward.

Amelia Bones sat down in a chair, sitting to Moody’s own right.

“Headmistress McGonagall,” said the elder witch, still without hesitation or delay, “The Line of Merlin Unbroken, which Dumbledore left to me in regency, is not responding to my hand. The Wizengamot must have a Chief Warlock who is trustworthy, at once; matters are in great flux in Britain. I must know what Dumbledore has done, immediately!”

“Crap,” muttered Moody. His mad-eye was rolling wildly. “That’s not good, not good at all.”

“Yes, well,” said Minerva McGonagall, who looked rather apprehensive. “I cannot say that for certain. Albus – well, he clearly had an intimation that he might not survive this war. But I do not think he was expecting Miss Granger to come back from the dead and kill Voldemort only hours later. I do not think Albus was expecting that at all. I am not quite sure what his legacies will make of that –”

Amelia Bones rose half out of her chair. “You mean to imply that the Granger girl may have inherited the Line of Merlin Unbroken? This is a catastrophe! She is twelve years old, untested – surely Albus would not be so

irresponsible as to leave the Line to whoever happened to defeat Voldemort, without knowing who!”

“Well, putting it simply,” Minerva said. Her fingers squared the paperwork she’d taken with her, now lying on the desk. “Albus did think he knew who would defeat Voldemort. There was a prophecy concerning it, a verified one, which now seems to be in abeyance, or – I don’t know, Madam Bones! I have one letter for Mr. Potter that I am to give him in the event of Albus’s death or other departure, and then another letter that Albus said Mr. Potter would be able to open only after he defeated Voldemort. I am not sure what will happen to it now. Perhaps Miss Granger will be able to open it, or perhaps it can never be opened –”

“Hold up,” Mad-Eye Moody said. He reached into his robes, drew out a long, grey-knobbed wand that Harry recognized; it was Dumbledore’s wand, of a form and style not like any other wand in Hogwarts. Moody laid the wand on the table. “Before we go any further, Albus left me an instruction or two of his own. Pick up this wand, boy.”

Harry hesitated, thinking.

Albus Dumbledore sacrificed himself for me. He trusted Moody. This probably isn’t a trap.

Then Harry began to reach for the wand.

It leaped up and flew across the table, into Harry’s hand. And the moment that Harry’s fingers grasped the handle it was like he heard a song, a paean of glory and battle that resonated in his mind. A wave of white fire ran up the handle and over the wood, magnifying as it moved, bursting from the end in a tremendous spray of sparks. Through the wood beneath his fingers ran a sense of strength and constrained danger, like a leashed wolf.

Harry was also receiving an impression of distinct skepticism, as if the wand had some level of awareness, and it was wondering how the hell it had ended up being held by a Hogwarts first-year.

“Right,” said Mad-Eye Moody into the puzzled stares. “So it wasn’t Miss Granger who defeated Voldie, then. Didn’t think so.”

“What.” Amelia Bones spoke the word flatly.

Mad-Eye Moody gave her a respectful nod. “Albus said this wand goes to whoever defeats its previous master. Took it off old Grindie, he did. Then Voldie defeated Albus, yesterday. Do I need to spell it out, Amelia?”

Amelia Bones was staring at Harry, her mouth wide open.

"That might not be right," Harry said. He swallowed another pang of the awful guilt. "I mean, Voldemort used me as a hostage because I, I was stupid, and Dumbledore gave himself up to save me, maybe the wand thinks that counts as my defeating Dumbledore. Um, I did defeat Voldemort, though. Vanquished him. But I think it's better if nobody has any idea I was there."

Beep. Tick. Whirr. Ding. Poot.

"That must have taken some doing," Mad-Eye said. The scarred man inclined his head slowly, a gesture of profound respect. "Don't feel too guilty about losing Albus and David and Flamel, son, no matter how stupid you were. You won in the end. All of us put together never could. Just to check, son, you and David also destroyed Voldie's horcrux? And you're certain it was the real thing?"

Harry hesitated, weighing up the probable consequences of trust, the possible disasters of silence, and then shook his head to Moody in reply. He'd been planning to tell at least McGonagall about what was now inside her school, anyway. "Voldemort had... rather a lot of horcruxes, actually. So instead I Obliviated most of his memories, then Transfigured him into this." Harry raised his hand, and silently pointed to the emerald on his ring.

Splat. Boing. Splat. Splat.

"Huh," Moody said, leaning back in his chair. "Minerva and I will be putting some alarms and enchantments on that ring of yours, son, if you don't mind. Just in case you forget to sustain that Transfiguration one day. And don't go hunting any other Dark wizards, ever, just live a quiet and peaceful life." The scarred man took a handkerchief and wiped at the beads of sweat that had now appeared on his forehead. "But well done, lad, you and David both, may he rest in peace. This was his idea, I'm guessing? Well done, I say."

"Indeed," said Amelia Bones, who had now regained her composure. "We all owe the both of you a tremendous debt of gratitude. But I say again that there is urgent business regarding the Line of Merlin Unbroken."

"I believe," Minerva McGonagall said slowly, "that I had best give Albus's letters to Mr. Potter, right now." At the top of her stack of papers now lay a parchment envelope, and a rolled-up parchment scroll sealed with a grey ribbon.

The Headmistress gave Harry the parchment envelope, first, and Harry opened it.



If you are reading this, Harry Potter, then I have fallen to Voldemort, and the quest now lies in your hands.

Though it may shock you to learn, this was the end that I wished in my heart would come to pass. For as I write this, it yet seems possible that Voldemort may fall by my own hand. And then, in time, I shall myself become the darkness you must overcome, to enter fully into your power. For it was said once that you might need to raise your hand against your mentor, the one who made you, who you loved; it was said that you might be my downfall. If you are reading this, then that shall never come to pass, and I am glad of it.

Even so, Harry, I would spare you this, the lonely fight against Voldemort. I write this, vowing to shelter you as long as I can, no matter the final cost to myself. But if I have failed, then know that I am glad of it, in my own selfish way.

With my passing, there is none left to oppose Voldemort as an equal save you. His shadow will fall long and terrible over magical Britain, and many will suffer and die for it. That shadow will not lift until you destroy its source, until you cleanse the heart of the darkness. How you are to do this, I do not know. If Voldemort knows not the power you bear, then neither do I. You must find that power within yourself, you must learn to wield it, you must become Voldemort's final judge, and I beg you not to make the error of showing him mercy.

My wand, which I have left to you in Moody's keeping, you must not dare to wield against Voldemort. For when that wand's master is defeated, it passes to the victor in turn. When you have conquered my conqueror, then the wand will answer truly to your hand; but if you try to turn it against Voldemort before then, it will betray you for certain. Keep it out of Voldemort's grasp at all costs. I should advise you not to wield that wand at all, yet it is a device of great power, which you might need in some desperate case. But if you pick it up you must fear its treachery at all times.

In my absence, the Wizengamot will inevitably fall to Malfoy. The Line of Merlin Unbroken I have passed to you, with Amelia Bones as your regent, until you come of age or come into your power. But she cannot oppose Malfoy for long, not with myself gone and Voldemort returned to advise him. Soon, I think, the Ministry will fall, and Hogwarts will become the last fortress. To Minerva I have left Hogwarts's keys, but you alone are its prince, and she will help you however she can.

Alastor now leads the Order of the Phoenix. Heed his words well, both

his advice and his confidences. It is one of my life's greatest regrets that I did not heed Alastor more and sooner.

That you will in the end defeat Voldemort, I have no doubt.

For that will be only the beginning of your life's destiny. Of that, too, I am certain.

When you have vanquished Voldemort, when you have saved this country, then, I hope, you may embark upon the true meaning of your days.

Hurry then to begin.

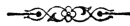
Yours in death (or in whatever),

Dumbledore.

P.S. The passwords are 'phoenix's price', 'phoenix's fate', and 'phoenix's egg', spoken within my office. Minerva can move those rooms to where you can reach them more easily.



Harry folded up the parchment and put its back into the envelope, frowning thoughtfully, then took the grey-ribboned scroll from the Headmistress. When the long grey wand in Harry's hand touched the ribbon, it fell away at once; and Harry unrolled the scroll, and read it.



Dear Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres:

If you are reading this, you have defeated Voldemort.

Congratulations on that.

I hope you had some time in which to celebrate before you opened this scroll, because the news in it is not cheerful.

During the First Wizarding War, there came a time when I realised that Voldemort was winning, that he would soon hold all within his hand.

In that extremity, I went into the Department of Mysteries and I invoked a password which had never been spoken in the history of the Line of Merlin Unbroken, did a thing forbidden and yet not utterly forbidden.

I listened to every prophecy that had ever been recorded.

And so I learned that my troubles were far worse than Voldemort.

From certain seers and diviners have come an increasing chorus of foretellings that this world is doomed to destruction.

And you, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, are one of those foretold to destroy it.

By rights I should have ended your line of possibility, stopped you from ever being born, as I did my best to end all the other possibilities I discovered on that day of terrible awakening.

Yet in your case, Harry, and in your case alone, the prophecies of your apocalypse have loopholes, though those loopholes be ever so slight.

Always 'he will end the world', not 'he will end life'.

Even when it was said that you would tear apart the very stars in heaven, it was not said that you would tear apart the people.

And so, it being clear that this world is not meant to last, I have gambled literally everything upon you, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres. There were no prophecies of how the world might be saved, so I found the prophecies that offered loopholes in the destruction; and I brought about the strange and complex conditions for those prophecies to come to pass. I ensured that Voldemort discovered a certain one of those prophecies, and so (even as I had feared) condemned your parents to death and made you what you are. I wrote a strange hint in your mother's Potions textbook, having no idea why I must; and this proved to show Lily how to help her sister, and ensured you would gain Petunia Evans's heartfelt love. I snuck invisibly into your bedroom in Oxford and administered the potion that is given to students with Time-Turners, to extend your day's cycle by two hours. When you were six years old I smashed a rock that was on your windowsill, and to this day I cannot imagine why.

All in the desperate hope that you can pass us through the eye of the storm, somehow end this world and yet bring out its people alive.

Now that you have passed the preliminary test of defeating Voldemort, I place my all in your hands, all the tools I can possibly give you. The Line of Merlin Unbroken, the command of the Order of the Phoenix, all my wealth and all my treasures, the Elder Wand out of the Deathly Hallows, the loyalty of such of my friends as may heed me. I have left Hogwarts in Minerva's care, for I do not think you will have time for it, but even that is yours if you demand it from her.

One thing I do not give you, and that is the prophecies. Upon the moment of my departure, they will be destroyed, and no future ones will be recorded, for it was said that you must not look upon them. If you think this frustrating, believe me when I say that even your wit cannot comprehend what frustration you have been spared. I will die, or be lost by you, or in some other way be taken from you – the prophecies are unclear, naturally – without ever once

knowing what the future truly holds, or why I must do what I do. It is all cryptic madness and you are well rid of it.

There can only be one king upon the chessboard.

There can only be one piece whose value is beyond price.

That piece is not the world, it is the world's peoples, wizard and Muggle alike, goblins and house-elves and all.

While survives any remnant of our kind, that piece is yet in play, though the stars should die in heaven.

And if that piece be lost, the game ends.

Know the value of all your other pieces, and play to win.

– Albus



Harry held the parchment scroll for a long time, staring at nothing.

So.

There were times when the phrase "That explains it" didn't really seem to cover it, but nonetheless, that explained it.

Absently Harry rolled up the parchment scroll in his fist, still staring at nothing.

"What does it say?" said Amelia Bones.

"It's a confession letter," Harry said. "Turns out Dumbledore's the one who killed my pet rock."

"This is not a time for jokes!" cried the elder witch. "Are you the true holder of the Line of Merlin Unbroken?"

"Yes," Harry said absently, his mind occupied with thoughts that were, by any objective quantification, overwhelmingly more important.

The old witch was sitting very still in her chair. She turned her head, and locked eyes with Minerva McGonagall.

Meanwhile Harry's brain, which was juggling way too many possibilities over way too many time horizons, some of them involving literally billions of years and stellar disassembly procedures, declared cognitive bankruptcy and started over. All right, what's the first thing I have to do to save the world... no, make it even more local, what do I have to do today... besides figuring out what to do, that is, and I'd better not delay before looking at whatever Dumbledore left me in the Phoenix's Egg room...

Harry raised his eyes from the rolled-up parchment and looked at Professor- at Headmistress McGonagall, at Mad-Eye Moody, and at the

leathery-looking old witch, as though seeing them for the first time. Though he was in fact seeing Amelia Bones for mostly the first time.

Amelia Bones, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, whom Albus Dumbledore had thought worthy to lead the Wizengamot at least temporarily. Her cooperation would be invaluable, maybe necessary, for... for whatever was headed Harry's way. Dumbledore had chosen her, and he'd read prophecies Harry hadn't seen.

Amelia Bones, who had thought she'd been appointed regent over the Line of Merlin Unbroken and made the next Chief Warlock, only to find that instead the position had gone to, apparently, an eleven-year-old boy.

You will now, said the voice of Hufflepuff inside his head, you will now be polite. You will not be your usual brand of bloody idiot. Because the fate of the world might just depend on it. Or not. We don't even know.

"I'm terribly sorry about all this," Harry Potter said, then paused to see what effect, if any, this polite statement had produced.

"Minerva seems to think," the old witch said, "that you will not take offense to honest words."

Harry nodded. His Ravenclaw part wanted to include the disclaimer about that being different from people blatantly trying to push you down while crying that you were intolerant of criticism, but Hufflepuff vetoed. Whatever she had to say, Harry would hear.

"I do not wish to speak ill of the departed," the old witch said. "But since time immemorial, the Line of Merlin Unbroken has passed to those who have thoroughly demonstrated themselves to be, not only good people, but wise enough to distinguish successors who are themselves both good and wise. A single break, anywhere along the chain, and the succession might go astray and never return! It was a mad act for Dumbledore to pass the Line to you at such a young age, even having made it conditional upon your defeat of You-Know-Who. A tarnish upon Dumbledore's legacy, that is how it will be seen." The old witch hesitated, her eyes still watching Harry. "I think it best that nobody outside this room ever learn of it."

"Um," Harry said. "You... don't think very much of Dumbledore, I take it?"

"I thought..." said the old witch. "Well. Albus Dumbledore was a better wizard than I, a better person than I, in more ways than I can easily count. But the man had his faults."

"Because, um. I mean. Dumbledore knew everything you just said. About

my being young and how the Line works. You're acting like you think Dumbledore was unaware of those facts, or just ignoring them, when he made his decision. It's true that sometimes stupid people, like me, make decisions that crazy. But not Dumbledore. He was not mad." Harry swallowed, forcing a sudden moisture away from his eyes. "I think... I'm beginning to realize... Dumbledore was the only sane person, in all of this, all along. The only one who was doing the right things for anything like the right reasons..."

Madam Bones was cursing under her breath, low dire imprecations that were making Minerva McGonagall twitch.

"I'm sorry," Harry said helplessly.

Mad-Eye was grinning, the scarred face twisting up in a smile. "Always knew Albus was up to something he never told the rest of us. Lad, you have no idea how hard it is for me not to use my Eye on that scroll."

Harry quickly shoved the scroll into his moleskin pouch.

"Alastor," Amelia said. The old witch's voice was rising. "You are a man of sense, you cannot think the lad is able to fill Dumbledore's socks! Not today!"

"Dumbledore," Harry said, the name tasting strange on his tongue, "did make one wrong assumption, when he made his decisions. He thought we'd be fighting Voldemort for years, all of us together. He didn't know I'd vanquish Voldemort immediately. It was the right thing for me to do, it saved a lot of lives compared to fighting a long battle. But Dumbledore thought you would have years to learn me, trust me... and instead it was all over in an evening." Harry inhaled. "Can't you just pretend we've been fighting Voldemort for years and I earned your trust and everything? So that I'm not penalised for winning more quickly than Dumbledore expected?"

"You are still a first-year in Hogwarts!" the old witch said. "You cannot take Dumbledore's place, whatever his intentions!"

"Right, that whole 'looking like an eleven-year-old' thing." Harry's hand came up, rubbed at his nose where his glasses lay. I suppose I could just use the Stone, change myself to look like ninety...

"I am not a fool," the old witch said. "I know you are no ordinary child. I have seen you speak to Lucius Malfoy, watched you frighten off a Dementor, and witnessed Fawkes grant your plea. Anyone with wisdom who saw you before the Wizengamot – by which I mean myself and at most two others – could guess that you had absorbed some portion of You-Know-Who's shredded soul on the night of his undeath, but subdued it and turned his

knowledge to good ends.”

There was a slight pause in the room.

“Well, yes, of course,” said Minerva McGonagall. She sighed, slumped a bit in the Headmistress’s chair. “As Albus clearly knew from the very beginning, but thoughtfully declined to warn me about in any way whatsoever.”

“Right,” Moody said. “I knew that. Yep. Perfectly obvious. Wasn’t confused at all.”

“I guess that’s close enough to the truth,” said Harry. “So, um. What’s the problem, exactly?”

“The problem,” Amelia Bones said, her voice perfectly even, “is that you are a bubbling, unstable blend of a Hogwarts first-year and You-Know-Who.” She paused, as though waiting for something.

“I’m getting better about that,” Harry said, since she seemed to be waiting on his reply. “Quite rapidly, in fact. More importantly, it’s not something Dumbledore didn’t know.”

The old witch continued. “Giving away your fortune and going in debt to Lucius Malfoy to keep your best friend out of Azkaban, as much as it demonstrates your upstanding moral character, also demonstrates that you cannot corral the Wizengamot. I can see now that you did the right thing for yourself, the thing you had to do to maintain your lease on sanity and hold back your inner darkness. But you also did a thing that Merlin’s heir must not do. A sentimental leader can be far worse than a selfish one. Albus, master and servant of a phoenix, was barely survivable – and even he opposed you that day.” Amelia gestured in the direction of Mad-Eye Moody. “Alastor has hardness. He has cunning. He still does not have the talent for government. You, Harry Potter, do not yet have the sternness, the capacity for sacrifice, to direct even the Order of the Phoenix. And being what you are, you must not try to become that person. Not now, not at your age. Align and fuse your divided soul in your own time, if you possibly can. Do not try to be Chief Warlock while you are doing it. If Albus thought that was a good idea, he was crafting a nicer story at the expense of real-world practicality. I do think the man had a problem with that.”

Harry’s eyes were a bit wide, listening to all this. “Um... what exactly do you think is going on in here?” Harry tapped his head just above his ear.

“I imagine that inside you is the soul of a boy who remains honest and true, gathering his will to force down the fragment of Voldemort’s spirit that tries to consume him, even as it howls at him that he is sentimental and weak

– did you just giggle?”

“Sorry. But seriously, it wasn’t ever that bad. More like having a lot of bad habits I needed to break.”

“Ahem,” said Headmistress McGonagall. “Mr. Potter, I think at the start of this year it was that bad.”

“Bad habits that chained into and triggered each other. Yes, those are a bit more of a problem.” Harry sighed. “And you, Madam Bones... er. Sorry if I’m wrong about this. But my guess is that you’re feeling a bit upset that the Line went to an eleven-year-old?”

“Not the way you are thinking,” the old witch said calmly. “Though it is natural for you to suspect me. The position of Chief Warlock is not one I will find pleasant, even compared to the horrors of Magical Law Enforcement. Albus persuaded me on the matter, and I would say that I took some convincing, but the truth is that I did not waste his time in an argument I expected to lose. I knew I would hate the task, and I knew I would do it anyway. Minerva says you have some amount of common sense, especially when others remind you of it. Can you really see yourself standing upon the Wizengamot’s high dais? Are you sure it is not some remnant of You-Know-Who that imagines himself suited to the position, or even desires it at all?”

Harry took off his glasses and massaged his forehead. His scar still ached a bit, from the damage he’d done by picking at it yesterday until it bled in a suitably dramatic fashion. “I do have some common sense, and yes, being Chief Warlock sounds like a huge amount of aggravation and a job that, in reality, does not fit me the tiniest bit. The trouble is. Um. I’m not sure the Line of Merlin is just about being Chief Warlock. There’s, um. I suspect... that there’s weird other stuff that goes along with it. And that Dumbledore meant me to take responsibility for the... other stuff. And that the other stuff is... possibly quite amazingly important.”

“Crap,” Moody said. Then Alastor Moody repeated, “Crap. Kid, should you even be saying this to us?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “If there’s a user manual, I haven’t looked at it yet.”

“Crap.”

“And if these other matters require sternness and sacrifice?” Amelia Bones said, still calmly. “If they test you as you were tested before the Wizengamot? I am old, Harry Potter, and I am not without knowledge of mysteries. You have seen how I was able to perceive your own nature at nearly a glance.”

“Amelia,” Mad-Eye Moody said. “What would have happened if you’d had to fight You-Know-Who last night?”

The old witch shrugged. “I would have died, I expect.”

“You’d have lost,” said Alastor Moody. “And the Boy-Who-Lived didn’t just take out Voldie, he set it up so that his good friend Hermione Granger came back from the dead at the same time Voldie resurrected himself. There’s no way in hell or double hell that was an accident, and I don’t think it was David’s idea either. Amy, the truth is, none of us know what the keeper of Merlin’s legacy has to do. But we’re not the right kind of crazy for this crap.”

Amelia Bones frowned. “Alastor, you know I’ve dealt with strange things before. Dealt with them quite well, in my opinion.”

“Yeah. You dealt with the crap so you could go back to real life. You’re not the kind of crazy that builds a castle out of the crap and lives there.” Moody sighed. “Amy, on some level you know exactly why Albus had to leave who-knows-what-job to the poor kid.”

The old witch’s fists clenched on the table. “Do you have any idea of the disaster it would be for Britain? Call me sane, but I cannot accept that outcome! I have worked too long toward this day to see it fall apart now, now of all times!”

“Excuse me,” Headmistress McGonagall said, sounding quite precise and Scottish. “Is there any reason why Mr. Potter cannot simply instruct the Line that Madam Bones is his regent for the position of Chief Warlock, but not anything having to do with the Department of Mysteries, until he comes of age? If Albus could tell the Line to appoint a regent only until Voldemort’s defeat, it is clearly capable of following complex orders.”

Slowly, this unexpected hammer-blow of common sense was absorbed by everyone present.

Harry opened his mouth to agree to appoint Amelia Bones his regent for Wizengamot-related matters, and then hesitated again.

“Um,” Harry said. “Um. Madam Bones, I would much prefer if you took charge of handling the Wizengamot instead of me.”

“In that we are agreed,” said the old witch. “Shall we let it be done?”

“But –”

There was a sort of frustrated dropping-back of the others. “What is the problem, Mr. Potter?” said the Headmistress, in a voice that indicated she hoped it was nothing serious.

“Um. I think there’s a couple of things I might have to do very soon that could... prove politically controversial, and in exchange for handing over the Line’s political power to Madam Bones I’m going to want her... um, cooperation on some things.”

Amelia Bones exchanged another long stare with Minerva McGonagall. Then she looked back at Harry Potter.

“I am indignant at your request!” Amelia Bones said. “Your hesitancy has told me that you are weak and unused to bargaining, and will probably fold if I push back.”

Harry closed his eyes.

Slightly dark-tinged Harry opened them.

“All right,” Harry said, “let me rephrase. I don’t mean to interfere with your work on a day-to-day or even month-to-month basis, but I can’t just toss off the final responsibility that Dumbledore left me. I’m not going to owl you bizarre parchments out of nowhere, there can be discussions first, but at some point I may have to give you an order. If you refuse the order I might have to take back the Line’s Wizengamot functions and assume direct control. Can you handle that?”

“And if I say no?” said the old witch.

Slight, slight the dark tinge... “I don’t have an alternative to you lined up. I could start by asking Augusta Longbottom who she thought might be suitable and work from there. But it may be important that we keep to Dumbledore’s plan as much as possible, since I don’t know exactly why he did the things he did, and he thought Amelia Bones should be Chief Warlock for a time. I’m not going to pull Merlin’s name on you, but... no, strike that, I am going to pull Merlin’s name on you, this might or might not be insanely important.”

The old witch thought for a time, her eyes going from person to person around the table. “I am not satisfied with this,” she said after a time. “But the Wizengamot must be called to order soon. It will do for now.”

Slowly the old witch reached into her robes, and took out a short rod of stone, dark stone.

She placed the rod on the table before Harry. “Take what is yours,” she said. “And then do please give it back.”

Harry reached out his hand to take it.

In the moment that Harry’s fingers first touched the dark stone –
– nothing happened.

Well, perhaps Merlin hadn't been given to melodrama. That could explain why his final legacy looked like a small, unassuming dark rod. If that was all that was needed for its function, that would be all that was there.

Harry took up the Line, frowning at it. "I'd like to appoint Amelia Bones as my regent for Wizengamot-related functions." Then, the thought occurring to him that he needed to specify a stopping point to define a regency, Harry added, "Until I say that I've taken it back."

Then Harry made a face. He'd been hoping for more from the Line, but it was just a key to places in the Department of Mysteries where interesting things were kept, or to seals where Merlin and his successors had stashed things that shouldn't be destroyed but ought to be kept from general circulation. Aside from that, the Line didn't do much.

The Line didn't let you bypass the Interdict of Merlin either. No, not even if the fate of the galaxy was at stake. Not even if the person seemed sane, had taken an Unbreakable Vow, and honestly believed the world was about to be destroyed otherwise.

Merlin had dreamed of a long run, a world that would last for eons and not just centuries. The world had no reason not to last forever, if the truly dangerous powers were removed and kept gone. Conversely, a single loophole in the safeguards made the world's destruction only a matter of time. Someday Merlin's Line would pass to the wrong person. It could reject the obviously unworthy, but eventually it would pass into hands too subtly flawed for the Line to detect. This was inevitable, when dealing with human beings, and Harry needed to keep that in mind before he sealed something where future Line-holders could retrieve it – the disaster of its inevitable misuse someday needed to be outweighed by its benefits over the next few thousand years.

Harry let out a sad small sigh, under his breath. Merlin, you idiot...

Thinking that didn't unlock any final safeguards.

There wasn't anything currently on fire in the Department of Mysteries, so Harry carefully placed the Line back on the table.

"Thank you," the old witch said. She picked up the rod of dark stone. "Do you know how I am to use it to call the Wizengamot to order, or – never mind, I shall just try striking the podium. That seems obvious enough. To the rest of the country, of course, I am the Chief Warlock so far as anyone knows except us four."

Harry hesitated. Then he imagined the owls he would receive if anyone

knew he was allowed to second-guess the Chief Warlock, and what that would do to Amelia's negotiating power. "Fine."

Amelia tucked the rod back into her robes. "I will not say it was a pleasure doing business with you, Boy-Who-Lived, but it could have been much worse. Thank you kindly for that."

Harry was already feeling worried about the exact balance of power here, from the way Madam Bones was acting. The others had, quite logically, deduced that it had been mostly David Monroe who'd planned the way to defeating Voldemort, which meant they were still underestimating him. It might take a crisis of some type, with Harry figuring it out successfully for once instead of screwing up, before Amelia Bones started to respect his authority. Or believe in it at all, actually... "So," Harry said. "Any weirdness for me that you would have brought to Dumbledore while he was around?"

Amelia looked thoughtful. "Since you ask... I can think of three things, indeed. First, we don't have the faintest notion what ritual was used to sacrifice the Death Eaters and resurrect You-Know-Who. It corresponds to no known legend, and the magic traces from the ritual have been eradicated. So far as my Aurors can tell, everyone's heads fell off their necks due to natural causes. Except for Walden MacNair, who was killed by magical fire after firing a Killing Curse from his wand. A very mysterious ritual indeed." She was giving Harry Potter a rather precise look.

Harry considered this, choosing his words carefully. Voldemort had said he'd put up wards, so Harry had been confident of not being observed by Time-Turned Aurors, but still... "I think this is a matter you don't need to investigate too hard, Madam Bones."

The old witch grinned slightly. "We can't be seen to go easy on the investigation of so many Noble deaths, Harry Potter. When I heard retold your particular account of David's last stand, I made certain to send investigators whom I considered reliable in the usual quality of their work. Auror Nobbs and Auror Colon, in fact, who are widely respected outside my Department. I found their report to be quite fascinating reading." Amelia paused. "There's a possibility that Augustus Rookwood left a ghost –"

"Exorcise it before anyone talks to it," Harry said, conscious of the sudden hammering of his heart.

"Yes, sir," the old witch said dryly. "I shall disrupt the soul's anchoring a little, and none shall be the wiser when it fails to materialize. The second matter is that there was a still-living human arm found among the Dark

Lord's things –"

"Bellatrix," Harry said. His mind had leaped back, made the connection that ongoing trauma had blurred. "I think that's Bellatrix Black's arm." Lesath Lestrange hadn't been named as someone who'd lost a parent. "Oh, bloody hell. She's still out there, isn't she. Can you use her arm to track her down somehow?"

Amelia Bones had acquired a sour look. "I see. As I was saying, a still-living human arm was found among the Dark Lord's things, but it proved to be easily incinerated."

"What idiot –" Harry stopped himself. "No, not an idiot. Because immediately destroying Dark objects is Department policy. Because of past experiences with rings that really should've been dropped into volcanos immediately. Right?"

Moody and Amelia nodded in unison. "Good guess, son," said Moody.

It might seem literally inevitable that Harry's past stupidity was going to come back and haunt him in some horrible fashion later, but that was no reason not to try subverting the plot. "I expect you've thought of this already," Harry said, "but the obvious next step is to put out your equivalent of an international bulletin for a thin witch missing her left arm. Oh, and add twenty-five thousand Galleons pledged from me – Headmistress, it's fine, please trust me on this – to whatever reward is being offered."

"Well said." The old witch leaned forward slightly. "The third and final matter... there was one truly puzzling element to last night's events, and I am curious to see what you make of it, Harry Potter. Found among the corpses was the head and the body of Sirius Black."

"What?" yelled Moody, starting half from his chair. "I thought he was in Azkaban!"

"So he is," said Madam Bones. "We checked that at once. The Azkaban guards reported that Sirius Black was still in his cell. Black's head and body have been transported to the St. Mungo's morgue, and show the same cause of death as the other Death Eaters, that is to say, his head spontaneously fell off. I am also told that Sirius Black is, as of this morning, sitting in the corner of his cell rocking back and forth with his head between his hands. No other duplicate Death Eaters have been found. Yet."

There was a pause filled with ticking and whooping things, as people considered this.

“Ah...” said Minerva. “That’s not possible even by You-Know-Who’s standards of possibility. Is it?”

“I would have thought so too when I was your age, dear,” said Amelia. “It is the sixth strangest thing I have ever seen.”

“You see, son?” said Moody. “This sort of thing is why nobody, even me, can ever be paranoid enough.” The scarred man tilted his head, looking thoughtful, as his bright blue eye kept ever-roving. “Twin brother, concealed from the rest of the world? Walpurga Black gave birth to twins, couldn’t bear to kill one, knew old Pollux would demand it... nah, ain’t buyin’ it.”

“Any ideas, Mr. Potter?” said Amelia Bones. “Or is this another matter into which my Department should not inquire too closely?”

Harry closed his eyes and thought.

Sirius Black had hunted down Peter Pettigrew, instead of fleeing the country as common sense would have suggested.

Black had been found in the middle of the street, surrounded by bodies, laughing.

Nothing left of Pettigrew except one finger.

Pettigrew had been a spy for the Light, not a double agent but somebody who snuck around and found things out.

One of the conspiracy theories about Pettigrew had been that he was an Animagus, since he’d been good at ferreting out secrets even in his Hogwarts years.

Dementors sapped all the magic in their vicinity.

Professor Quirrell had said something about a particular type of magic that rearranged flesh like a Muggle smith reshaping metal with hammer and tongs...

Harry opened his eyes again.

“Was Peter Pettigrew a secret Metamorphmagus?”

Amelia Bones’s face changed. She made a single croaking noise and fell backward within her chair.

“Yes, in fact...” Minerva said slowly. “Why?”

“Sirius Black Confunded Peter Pettigrew,” Harry’s voice explained patiently, “to force him to change shape and pretend to be Black. By the time the Confundus wore off, Peter was in Azkaban and couldn’t change back. The Aurors are used to people in Azkaban saying absolutely anything to get out, so they didn’t listen while Peter Pettigrew was screaming about it over and over again until his voice wore out.”

Even Mad-Eye Moody's face showed the horror, then.

"In retrospect," said Harry's voice, which seemed to be operating entirely on automatic, "you should have been suspicious when you managed to get that one Death Eater hauled off to Azkaban without a trial."

"We thought Malfoy was distracted," whispered the old witch. "That he was only trying to save himself. There were other Death Eaters we managed to get then, like Bellatrix –"

Harry nodded, feeling like his neck and head were moving on puppet strings. "The Dark Lord's most fanatic and devoted servant, a natural nucleus of opposition for anyone who contested Lucius's control of the Death Eaters. You thought Lucius was distracted."

"Get him out of there," said Minerva McGonagall. Her voice rose to a scream. "Get him out of there!"

Amelia Bones shoved herself up from the chair, whirled on the Floo –
"Stop."

Everyone looked at Harry with astonishment, none more than Minerva McGonagall.

Something else seemed to have taken over Harry's voice. "There's four things we still need to discuss. An innocent man has been in Azkaban for ten years, eight months, and fourteen days. He can stay there a few minutes longer. That's how urgent those four things are."

"You –" whispered Amelia Bones. "You should not try to be this person, at your age –"

"First. I think I should look at the complete police records on every other Death Eater that went to Azkaban while Lucius was distracted. Can you compile that by tonight?"

"Within the hour," said Amelia Bones. She looked gray.

Harry nodded. "Second. Azkaban is over. You'll need to start preparations now to move the prisoners to Nurmengard or other secure non-Dementor prisons, and to provide treatment for their Dementor exposure."

"I," said Amelia. The old witch seemed bent, diminished. "I... do not think, that even with this... scandal, that the remainder of the Wizengamot will bend... and the Dementors must be fed, not so much as we have fed them, but they must be given some victims, or they will roam the world, prey on innocents..."

"It doesn't matter what the Wizengamot says," Harry said. "Because –" Harry's voice choked. "Because –" Harry took a deep breath, steadied himself.

He thought he could see the shape now of the immediate future, could see it stretching out before him like a golden pathway lit with sunlight. Was this also written, in the book of Time that I must not see? "Because if I'm right about what comes next, then sometime very soon, Hermione Granger, the Girl-Who-Revived, is going to go to Azkaban and destroy all the Dementors there."

"Impossible!" spat Mad-Eye Moody.

"Merlin," whispered Amelia Bones. "Oh, dear Merlin. That's what happened to the Dementor that Dumbledore 'lost'. That's why they're afraid of you – and now her as well?" Her voice trembled. "What is this, what is all this?"

If Hermione believes that Death can be defeated –

Whether or not she could've believed that before, she'll believe it now.

"An authorized portkey to Azkaban would be appreciated –" Harry's voice broke again. Tears were streaming down his cheeks.

She can't die. I have her horcrux.

But Hermione doesn't need to know about that. Not for one more week.

If she's willing to risk her own life to end this –

"Though I think, she might make, her own way there..."

"Harry?" said Headmistress McGonagall.

Harry was crying now, huge ragged breaths bursting from him. But he didn't stop talking. Somewhere out there Peter Pettigrew was waiting while Harry cried.

Somewhere out there, everyone was waiting while he cried.

"Third. Somewhere just inside the wards of Hogwarts. In a highly defensible position. But where emergency cases can be portkeyed in from just outside the wards. There's going to be a high-security h-h-hospital. With very powerful guards, that have taken Unbreakable Vows, I don't, I don't care how much gold it takes to pay for the Vows, it genuinely does not matter any more. And, and Alastor Moody is going to design the security architecture, and go completely overboard on paranoia without being constrained by a budget or sanity or common sense, only it has to open soon." Couldn't stop talking to cry.

"Harry," said the Headmistress, "both of them think you've gone mad, they don't know you well enough to know better. You need to slow down and explain."

Instead Harry reached into his pouch and made sign language with his fingers, and lifted out, his fingers straining, a five-kilo chunk of gold larger than his fist, from when he'd been experimenting this morning. It made a heavy thud as it landed on the table.

Moody reached over and tapped it with his wand, and then his throat made an incomprehensible sound.

"That's your starting budget, Alastor, if you need money right away. Nicholas Flamel didn't make the Philosopher's Stone, he stole it, Dumbledore didn't know the secret history but Monroe did. Once you know how it works, the Stone can do one complete restoration to full health and youth every two hundred and thirty-four seconds. Three hundred sixty people per day. One hundred and thirty-four thousand healings per year. That should be enough to stop, all the wizards everywhere, and all the goblins and house-elves and whoever, from dying. Of old age, or anything else." Harry was wiping away tears, over and over. "Flamel had more blood on his hands than a hundred Voldemorts, for all the people he could've saved and didn't. The whole time, Moody, the Philosopher's Stone could've healed all your scars and given you back your leg, any time Flamel felt like it. Dumbledore didn't know. I'm sure he didn't know." Harry smiled shakily. "I can't imagine you as a teenage witch, Madam Bones, but I bet it looks good on you. That'll give you more energy for trying to keep the Wizengamot from messing with me, because if they get the idea that the Stone is something they can mess with in any way, tax, regulate, I don't care, Hogwarts is going to secede from Britain and become its own country. Headmistress, Hogwarts is no longer dependent on the Ministry for gold, or for that matter food. You may reform the educational curriculum at will. I'm thinking we may want to add some more advanced courses soon, especially in Muggle studies."

"Slow down!" said Minerva McGonagall.

"Fourth –" Harry said, and then stopped.

Fourth. Begin preparations for an orderly take-down of the Statute of Secrecy and to provide magical healing on a mass scale to the Muggle world. Those who oppose this agenda in any way may be denied services by the Stone...

Harry's lips couldn't move. Not wouldn't, couldn't.

With six billion Muggles thinking creatively about how to use magic...

Transfiguring antimatter was just one idea. It wasn't even the most destructive idea. There were also black holes and negatively charged strangelets.

And if black holes couldn't be Transfigured because they didn't already exist as magic defined that to within some spatial radius, there was just Transfiguring lots and lots of nuclear weapons and Black Death plague that could reproduce before the Transfiguration wore off and Harry hadn't even thought about the problem for five minutes but it didn't matter because he'd already thought of enough. Someone would think of it, someone would talk, someone would try it. The probability was as close to certainty as made no difference.

What happened if you Transfigured a cubic millimeter of up quarks, just the up quarks without any down quarks to bind them? Harry didn't even know, and up quarks were certainly a kind of substance that already existed. All it might take was one single Muggleborn who knew the names of the six quarks deciding to try it. That could be the clock ticking down to the prophesied end of the world.

Harry would have tried to deny the thought, rationalize it away.

He couldn't do that either.

It wasn't a thing-Harry-Potter-would-do.

Like water flowing downhill, Harry Potter would take no chances when it came to not destroying the world.

"Fourth?" said Amelia Bones, who was looking like she'd been hit repeatedly in the face with a planet. "What comes fourth?"

"Never mind," said Harry. His voice did not break. He did not fold over sobbing. There were still lives he could save and those took precedence. "Never mind. Chief Warlock Bones, I've given the regency of the Wizengamot into your hands. Please use that position to announce internationally that the Stone's healing power will soon be made available to all, and that meanwhile, all dying patients are to be kept alive at any cost, no matter what magic is required to do it. That announcement is your absolute priority. When you have done that you may rescue Peter Pettigrew and tell your old Department to begin preparations for shutting down Azkaban. Then please have someone prepare a full list of imprisoned Death Eaters and what was said at their trials and whether Lucius seemed strangely uninterested in defending them. Thank you. That's all."

Amelia Bones turned without another word, and dashed into the Floo like it was her own self that was on fire.

"And someone," Harry said, his voice breaking again now that it was all set in motion, and crying wasn't costing time, though the vast majority of total lives at stake had turned out not to be savable just yet, "someone has to,

someone tell Remus Lupin.

SOMETHING TO PROTECT: DRACO MALFOY

THE boy sat in an office near to where the once-Deputy Headmistress had held court. His tears had run dry hours ago. Now there was only the waiting to see what would become of him, the orphan ward of Hogwarts, whose life and happiness lay in the hands of his family's enemies. The boy had been called to this room, and he had come because there was nothing else to do and nowhere else to go. Vincent and Gregory had left his side, called back by their mothers for their fathers' hurried funerals. Perhaps the boy should have gone with them, but he could not bring himself to do so. He would not have been able to act the part of a Malfoy. The feeling of emptiness that filled him up was so profound that it left no room even for pretended courtesy.

Everyone was dead.

His father was dead, and his godfather Mr. MacNair, and his fallback godfather Mr. Avery. Even Sirius Black, his mother's cousin, had somehow managed to die, and the last remnant of House Black was no friend to any Malfoy.

Everyone was dead.

There came a knock upon the office's door; and then, when the boy made no reply, the door opened, revealing –

"Go away," Draco Malfoy said to the Boy-Who-Lived. He couldn't muster any force in the words.

"I will soon," Harry Potter said, as he stepped into the room. "But there's a decision to be made, and only you can make it."

Draco turned his head toward the wall, because just looking at Harry Potter took more energy than he had left in him.

"You have to decide," Harry said, "what happens to Draco Malfoy after this. I don't mean that in any ominous way. No matter what, you're still going to grow up to be the rich heir of a Noble and Most Ancient House. The thing is," Harry's voice was wavering now, "the thing is, there's a horrible truth you don't know, and I keep thinking that if you knew, you'd tell me not to be your friend anymore. And I don't want to stop being your friend. But to just –

never tell you – and always maintain that lie so I can go on being your friend – I can't do that. It's also wrong. I don't... don't want this anymore, I don't want to be manipulating you. I've hurt you too much already."

Then stop trying to be my friend, you're no good at it anyway. The words rose up into Draco's consciousness, and were rejected from his lips. He felt like he'd mostly lost Harry already, from the games Harry had played with their friendship, the lies and manipulations; and yet the thought of going back to Slytherin alone, maybe without Vincent and Gregory if their mothers terminated the arrangement... Draco didn't want to do that, he didn't want to go back to Slytherin and live out his life among only people who'd agreed to be Sorted into Slytherin House. Draco was barely sensible enough to remember how many of his real friends were also friends with Harry, that Padma was a Ravenclaw and even Theodore was a Chaotic Lieutenant. All that remained of Malfoy House was a tradition, now; and that tradition said it wasn't clever to tell the war's victor to go away and stop trying to be friends with you.

"All right," Draco said emptily. "Tell me."

"That's what I'm going to do," Harry said. "And then the Headmistress will come in after I leave, and seal away your last half-hour of memory. But before then, knowing the whole truth, you'll get to decide whether you still want to be involved with me." Harry's voice was shaking. "Um. According to the records I was reading through before I came here, the story really began in 1926 with the birth of a half-blood wizard named Tom Morfin Riddle. His mother died in childbirth, and he grew up in a Muggle orphanage, until his Hogwarts letter was brought to him by Professor Dumbledore..."

The Boy-Who-Lived continued speaking, words that slammed into what was left of Draco's mind like falling houses.

The Dark Lord had been a half-blood. He'd never believed in blood purity for a fraction of a second.

Tom Riddle had come up with the idea of Lord Voldemort as a bad joke.

The Death Eaters had been meant to lose to David Monroe, so Monroe could take over.

After giving up on that, Tom Riddle had gone on playing Voldemort instead of actually trying to win, because he'd liked bossing the Death Eaters around.

Voldemort used me to try to frame Father for my attempted murder, then used me again to go after the Philosopher's Stone. Draco couldn't remember

that part, but he'd already been told that he'd been used as a pawn alongside Professor Sprout, and that no charges would be filed.

And then the last horror.

"You –" whispered Draco Malfoy. "You –"

"I'm the one who killed your father and all the other Death Eaters last night. They'd been told to open fire on me the moment I did anything, so I had to kill them in order to have a chance at dealing with Voldemort, who was a danger to the entire world." Harry Potter's voice was strained. "I didn't think about you and Theodore and Vincent and Gregory, but if I had, I'd had done it anyway. My mind managed not to realise until afterwards that Mr. White was Lucius, but if I'd realised, I still wouldn't have risked leaving him alive, in case he knew wandless magic. The thought occurred to me long before that it would be pretty convenient, in terms of the political landscape, for all the Death Eaters to suddenly die. I always thought that the Death Eaters were horrible people, much more strongly than I ever let on to you, since the first day we met. But if your father hadn't been there, and I'd had a button that could kill him remotely, I wouldn't have pressed the button just for political reasons. The way I feel about what I've done, and whether there's remorse... well, there's a part of me that's screaming in generic horror about having killed anyone. And another part that says that from a moral standpoint, the Death Eaters signed away their lives on the day they signed up with Voldemort. They pointed their wands at me first, blah blah and so on. But right now I just feel sick about what I've done to you. Again. I feel like," Harry Potter's voice wobbled a bit, "everything I do only hurts you, for all my good intentions, that you've only ever lost things from being around me, so if you tell me to stay away entirely from Draco Malfoy after this, then I will. And if you want me to try to be your friend for real this time, without ever trying to manipulate you again, without ever using you again or risking hurting you again, then I will, I swear I will."

The next Lord Malfoy was crying, openly in front of his enemy, decorum and composure abandoned, because he didn't have anyone left for whose sake he could keep it.

A lie.

A lie.

Everything had been a lie, it was all lies piled on top of lies, lies lies lies –

"You should die," Draco forced out. "You should die for having killed Father." The words only filled him with more emptiness, but they had to be

said.

Harry Potter just shook his head. "And if that's not an option?"

"You should hurt."

Harry only shook his head again.

The Boy-Who-Lived pressed the Lord Malfoy for his decision.

The Lord Malfoy refused to give it. He couldn't say it, couldn't bring himself to say it, either way. He didn't want the war's victor and their mutual friends to abandon him, and he wasn't going to give Harry the absolution he wanted, either.

So Draco Malfoy refused to answer, and then the time of that self's memory ended.



The boy sat in an office near to where the once-Deputy Headmistress had held court. His tears had run dry hours ago. Now there was only the waiting to see what would become of him, the orphan ward of Hogwarts, whose life and happiness lay in the hands of his family's enemies. The boy had been called to this room, and he had come, because there was nothing else to do, and nowhere else to go. Vincent and Gregory had left his side, called back by their mothers for their fathers' hurried funerals. Perhaps the boy should have gone with them, but he could not bring himself to do so. He would not have been able to act the part of a Malfoy. The feeling of emptiness that filled him up was so profound that it left no room even for lies.

Everyone was dead.

Everyone was dead, and it had all been futile from the beginning.

There was a knock upon the office door, and then, after a polite pause, it opened to reveal Headmistress McGonagall, dressed much as she had dressed when she was a Professor. "Mr. Malfoy?" his family's victorious enemy said. "Please come with me."

Listlessly, Draco rose up, and followed her out of the office. Seeing Harry Potter waiting beside her gave him some pause, but then his mind simply shut it out.

"Here's the last thing," Harry Potter said. "I found it in a folded parchment whose outside said that it was the last weapon to be used against House Malfoy, telling me not to read any further until the whole war hung in the balance. I didn't want to tell it to you before because I thought it might

prejudice your decision unfairly. If you were a good person who never killed or lied, but you had to do one or the other, which would be worse?"

Draco ignored him and continued in Headmistress McGonagall's company, leaving Harry behind looking sadly after.

They came to the Headmistress's old office, where she lit her Floo-fire with a wave of her wand, said to the green flame "Gringotts travel office" and stepped through after a firm glance in his direction.

For lack of any other option, Draco Malfoy followed.



She lay in bed, feeling more listless than usual that morning, awoken too early with the Sun just beginning to rise – though the direct sunlight was blocked by the skyscrapers that shadowed her house. A faint tinge of hangover gnawed at her temples, dried her mouth; she tried to be sparing with the drink (though she didn't know why she bothered) but yesterday she'd felt... even more depressed than usual, like she'd lost something, somehow. Not for the first time, not for the hundredth time, she thought about moving – to Adelaide, to Perth, maybe to Perth Amboy if that was what it took. She always had the sense there was somewhere else she ought to be; but while she could live a comfortable life on the payments the insurance company made to her, she couldn't afford luxuries. She couldn't pay to go gallivanting around the world looking for someplace that fit her unsatisfied sense of belonging. She'd watched the TV for long enough, she'd rented enough travelogues, to know that nowhere the VCR showed her gave her any more sense of rightness than Sydney.

She'd felt frozen, stopped in time, ever since the traffic accident that had stolen her memories – not just of a dead family that meant nothing to her now, but memories like how a stove worked. She suspected, no, she knew, that whatever her heart was waiting for, whatever key needed to turn inside her to make her life begin moving again, it was one more thing she'd lost to that runaway minivan. She thought about that almost every morning, trying to guess what she was missing, missing, missing from her life and mind.

Somebody rang her doorbell.

She groaned, turning her head far enough to look at the LED alarm clock at the side of her bed. 6:31, it said, with the AM dot lit. Seriously? Well, that idiot could wait while she staggered out of bed at her own pace, then.

Stagger out of bed she did, ignoring the doorbell as it rang again, as she ducked into the bathroom and dressed herself.

She clambered down the stairs, ignoring the ever-nagging sense that someone else ought to be answering her door for her. “Who’s there?” she called to the closed door; the door had a peephole, but it was fogged over.

“Are you Nancy Manson?” came a woman’s voice, speaking in a precise Scottish accent.

“Yes,” she said cautiously.

“Eunoe,” spoke the Scottish voice, and Nancy leapt back in shock as a flash of light came from the door and hit her and...

Nancy swayed, putting a hand to her forehead. Flashes of light just going through doors and hitting people, that was... that was... that wasn’t particularly surprising...

“Would you please open the door?” said the Scottish woman’s voice. “The war is over and your memories should be returning shortly. There’s someone here who ought to see you.”

My memories –

Nancy’s head was already feeling clogged, like she was about to start hacking something out of her brain, but she managed to reach out and yank the door open.

There in front of her was a woman dressed as a (perfectly normal) witch, from black robes to tall pointed hat –

– and standing beside her a boy, with short white-blond hair and wearing (perfectly normal) dark robes trimmed in green, staring at her with his jaw dropped and eyes wide and beginning to fill with tears.

Green-trimmed robes and white-blond hair...

Something warm stirred in her memory. She felt her heart rising into her throat as she realized that the thing that she’d been looking for these past ten years might be right in front of her this very instant. Somewhere deep inside her, ice was cracking around her heart, the piece of her that had been stopped for so long preparing to move once more.

The boy was staring at her, his mouth working soundlessly.

A mysterious name came into her mind, rose to her lips.

“Lucius?” she whispered.

SOMETHING TO PROTECT: SEVERUS SNAPE

A SOMBER mood pervaded the Headmistress's office. Minerva had returned after dropping off Draco and Narcissa/Nancy at St. Mungo's, where the Lady Malfoy was being examined to see if a decade living as a Muggle had done any damage to her health; and Harry had come up to the Headmistress's office again and then... not been able to think of priorities. There was so much to do, so many things, that even Headmistress McGonagall didn't seem to know where to start, and certainly not Harry. Right now Minerva was repeatedly writing words on parchment and then erasing them with a handwave, and Harry had closed his eyes for clarity. Was there any next first thing that needed to happen...

There came a knock upon the great oaken door that had been Dumbledore's, and the Headmistress opened it with a word.

The man who entered the Headmistress's office appeared worn, he had discarded his wheelchair but still walked with a limp. He wore black robes that were simple, yet clean and unstained. Over his left shoulder was slung a knapsack, of sturdy gray leather set with silver filigree that held four green pearl-like stones. It looked like a thoroughly enchanted knapsack, one that could contain the contents of a Muggle house.

One look at him, and Harry knew.

Headmistress McGonagall sat frozen behind her new desk.

Severus Snape inclined his head to her.

"What is the meaning of this?" said the Headmistress, sounding... heart-sick, like she'd known, upon a glance, just like Harry had.

"I resign my position as the Potions Master of Hogwarts," the man said simply. "I will not stay to draw my last month's salary. If there are students who have been particularly harmed by me, you may use the money for their benefit."

He knows. The thought came to Harry, and he couldn't have said in words just what the Potions Master now knew; except that it was clear that Severus knew it.

"Severus..." Headmistress McGonagall began. Her voice sounded hollow. "Professor Severus Snape, you may not realize how difficult it is to find Potions Masters who can safely teach Muggleborns, or Professors sharp enough to keep Slytherin House in any semblance of order..."

Again the man inclined his head. "I think it need not be said to you, Headmistress, but I recommend in the strongest possible terms that the next Head of Slytherin be nothing like me."

"Severus, you only did as Albus told you to do! You could stay on and act differently!"

"Headmistress," Harry said. His own voice seemed also hollow, and Harry wondered at it, for he hadn't known Severus Snape that well. "If he wants to go, I think you should let him go."

Dumbledore was using him. Maybe not exactly the way Professor Quirrell thought, maybe it was prophecy rather than sabotaging Slytherin, but Dumbledore was still using him. There were things that could have been said long ago to Severus, to free him. It's clear why Dumbledore didn't risk that, but still, Severus wasn't being used kindly. Even his blindness and grief were being used, the way he didn't grasp the consequences of his actions as Potions Master...

"It is well to find you here, Mr. Potter," Severus said. "There is unfinished business between us."

Harry didn't know what to say, so he just nodded.

Severus seemed to be having some difficulty speaking, as he stood before the two of them with the grey knapsack on his shoulder. Finally he seemed to find the words he'd come to speak. "Your mother. Lily. She was -"

"I know," Harry said, through the thickness of his throat. "You don't have to say it."

"Lily was a fine upstanding witch, Mr. Potter. I would not have you think otherwise from any words I said to you."

"Severus?" said Minerva McGonagall, looking as shocked as if she'd been bitten by her own shoes.

The former Potions Master kept his eyes on Harry. "More than one bar lay between myself and Lily, most notably my ill-advised attempts to curry favor with the purebloods of my house. If I made it sound like one mistake upon a muddy field ended it all, if I pretended that she had no reason but shallowness not to love me, I hope your books have also told you why fools may say such things."

"They did," Harry said. He was looking at the fine gray knapsack on Severus Snape's left shoulder, unable to meet the Potions Master's eyes. "They did."

"However," the former Potions Master continued, "I'm afraid I have nothing more to say about your father than what I've already told you."

"Severus!"

The former Potions Master seemed to have eyes only for Harry. "The Dark Mark upon my arm is not dead, nor is the prophecy fulfilled by that story you recounted before the crowd. How did you destroy all but a remnant of the Dark Lord?"

Harry hesitated. "I Obliviated most of his memories and... sealed him, I guess is how wizards say it. Even if the seal breaks, he won't come back as himself."

Severus frowned briefly and then shrugged. "I suppose that is acceptable."

"Professor Snape," Harry said, because this too was now his responsibility, "the Order of the Phoenix owes you for services rendered. I'm in an excellent position to repay it, both financially and magically. Just in case you want to start your next life in a position of wealth, or with better hair, or something."

"Strange words to say to such as me," the former Potions Master said in a soft drawl. "I went to the Dark Lord intending to sell him the prophecy in exchange for Lily's love becoming mine, by whatever darkness was required to achieve it. That is hardly something to be forgiven lightly. And then, in the years after when I was a Potions Master... that you experienced yourself. Do you think my service to the Order of the Phoenix has repaid all my sins?"

"People are always broken," Harry said, though the words stuck in his throat. "They always make mistakes. At least you tried to repay them."

"Perhaps," said the former Potions Master. "My final duty was to fail in guarding the Stone, to be struck down. This I have done, and I survived it, which I never expected to do." Severus was leaning against the door through which he'd entered, taking his weight off his left leg. "I would not have thought to ask for your forgiveness, but since you offer it so freely, I will accept with thanks. From this day on I wish to take less unkindly ways, and I think that is best done by starting over."

Tears glistened on Minerva McGonagall's nose and cheeks, when she spoke her voice was without hope. "Surely you could start over inside Hogwarts."

Severus shook his head. "Too many students would remember me as the

evil Potions Master. No, Minerva. I will go someplace new, and take a new name, and find someone new to love.”

“Severus Snape,” Harry said, because it was his responsibility to say it, “has all your will been done?”

“Lily’s killer is vanquished,” the man said. “I am content.”

The Headmistress lowered her head. “Be well, Severus,” she whispered.

“I do have one last piece of advice,” Harry said. “If you want it.”

“What is it?” said Severus Snape.

“Ruminating about the past can contribute to depression. You have my blanket permission to just never think about your past, ever. You shouldn’t think that it’s your responsibility to Lily to bear your guilt for her, or anything like that. Just keep your mind on your future and whatever new people you meet.”

“I shall take your wisdom into consideration,” Severus said neutrally.

“Also, try a different brand of hair shampoo.”

A wry grin crossed Severus’s face, and Harry thought it might have been, for the first time, that man’s true smile. “Drop dead, Potter.”

Harry laughed.

Severus laughed.

Minerva was sobbing.

Without saying anything else, the free man took a pinch of Floo powder, and cast it into the office’s fireplace, and strode into the green flame whispering something that nobody caught; and that was the last that anyone ever heard of Severus Snape.

SOMETHING TO PROTECT: HERMIONE GRANGER

AND it was evening and it was morning, the last day. June 15th, 1992. The beginning light of morning, the pre-dawn before sunrise, was barely brightening the sky. To the east of Hogwarts, where the Sun would rise, that faintest tinge of grey made barely visible the hilly horizon beyond the Quidditch stands.

The stone terrace-platform where Harry now sat would be high enough to see the dawn beyond the hills below; he'd asked for that, when he was describing his new office.

Harry was currently sitting cross-legged on a cushion, chilly pre-morning breezes stirring over his exposed hands and face. He'd ordered the house-elves to bring up the hand-glittered throne from his previous office as General Chaos... and then he'd told the elves to put it back, once it had occurred to Harry to start worrying about where his taste in decorations had come from and whether Voldemort had once possessed a similar throne. Which, itself, wasn't a knockdown argument – it wasn't like sitting on a glittery throne to survey the lands below Hogwarts was unethical in any way Harry's moral philosophy could make out – but Harry had decided that he needed to take time and think it through. Meanwhile, simple cushions would do well enough.

In the room below, connected to the rooftop by a simple wooden ladder, was Harry's new office inside Hogwarts. A wide room, surrounded by full-wall windows on four sides for sunlight; currently bare of furnishings but for four chairs and a desk. Harry had told Headmistress McGonagall what he was looking for, and Headmistress McGonagall had put on the Sorting Hat and then told Harry the series of twists and turns that would take him where he wanted to be. High enough in Hogwarts that the castle shouldn't have been that tall, high enough in Hogwarts that nobody looking from the outside would see a piece of castle corresponding to where Harry now sat. It seemed like an elementary precaution against snipers that there was no reason not to take.

Though, on the flip side, Harry had no idea where he currently was in any real sense. If his office couldn't be seen from the lands below, then how was Harry seeing the lands, how were photons making it from the landscape to him? On the western side of the horizon, stars still glittered, clear in the pre-dawn air. Were those photons the actual photons that had been emitted by huge plasma furnaces in the unimaginable distance? Or did Harry now sit within some dreaming vision of the Hogwarts castle? Or was it all, without any further explanation, 'just magic'? He needed to get electricity to work better around magic so he could experiment with shining lasers downward and upward.

And yes, Harry had his own office on Hogwarts now. He didn't have any official title yet, but the Boy-Who-Lived was now a true fixture of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the soon-to-be-home of the Philosopher's Stone and the world's only wizarding institution of genuinely higher education. It wasn't fully secured, but Professor Vector had put up some preliminary Charms and Runes to screen the office and its rooftop against eavesdropping.

Harry sat on his cushion, near the edge of his office's roof, and gazed down upon trees and lakes and flowering grass. Far below, carriages sat motionlessly, not yet harnessed to skeletal horses. Small boats littered the shore, prepared to ferry younger students across the lake when the time came. The Hogwarts Express had arrived overnight, and now the train cars and the huge old-fashioned engine awaited on the other side of the southern lake. All was ready to take the students home after the Leave-Taking Feast in the morning.

Harry stared across the lake, at the great old-fashioned locomotive he wouldn't be riding home this time. Again. There was a strange sadness and worry to that thought, like Harry was already starting to miss out on the bonding experiences with the other students his age – if you could say that at all, when a significant part of Harry had been born in 1926. It had felt to Harry, last night in the Ravenclaw common room, like the gap between him and the other students had, yes, widened even further. Though that might only have been from the questions Padma Patil and Anthony Goldstein had excitedly asked each other about the Girl-Who-Revived, the rapid-fire speculations shooting through the air from Ravenclaw to Ravenclaw. Harry had known the answers, he'd known all the answers, and he hadn't been able to say them.

There was a part of Harry that was tempted to go on the Hogwarts Express and then come back to Hogwarts by Floo. But when Harry imagined finding five other students for his compartment, and then spending the next eight hours keeping secrets from Neville or Padma or Dean or Tracey or Lavender... it didn't seem like an attractive prospect. Harry felt like he ought to do it for reasons of Socializing with the Other Children, but he did not want to do it. He could meet with everyone again at the start of the next school year, when there would be other topics of which he could speak more freely.

Harry stared south across the lake, at the huge old locomotive, and thought about the rest of his life.

About the Future.

The prophecy Dumbledore's letter had mentioned about him tearing apart the stars in heaven... well, that sounded optimistic. That part had an obvious interpretation to anyone who'd grown up with the right sort of upbringing. It described a future where humanity had won, more or less. It wasn't what Harry usually thought about when he gazed at the stars, but from a truly adult perspective, the stars were enormous heaps of valuable raw materials that had unfortunately caught fire and needed to be scattered and put out. If you were tapping the huge hydrogen-helium reservoirs for raw materials, that meant your species had successfully grown up.

Unless the prophecy had been referring to something else entirely. Dumbledore might have been misinterpreting some seer's words... but his message to Harry had been phrased as if there'd been a prophecy about Harry personally tearing apart stars, in the foreseeable future. Which seemed potentially more worrisome, though by no means certain to be true, or a bad thing if it was true...

Harry vented a sigh. He'd begun to understand, in the long hours before sleep had taken him last night, just what Dumbledore's last message implied.

Looking back on the events of the 1991-1992 Hogwarts school year was nothing short of bone-freezingly terrifying, now that Harry understood what he was seeing.

It wasn't just that Harry had kept the frequent company of his good friend Lord Voldemort. It wasn't even mostly that.

It was the vision of a narrow line of Time that Albus Dumbledore had steered through fate's narrow keyhole, a hair-thin strand of possibility threaded through a needle's eye.

The prophecies had instructed Dumbledore to have Tom Riddle's intelligence copied onto the brain of a wizarding infant who would then grow up learning Muggle science. What did it say about the likely shape of the Future, if that was the first or best strategy the seers could find that didn't lead to catastrophe?

Harry could look back now on the Unbreakable Vow that he'd made, and guess that if not for that Vow, disaster might have already been set in motion yesterday when Harry had wanted to tear down the International Statute of Secrecy. Which in turn strongly suggested that the many prophecies Dumbledore had read and whose instructions he'd followed, had somehow ensured that Harry and Voldemort would collide in exactly the right way to cause Voldemort to force Harry to make that Unbreakable Vow. That the Unbreakable Vow had been part of Time's narrow keyhole, one of the improbable preconditions for allowing the Earth's peoples to survive.

A Vow whose sole purpose was to protect everyone from Harry's current stupidity.

It was like watching a videotape of an almost-traffic-accident that had happened to you, where you remembered another car missing you by centimeters, and the video showing that somebody had also thrown a pebble in exactly the right way to cause an enormous lorry to miss that near-collision, and if they hadn't thrown that pebble then you and all your family in the automobile and your entire planet would have been hit by the lorry, which, in the metaphor, represented your own sheer obliviousness.

Harry had been warned, he'd known on some level or the Vow wouldn't have stopped him, and yet he'd still almost made the wrong choice and destroyed the world. Harry could look back now and see that, yes, the alternate-Harry with no Vow would've had trouble accepting the reasoning that said you couldn't get magical healing to Muggles as fast as possible. If the alternate-Harry had acknowledged the danger at all, he would have rationalized it, tried to figure out some clever way around the problem and refused to accept taking a few years longer to do it, and so the world would have ended. Even after all the warnings Harry had received, it still wouldn't have worked without the Unbreakable Vow.

One tiny strand of Time, being threaded through a needle's eye.

Harry didn't know how to handle this revelation. It wasn't a sort of situation that human beings had evolved emotions to handle. All Harry could do was stare at how close he had come to disaster, might come again to

disaster if that Vow was fated to trigger more than once, and think...

Think...

'I don't want that to happen again' didn't seem like the right thought. He'd never wanted to destroy the world in the first place. Harry hadn't lacked for protective feelings about Earth's sapient population, those protective feelings had been the problem in a way. What Harry had lacked was some element of clear vision, of being willing to consciously acknowledge what he'd already known deep down.

And the whole thing with Harry having spent the last year cozying up to the Defense Professor didn't speak highly of his intellect either. It seemed to point to the same problem, even. There were things Harry had known or strongly suspected on some level, but never promoted to conscious attention. And so he had failed and nearly died.

I need to raise the level of my game.

That was the thought Harry was looking for. He had to do better than this, become a less stupid person than this.

I need to raise the level of my game, or fail.

Dumbledore had destroyed the recordings in the Hall of Prophecy and arranged for no further recordings to be made. There'd apparently been a prophecy that said Harry mustn't look upon those prophecies. And the obvious next thought, which might or might not be true, was that saving the world was beyond the reach of prophetic instruction. That winning would take plans that were too complex for seers' messages, or that Divination couldn't see somehow. If there'd been some way for Dumbledore to save the world himself, then prophecy would probably have told Dumbledore how to do that. Instead the prophecies had told Dumbledore how to create the preconditions for a particular sort of person existing; a person, maybe, who could unravel a challenge more difficult than prophecy could solve directly. That was why Harry had been placed on his own, to think without prophetic guidance. If all Harry did was follow mysterious orders from prophecies, then he wouldn't mature into a person who could perform that unknown task.

And right now, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres was still a walking catastrophe who'd needed to be constrained by an Unbreakable Vow to prevent him from immediately setting the Earth on an inevitable course toward destruction when he'd already been warned against it. That had happened literally yesterday, just one day after he'd helped Voldemort almost

take over the planet.

A certain line from Tolkien kept running through Harry's mind, the part where Frodo upon Mount Doom put on the ring, and Sauron suddenly realized what a complete idiot he'd been. 'And the magnitude of his own folly was at last laid bare', or however that had gone.

There was a huge gap between who Harry needed to become, and who he was right now.

And Harry didn't think that time, life experience, and puberty would take care of that automatically, though they might help. Though if Harry could grow into an adult that was to this self what a normal adult was to a normal eleven-year-old, maybe that would be enough to steer through Time's narrow keyhole...

He had to grow up, somehow, and there was no traditional path laid out before him for accomplishing that.

The thought came then to Harry of another work of fiction, more obscure than Tolkien:

You can only arrive at mastery by practicing the techniques you have learned, facing challenges and apprehending them, using to the fullest the tools you have been taught, until they shatter in your hands and you are left in the midst of wreckage absolute... I cannot create masters. I have never known how to create masters. Go, then, and fail... You have been shaped into something that may emerge from the wreckage, determined to remake your Art. I cannot create masters, but if you had not been taught, your chances would be less. The higher road begins after the Art seems to fail you; though the reality will be that it was you who failed your Art.

It wasn't that Harry had gone down the wrong path, it wasn't that the road to sanity lay somewhere outside of science. But reading science papers hadn't been enough. All the cognitive psychology papers about known bugs in the human brain and so on had helped, but they hadn't been sufficient. He'd failed to reach what Harry was starting to realise was a shockingly high standard of being so incredibly, unbelievably rational that you actually started to get things right, as opposed to having a handy language in which to describe afterwards everything you'd just done wrong. Harry could look back now and apply ideas like 'motivated cognition' to see where he'd gone astray over the last year. That counted for something, when it came to being saner in the future. That was better than having no idea what he'd done wrong. But that wasn't yet being the person who could pass through Time's narrow

keyhole, the adult form whose possibility Dumbledore had been instructed by seers to create.

I need to think faster, grow up faster... How alone am I, how alone will I be? Am I making the same mistake I made during Professor Quirrell's first battle, when I didn't realise Hermione had captains? The mistake I made when I didn't tell Dumbledore about the sense of doom, once I realised Dumbledore probably wasn't mad or evil?

It would help if Muggles had classes for this sort of thing, but they didn't. Maybe Harry could recruit Daniel Kahneman, fake his death, rejuvenate him with the Stone, and put him in charge of inventing better training methods...

Harry took the Elder Wand out of his robes, gazed again at the dark-grey wood that Dumbledore had passed down to him. Harry had tried to think faster this time, he'd tried to complete the pattern implied by the Cloak of Invisibility and the Resurrection Stone. The Cloak of Invisibility had possessed the legendary power of hiding the wearer, and the hidden power of allowing the wearer to hide from Death itself in the form of Dementors. The Resurrection Stone had the legendary power of summoning an image of the dead, and then Voldemort had incorporated it into his horcrux system to allow his spirit to move freely. The second Deathly Hallow was a potential component of a system of true immortality that Cadmus Peverell had never completed, maybe due to his having ethics.

And then there was the third Deathly Hallow, the Elder Wand of Antioch Peverell, that legend said passed from wizard to stronger wizard, and made its holder invincible against ordinary attacks; that was the known and overt characteristic...

The Elder Wand that had belonged to Dumbledore, who'd been trying to prevent the Death of the world itself.

The purpose of the Elder Wand always going to the victor might be to find the strongest living wizard and empower them still further, in case there was any threat to their entire species; it could secretly be a tool to defeat Death in its form as the destroyer of worlds.

But if there was some higher power locked within the Elder Wand, it had not presented itself to Harry based on that guess. Harry had raised up the Elder Wand and spoken to it, named himself a descendant of Peverell who accepted his family's quest; he'd promised the Elder Wand that he would do his best to save the world from Death, and take up Dumbledore's duty. And the Elder Wand had answered no more strongly to his hand than before,

refusing his attempt to jump ahead in the story. Maybe Harry needed to strike his first true blow against the Death of worlds before the Elder Wand would acknowledge him; as the heir of Ignotus Peverell had already defeated Death's shadow, and the heir of Cadmus Peverell had already survived the Death of his body, when their respective Deathly Hallows had revealed their secrets.

At least Harry had managed to guess that, contrary to legend, the Elder Wand didn't contain a core of 'Thestral hair'. Harry had seen Thestrals, and they were skeletal horses with smooth skin and no visible mane on their skull-like heads, nor tufts on their bony tails. But what core was truly inside the Elder Wand, Harry hadn't yet felt himself knowing; nor had he been able to find, anywhere on the Elder Wand, the circle-triangle-line of the Deathly Hallows that should have been present.

"I don't suppose," Harry murmured to the Elder Wand, "you could just tell me?"

There came back no answer from the globe-knobbed wand; only a sense of glory and contained power, watching him skeptically.

Harry sighed, and put the most powerful wand in the world back into his school robes. He'd get it eventually, and hopefully in time.

Maybe faster, if there was someone to help him do the research.

Harry was aware on some level – no, he needed to stop being aware of things on some level and start just being aware of them – Harry was explicitly and consciously aware that he was ruminating about the Future mostly to distract himself from the imminent arrival of Hermione Granger. Who would receive a clear bill of health from St. Mungo's, when she woke up very early this morning, and who would then Floo with Professor Flitwick back to Hogwarts. Whereupon she'd tell Professor Flitwick that she needed to speak with Harry Potter immediately. There'd been a note from Harry to himself about that, when Harry had woken up later this morning with the sun already risen in the Ravenclaw dorm. He'd read the note, and then Time-Turned back to before the dawn hour when Hermione Granger would arrive.

She won't actually be angry with me.

...

Seriously. Hermione isn't that kind of person. Maybe she was at the start of the year but she's too self-aware to fall for that one now.

...

What do you mean, ‘...’? If you have something to say, inner voice, just say it! We’re trying to be more aware of our own thought processes, remember?



The sky had gone full blue-gray, dawn barely short of sunrise, by the time that Harry heard the sound of footsteps coming from the ladder that opened into his new office. Hastily Harry stood up and began to brush off his robes; and then, realising what he was doing, stopped the nervous motions. He’d just defeated Voldemort, damn it, he ought not to be this nervous.

The young witch’s head and chestnut curls appeared in the opening and peered around. Then she rose up higher, seemed almost to run up the ladder steps, like she was walking along an ordinary sidewalk but vertically; Harry could have blinked and missed it, how her one shoe came down on the top rung of the ladder and then she leaped lightly onto the roof an instant later.

Hermione. Harry’s lips moved around the word, but made no sound.

There’d been something Harry had meant to say, but it had gone right out of his mind.

Maybe a quarter of the minute passed, on the rooftop, before Hermione Granger spoke. She was wearing a blue-edged uniform now, and the blue-bronze-striped tie of her proper House.

“Harry,” said Hermione Granger, a terribly familiar voice that almost brought tears to Harry’s eyes, “before I ask you all the questions, I’d like to start by saying thank you very much for, um, whatever it is you did. I mean it, really. Thank you.”

“Hermione,” Harry said, and swallowed. The phrase may I have permission to hug you, which Harry had imagined using for his opening line, seemed impossible to say. “Welcome back. Hold on while I put up some privacy spells.” Harry took the Elder Wand out of his robes, got a book from his pouch that he opened to a bookmark, and then carefully pronounced “Homenum Revelio,” along with two other recently-acquired security Charms that Harry had found himself barely able to cast if he wielded the Elder Wand. It wasn’t much, but it was marginally better security than just relying on Professor Vector.

“You have Dumbledore’s wand,” Hermione said. Her voice was hushed, and sounded as loud as an avalanche in the still dawn air. “And you can use it to cast fourth-year spells?”

Harry nodded, making a mental note to be more careful who else saw him do that. "Is it okay if I hug you?"

Hermione moved lightly over to him; her movements were peculiarly swift, more graceful than they'd been before. Her motions seemed to radiate an air of something pure and untouched, reminding Harry again of how peaceful Hermione had looked when she was sleeping on Voldemort's altar –

Realization hit Harry like a ton of bricks, or at least a kilogram of brick.

And Harry hugged Hermione, feeling how very alive she seemed. He felt like crying, and suppressed it, because he didn't know whether that was just her aura affecting him or not.

Hermione's arms around him were gentle, exceedingly light in their pressure, as if she were being deliberately careful not to snap his body in half like a used toothpick.

"So," Hermione said, once Harry had let go of her. Her young face looked very serious, as well as pure and innocent. "I didn't tell the Aurors you were there, or that it was Professor Quirrell and not You-Know-Who who killed all the Death Eaters. Professor Flitwick only let them give me one drop of Veritaserum, so I didn't have to say. I just told them the troll was the last thing I remembered."

"Ah," Harry said. He had somehow found himself staring at Hermione's nose instead of her eyes. "What do you think happened, exactly?"

"Well," Hermione Granger said consideringly, "I got eaten by a troll, which I'd frankly rather not do again, and then there was a really loud bang and my legs were back, and I was lying on a stone altar in the middle of a graveyard in a dark moonlit forest I'd never seen before, with somebody's severed hands clutched around my throat. So you see, Mr. Potter, finding myself in a situation that weird and dark and scary, I wasn't going to make the same mistake I did last time with Tracey. I knew right away that it was you."

Harry nodded. "Good call."

"I said your name, but you didn't answer," said Hermione. "I sat up and one of the bloody hands slid down over my shirt, leaving little bits of flesh behind. I didn't scream though, even when I looked around and saw all the heads and bodies and realized what the smell was." Hermione stopped, took another deep breath. "I saw the skull masks and realized that the dead people had been Death Eaters. I knew right away that the Defense Professor had been there with you and killed them all, but I didn't notice Professor Quirrell's body was also there. I didn't realize it was him even when I saw

Professor Flitwick checking the body. He looked... different, when he was dead.” Hermione’s voice became quieter. She looked humbled somehow, in a way Harry couldn’t often remember seeing. “They said David Monroe sacrificed his life to bring me back, the same way your mother sacrificed herself for you, so that the Dark Lord would explode again when he tried to touch me. I’m pretty sure that’s not the whole truth, but... I’ve thought a lot of nasty things about our Defense Professor that I never should’ve thought.”

“Um,” Harry said.

Hermione nodded solemnly, her hands clasped in front of her as though in penitence. “I know you’re probably too nice to say the things to me that you have a right to say now, so I’ll say them for you, Harry. You were right about Professor Quirrell, and I was wrong. You told me so. David Monroe was a little bit Dark and a whole lot Slytherin, and it was childish of me to think that was the same thing as being evil.”

“Ah...” Harry said. This was very hard to say. “Actually, the rest of the world doesn’t know this part, not even the Headmistress. But in point of fact you were one hundred and twelve percent correct about him being evil, and I’ll remember for future reference that although ‘Dark’ and ‘evil’ may not technically be the same thing, there’s a great big statistical correlation.”

“Oh,” said Hermione, and fell silent again.

“You’re not saying that you told me so?” said Harry. His mental model of Hermione was yelling: I TOLD YOU SO! DIDN’T I TELL YOU SO, MR. POTTER? DIDN’T I TELL YOU? PROFESSOR QUIRRELL IS EEEEEVIL, I SAID, BUT YOU DIDN’T LISTEN TO ME!

The actual Hermione just shook her head. “I know you cared about him a lot,” she said softly. “Since I was right after all... I knew you’d probably be hurting a lot after Professor Quirrell turned out to be evil, and that it wouldn’t be a good time to say I told you so. I mean, that’s what I decided when I was thinking that part through several months earlier.”

Thank you, Miss Granger. Harry was glad she’d said that much, though, it just wouldn’t have felt like Hermione otherwise.

“So, Mr. Potter,” said Hermione Granger, tapping her fingers on her robe at around thigh level. “After the medi-witch drew my blood, it stopped hurting right away, and when I brushed away the little bit of blood on my arm, I couldn’t find where the needle had poked me. I bent some of the metal in my bedframe without trying hard, and though I haven’t had a chance to test it yet, I feel like I should be able to run really fast. My fingernails are

pearly-white and shiny even though I don't remember painting them. And my teeth look like that too, which, being the daughter of dentists, makes me nervous. So it's not that I'm ungrateful, but just what exactly did you do?"

"Um," Harry said. "And I'm expecting you're also wondering why you're radiating an aura of purity and innocence?"

"I'm WHAT?"

"That part wasn't my idea. Honestly." Harry's voice went small. "Please don't kill me."

Hermione Granger raised her hands in front of her face, staring somewhat cross-eyed at her fingers. "Harry, are you saying... I mean, my radiating innocence and being all fast and graceful and my teeth being pearly white... is it alicorn my fingernails are made of?"

"Alicorn?"

"It's the term for unicorn horn, Mr. Potter." Hermione Granger seemed to be trying to nibble her fingernails, and not having much luck. "So, I guess if you bring a girl back from the dead she ends up as, what did Daphne call it, a Sparkling Unicorn Princess?"

"That's not exactly what happened," Harry said, though it was frighteningly close.

Hermione took her finger out of her mouth, frowning at it. "I can't bite through it either. Mr. Potter, did you consider the problems now that it's literally impossible for me to trim my fingernails and toenails?"

"The Weasley twins have a magical sword that should work," Harry volunteered.

"I think," Hermione Granger said firmly, "that I would like to know the whole story behind all this, Mr. Potter. Because knowing you and knowing Professor Quirrell, there was some sort of plan going on."

Harry took a deep breath. Then he exhaled. "Sorry, it's... classified. I could tell you if you studied Occlumency, but... do you want to?"

"Do I want to study Occlumency?" Hermione said, looking slightly surprised. "That's at least a sixth-year thing, isn't it?"

"I learned it," Harry said. "I started with an unusual boost, but I doubt that really mattered in the long run. I mean, I'm sure you could learn calculus if you studied hard, regardless of what age Muggles usually learn it. The question is, um." Harry was having to control his breathing. "The question is, do you still want to do... that kind of stuff."

Hermione turned, and looked at where the sky was lightening in the east. "You mean," she said quietly, "do I still want to be a hero now that it's earned me a horrible death that one time."

Harry nodded, then said "Yes" because Hermione wasn't turning toward him, though the word felt blocked in his throat.

"I've been thinking about that," Hermione said. "It was, in fact, an exceptionally gruesome and painful death."

"I, um. I did set some things up just in case you still wanted to be a hero. There were some short windows of opportunity where I didn't have time to consult you, I couldn't let you see me because I expected you to be given Veritaserum later. But if you don't like it, I can undo most of what I did and you can just ignore the rest."

Hermione nodded distantly. "Like making everyone think that I... Harry, did I actually do anything to You-Know-Who?"

"No, that was all me, though please don't tell anyone that. Just so you know, that time the Boy-Who-Lived supposedly defeated Voldemort, on the night of Halloween in 1981, that was Dumbledore's victory and he let everyone think it was me. So now I've defeated a Dark Lord once, and gotten credit for it once. It all balances out eventually, I guess."

Hermione went on gazing to the east. "I'm not really comfortable with this," she said after a while. "People thinking I defeated the Dark Lord Voldemort, when I haven't done anything at all... oh, that's the same thing you went through, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Sorry about inflicting that on you. I was... well, I was trying to create a separate identity for you in people's minds, I guess. There was just the one opportunity and everything was sort of rushed and... I realized afterwards that maybe I shouldn't have, but it was too late." Harry cleared his throat. "Though, um. If you're feeling like you want to do something that's actually worthy of the way people think about the Girl-Who-Revived, um. I might have an idea for what you can do. Very soon, if you want."

Hermione Granger was giving him a look.

"But you don't have to!" Harry said hastily. "You can just ignore this whole thing and be the best student in Ravenclaw! If that's what you prefer."

"Are you trying to use reverse psychology on me, Mr. Potter?"

"No! Honestly!" Harry took a deep breath. "I'm trying not to decide your life for you. I thought I saw, yesterday, I thought I saw what might come next for you – but then I remembered how much of this year I'd spent being a total

idiot. I thought of some things Dumbledore said to me. I realized it genuinely wasn't my place to say. That you could do anything you wanted with your life, and that above all, the choice had to be your own. Maybe you don't want to be a hero after this, maybe you want to become a great magical researcher because that's who Hermione Granger really was all along, never mind what your fingernails are made out of now. Or you could go to the Salem Witches' Institute in America instead of Hogwarts. I won't lie and say I'd like that, but it really is up to you." Harry turned to the horizon and swept his hand wide, as though to indicate all the world that lay beyond Hogwarts. "You can go anywhere from here. You can do anything with your life. If you want to be a wealthy sixty-year-old merman, I can make it happen. I'm serious."

Hermione nodded slowly. "I'm curious about how you'd do that exactly, but what I want isn't to have things done for me."

Harry sighed. "I understand. Um..." Harry hesitated. "I think... if it helps you to know... in my case, things were being arranged for me a lot. By Dumbledore, mostly, though Professor Quirrell too. Maybe the power to earn your own way in life is itself something you have to earn."

"Why, that sounds very wise," Hermione said. "Like having my parents pay for me to go to university, so I can someday get my own job. Professor Quirrell bringing me back to life as a Sparkling Unicorn Princess and you telling everyone that I offed the Dark Lord Voldemort is just like that, really."

"I am sorry," Harry said. "I know I should've done it differently, but... I didn't have much time to plan and I was exhausted and not really thinking straight –"

"I'm grateful, Harry," Hermione said, her voice softer now. "You're being too harsh on yourself, even. Please don't take it so seriously when I'm snarky at you. I don't want to be the sort of girl who comes back from the dead, and then starts complaining about which superpowers she got and that her alicorn fingernails are the wrong shade of pearly white." Hermione had turned, was again gazing off at the east. "But, Mr. Potter... if I do decide that dying a horrible death isn't enough to make me rethink my life choices... not that I'm saying that just yet... then what happens next?"

"I do my best to support you in your life choices," Harry said firmly. "Whatever they are."

"You have a quest already lined up for me, I'm guessing. A nice safe quest where there's no chance of my getting hurt again."

Harry rubbed his eyes, feeling tired inside. It was like he could hear

the voice of Albus Dumbledore inside his head. Forgive me, Hermione Granger... "I'm sorry, Hermione. If you go down that path I'm going to have to Dumbledore you, and not tell you some things. Manipulate you, if only for a short while. I do believe there's something you might be able to do now, something real, something worthy of the way people are thinking about the Girl-Who-Revived... that you might have a destiny, even... but in the end that's just a guess, I know a lot less than Dumbledore did. Are you willing to risk the life you just got back?"

Hermione turned to look at him, her eyes widening in surprise. "Risk my life?"

Harry didn't nod, because that would have been outright lying. "Are you willing to do that?" Harry said instead. "The quest that I think might be your destiny – and no, I don't know any specific prophecies, it's just a guess – involves literal descent-into-Hell type stuff."

"I thought..." Hermione said. She sounded uncertain. "I thought for sure that after this, you and Professor McGonagall wouldn't... you know... let me do anything the least bit dangerous ever again."

Harry said nothing, feeling guilty about the false relationship credit he was getting. It was in fact the case that Hermione was modeling him with tremendous accuracy, and that if not for Hermione having a horcrux, the surface of the planet Venus would have dropped to fractional-Kelvin temperatures before Harry tried this.

"On a scale of zero to a hundred, how literal a descent into Hell are we talking about here?" said Hermione. The girl now looked a bit worried.

Harry mentally calibrated his scales, remembering Azkaban. "I'd say maybe eighty-seven?"

"This sounds like something I should do when I'm older, Harry. There's a difference between being a hero and being a complete lunatic."

Harry shook his head. "I don't think the risk would change much," Harry said, leaving aside the question of how much risk that really was, "and it's the sort of thing that's better done sooner, if someone does it at all."

"And my parents don't get a vote," Hermione said. "Or do they?"

Harry shrugged. "We both know how they'd vote, and you can take that into account if you like. Um, I said for Dr. and Dr. Granger not to be told yet that you're alive. They'll find out after you come back from your mission, if you choose to accept it. That seems a bit... kinder on your parents' nerves, they just get the one pleasant surprise, instead of having to worry about, um,

stuff.”

“Why, that’s very thoughtful of you,” Hermione said. “It’s nice that you’re so concerned about their feelings. May I think about this for a few minutes, please?”

Harry gestured toward the cushion he’d set down opposite his own, and Hermione moved over with fluid grace, and sat down to look out over the castle-edge, still radiating peacefulness all over the place. They’d really need to do something about that, maybe pay someone to invent an Anti-Purity Potion.

“Do I have to decide without knowing what the mission is?” Hermione asked.

“Oh hell no,” Harry said, thinking of a similar conversation before his own trip to Azkaban. “This is the sort of thing you have to choose freely if you do it at all. I mean that’s an actual mission requirement. If you say that you still want to be a hero, I’ll tell you afterwards about the mission – after you’ve had some time to eat and talk to people and recover a bit – and you’ll decide then if it’s something you want to do. And we’ll test in advance whether returning from death has allowed you to cast the spell that normal wizards think is impossible, before you go out.”

Hermione nodded, and fell back into silence.

The sky had lightened further by the time Hermione spoke again.

“I’m afraid,” Hermione said, almost in a whisper. “Not of dying again, or not just that. I’m afraid I won’t be good enough. I had my chance to defeat a troll, and instead I just died –”

“That was a troll empowered by Voldemort as a weapon, plus he sabotaged all your magic items, just so you know.”

“I died. And you killed the troll, somehow, I think I remember that part, it didn’t even slow you down.” Hermione wasn’t crying, no tears glistened on her cheeks, she simply gazed off at the lightening sky where the Sun would rise. “And then you brought me back from the dead as a Sparkling Unicorn Princess. I know I couldn’t have done that. I’m afraid I’ll never be able to do that, no matter what people think about me.”

“This situation is where your journey begins, I think –” Harry paused. “Excuse me, I shouldn’t be trying to influence your decision.”

“No,” Hermione whispered, still gazing at the hills below her. She raised her voice. “No, Harry, I want to hear this.”

“Okay. Um. I think this is where you start. Everything that’s happened up until now... it places you in the same place I started out in September, when I’d thought of myself as just being a child prodigy before, and then I found something new I needed to live up to. If you weren’t comparing yourself to me and my,” adult cognitive patterns copied off Tom Riddle, “dark side... then you’d be the brightest star of Ravenclaw, who organized her own company to fight school bullies and kept her sanity under assault by Voldemort, all while she was only twelve years old. I looked it up, you got better grades than Dumbledore did in his first year.” Leaving aside the Defense grade, because that was just Voldemort being Voldemort. “Now you have some powers, and a reputation to live up to, and the world is about to hand you some difficult tasks. That’s where it all begins for you, the same as it began for me. Don’t sell yourself short.” And then Harry shut his mouth hard, because he was talking Hermione into it and that wasn’t right. He’d at least managed to stop before the part where he asked, if she couldn’t be a hero with all that going for her, who exactly she thought was going to do it.

“You know,” Hermione said to the horizon, still not looking at Harry, “I had a conversation like this with Professor Quirrell, once, about being a hero. He was taking the other side, of course. But apart from that, this is feeling like when he argued with me, somehow.”

Harry kept his lips pressed shut. Letting people make their own decisions was hard, because it meant they were allowed to make the wrong ones, but it still had to be done.

Hermione spoke carefully, the blue fringes of her Hogwarts uniform now seeming brighter against her black robes as the sky all around them became illuminated; there were no more stars in the west. “Professor Quirrell told me, he said he’d been a hero once. But people weren’t helping him enough, so he gave up and went off to do something more interesting. I told Professor Quirrell that it hadn’t been right for him to do that – what I actually said was ‘that’s horrible’. Professor Quirrell said that, yes, maybe he was an awful person, but then what about all the other people who’d never tried to be heroes at all? Were they even worse than him? And I didn’t know what to say back. I mean, it’s wrong to say that only Gryffindor-style heroes are good people – though I think from Professor Quirrell’s perspective it was more like only people with big ambitions had a right to breathe. And I didn’t believe that. But it also seemed wrong to stop being a hero, to walk away like he’d done. So I just stood there looking silly. But now I know what I

should've told him back then."

Harry controlled his breathing.

Hermione stood up from her cushion, and turned to face Harry. "I'm done with trying to be a heroine," said Hermione Granger with the eastern sky brightening around her. "I shouldn't ever have gone along with that entire line of thinking. There are just people who do what they can, whatever they can. And there are also people who don't even try to do what they can, and yes, those people are doing something wrong. I'm not ever going to try to be a hero again. I'm not going to think in heroic terms if I can help it. But I won't do any less than I can – or not a lot less, I mean, I'm only human." Harry had never understood what was supposed to be mysterious about the Mona Lisa, but if he could have taken a picture of Hermione's resigned/joyous smile just then, he had the sense that he could have looked at it for hours without understanding, and that Dumbledore could have read through it at a glance. "I won't learn my lesson. I will be that stupid. I'll go on trying to do most of what I can, or at least some of what I can – oh, you know what I mean. Even if it means risking my life again, so long as it's worth the risk and isn't being, you know, actually stupid. That's my answer." Hermione took a deep breath, her face resolute. "So, is there something I can do?"

Harry's throat was choked. He reached into his pouch, and signed C-L-O-A-K since he couldn't speak, and drew forth the fuliginous spill of the Cloak of Invisibility, offering it to Hermione for the last time. Harry had to force the words from his throat. "This is the True Cloak of Invisibility," Harry said in almost a whisper, "the Deathly Hallow passed down from Ignotus Peverell to his heirs, the Potters. And now to you –"

"Harry!" Hermione said. Her hands flew up across her chest, as though to protect herself from the attacking gift. "You don't have to do this!"

"I do have to do this. I've left the part of the path that lets me be a hero, I can't risk myself adventuring, ever. And you... can." Harry reached up the hand that wasn't holding the Cloak, and wiped at his eyes. "This was made for you, I think. For the person you're going to become." A weapon to fight Death, in its form as the shadow of despair that falls on human minds and drains away their hope for the future; you will fight that, I expect, in more forms than just Dementors... "I do not loan you, my Cloak, but give you, unto Hermione Jean Granger. Protect her well forevermore."

Slowly, Hermione reached out, and took hold of the Cloak, looking like she was trying not to cry herself. "Thank you," she whispered. "I think... even

though I'm done with the notion of heroing... I think that you always were, from the day I met you, my mysterious old wizard."

"And I think," Harry said, his own throat half-closed, "even if you deny that way of thinking now, I think that you were always destined to become, from the very beginning of the story, the hero." Who must Hermione Granger become, what adult form must she take when she grows up, to pass through Time's narrow keyhole? I don't know the answer to that either, any more than I can imagine my own adult self. But her next few steps ahead seem clearer than mine...

Harry let the Cloak go, and it passed from his hands to hers.

"It sings," Hermione said. "It's singing to me." She reached up, and wiped at her own eyes. "I can't believe you did that, Harry."

Harry's other hand came out of his pouch, now bearing a long golden chain, at the end of which dangled a closed golden shell. "And this is your personal time machine."

There was a pause, during which the planet Earth rotated a bit further in its orbit.

"What?" said Hermione.

"A Time-Turner, they call it. Hogwarts has a stock they give out to some students, I got one at the start of the year to treat my sleep disorder. It lets the user go backwards in time, in up to six one-hour increments, which I used to get six extra hours per day to study. And to vanish out of Potions class and so on. Don't worry, a Time-Turner can't change history or generate paradoxes that destroy the universe."

"You were keeping up with me in lessons by studying six extra hours per day using a time machine." Hermione Granger seemed to be having trouble with this concept for some unaccountable reason.

Harry made his face look puzzled. "Is there something odd about that?"

Hermione reached out and took the golden necklace. "I guess not by wizard standards," she said. For some reason her voice sounded rather sharp. She arranged the chain around her neck, placing the hourglass inside her shirt. "I do feel better now about keeping up with you, though, so thank you for that."

Harry cleared his throat. "Also, since Voldemort wiped out the House of Monroe and then, so far as everyone believes, you avenged them by killing Voldemort, I got Amelia Bones to railroad a bill through what's left of the Wizengamot, saying that Granger is now a Noble House of Britain."

“Excuse me?” said Hermione.

“That also makes you the only scion of a Noble House, which means that to get your legal majority you just need to pass your Ordinary Wizarding Levels, which I’ve set us up to do at the end of the summer so we’ll have some time to study first. If you’re okay with that, I mean.”

Hermione Granger was making some sort of high-pitched noise that would, in a less organic device, have indicated an engine malfunction. “I have two months to study for my O.W.L.s.?”

“Hermione, it’s a test designed so that most fifteen-year-olds can pass. Ordinary fifteen year-olds. We can get a passing grade with a low third-year’s power level if we learn the right set of spells, and that’s all we need for our majorities. Though you’ll need to come to terms with getting Acceptable scores instead of your usual Outstandings.”

The high-pitched noises coming from Hermione Granger rose in pitch.

“Here’s your wand back.” Harry took it from his pouch. “And your mokeskin pouch, I made sure they put back everything that was there when you died.” That pouch Harry withdrew from a normal pocket of his robes, since he was reluctant to put a bag of holding inside a bag of holding no matter what was supposed to be harmless so long as both devices had been crafted observing all safety precautions.

Hermione took her wand back, and then her pouch, the motions somehow managing to look graceful even though her fingers were a bit shaky.

“Let’s see, what else... the oath you swore before to House Potter only said you had to serve until ‘the day you die’, so you’re now free and clear. And right after your death I got the Malfoys to publicly declare that you were innocent of all charges in Draco’s attempted murder.”

“Why, thank you again, Harry,” said Hermione Granger. “That was very nice of you, and them too, I guess.” She was repeatedly running her fingers through her chestnut curls, as though, by organizing her hair, she could restore sanity to her life.

“Last but not least, I had the goblins start the process of building a vault in Gringotts for House Granger,” Harry said. “I didn’t put any money into it, because that was something where I could wait and ask you first. But if you’re going to be a superhero who goes around righting certain kinds of wrongs, it will help a lot if people consider you to be part of the upper social strata and, um, I think it may help if they know you can afford lawyers. I can put in as much gold into your vault as you want, since after Voldemort killed

Nicholas Flamel, I ended up holding the Philosopher's Stone."

"I feel like I ought to be fainting," Hermione said in a high-pitched voice, "only I can't because of my superpowers and why do I have those again?"

"If it's all right with you, your Occlumency lessons will start on Wednesday with Mr. Bester, he can work with you once per day. Until then, I think it might be better for the true origin of your powers not to become known just because a Legilimens looks you in the eyes. I mean, obviously there's a normal magical explanation, nothing super-supernatural, but people do tend to worship their own ignorance and, well, I think the Girl-Who-Revived will be more effective if you remain mysterious. Once you can keep out Mr. Bester and beat Veritaserum, I'll tell you the entire backstory, I promise, including all the secrets you can never tell anyone else."

"That sounds lovely," said Hermione Granger. "I'm quite looking forward to it."

"Though you'll need to take an Unbreakable Vow to not do anything that might destroy the world before I can tell you the more dangerous parts of the story. I mean, I literally can't tell you otherwise, because I took an Unbreakable Vow myself. Is that okay?"

"Sure," said Hermione. "Why shouldn't it be okay? I wouldn't want to destroy the world anyhow."

"Do you need to sit down again?" Harry said, feeling alarmed by the way Hermione was swaying slightly, as though in rhythm with the words being spoken.

Hermione Granger took several deep breaths. "No, I'm perfectly peachy," she said. "Is there anything else I should know about?"

"That was it. I'm finished, at least for now." Harry paused. "I do understand that you want to do things for yourself, not just have them done for you. It's just... you're going to be a more serious kind of hero, and the only sane choice is for me to give you all the advantages I can manage –"

"I understand that quite well," Hermione said. "Now that I've actually lost a fight and died. I didn't used to understand, but now I do." A breeze ruffled Hermione's chestnut hair and stirred her robes, making her look even more peaceful in the dawn air, as she raised one hand and carefully clenched it into a fist. "If I'm going to do this, I'm going to do it right. We need to measure how hard I can punch, and how high I can jump, and figure out a safe way to test if my fingernails can kill Lethifolds like a real unicorn's horn, and I should practice using my speed to dodge spells I can't let hit me and..."

and it sounds like you could maybe arrange for me to get Auror training, like from whoever taught Susan Bones.” Hermione was smiling again now, a strange light in her eyes that would’ve puzzled Dumbledore for hours and that Harry understood immediately, not without a twinge of apprehension. “Oh! And I want to start carrying Muggle weapons, maybe hidden so nobody knows I have them. I thought of incendiary grenades when I was fighting the troll, but I knew I couldn’t Transfigure them fast enough, even after I stopped caring about obeying the rules.”

“I have the feeling,” Harry said, imitating Professor McGonagall’s Scottish accent as best he could, “that I ought to be doing something about this.”

“Oh, it’s much, much, MUCH too late for that, Mr. Potter. Say, can you get me a bazooka? The rocket launcher, I mean, not the chewing gum? I bet they won’t be expecting that from a young girl, especially if I’m radiating an aura of innocence and purity.”

“All right,” Harry said calmly, “now you’re starting to scare me.”

Hermione paused from where she was experimenting with balancing on the tip of her left shoe, her arm reaching in one direction and her right leg stretched in the other, like a ballet dancer. “Am I? I was just thinking that I didn’t see what I could do that a Ministry squad of Hit Wizards couldn’t. They have broomsticks for mobility and spells that hit harder than I possibly could.” She gracefully lowered her leg back down. “I mean, now that I can try a few things without worrying about who’s watching, I’m starting to think that I really really really like having superpowers. But I still don’t see how I could win a fight that Professor Flitwick couldn’t, not unless it involves me taking a Dark Wizard by surprise.”

You can take risks other people shouldn’t, and try again with the knowledge of what killed you. You can experiment with new spells, more than anyone else could try without dying for sure. But Harry couldn’t say any of that yet, so instead he said, “I think it’s okay to think more about the future, not just what you can do this very minute.”

Hermione jumped high in the air, clicked her heels together three times on the way down, and landed on her tiptoes, perfectly posed. “But you said there was something I could do right away. Or were you just testing?”

“That part is a special case,” Harry said, feeling the chill of the dawn air against his skin. He was increasingly not looking forward to telling super-Hermione that her Ordeal would involve facing her literal worst nightmare, under conditions where all her newfound physical strength would be useless.

Hermione nodded, then glanced to the east. At once she went to the side of the roof and sat down, her feet dangling over the rooftop ledge. Harry went to her side and sat down too, sitting crosslegged and further back of the roof-edge.

In the distance, a brilliant tinge of red was rising above the hills to the east of Hogwarts.

Watching the tip of the sunrise made Harry feel better, somehow. So long as the Sun was in the sky, things were still all right on some level, like his having not yet destroyed the Sun.

"So," Hermione said. Her voice rose a bit. "Speaking of the future, Harry. I had time to think about a lot of things while I was waiting in St. Mungo's, and... maybe it's silly of me, but there's a question I still want to know the answer to. Do you remember the last thing we talked about together? Before, I mean?"

"What?" Harry said blankly.

"Oh..." Hermione said. "It was two months ago for you... I guess you don't recall, then."

And Harry remembered.

"Don't panic!" Hermione said, as a sort of strangled half-gurgle came from Harry's throat. "I promise no matter what you say, I won't burst into tears and run away and get eaten by a troll again! I know it's been less than two days for me, but I think that dying has made a lot of things I used to fret about seem much less important compared to what I've been through!"

"Oh," Harry said, his own voice now high-pitched. "That's a good use of a major trauma, I guess?"

"Only, see, I was still wondering about it, Harry, because for me it hasn't been very long at all since our last conversation, and we didn't finish talking which was admittedly all my own fault for losing control of my emotions and then being eaten by a troll which I am definitely not going to do again. I've been thinking I ought to reassure you that's not going to happen every time you say the wrong thing to a girl." Hermione was fidgeting, leaning from one side to the other where she sat, slightly back and forth. "But, well, even most people who are in love don't do literally one hundredth of what you've done for me. So, Mr. Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, if it's not love, I want to know exactly what I am to you. You never said."

"That's a good question," Harry said, controlling the rising panic. "Do you mind if I think about it?"

Bit by bit, more of the searingly brilliant circle became visible beyond the hills.

“Hermione,” Harry said when the Sun was halfway above the horizon, “did you ever invent any hypotheses to explain my mysterious dark side?”

“Just the obvious one,” Hermione said, kicking her legs slightly over the rooftop’s edge. “I thought maybe when You-Know-Who died right next to you, he happened to give off the burst of magic that makes a ghost, and some of it imprinted on your brain instead of the floor. But that never felt right to me, like it was just a clever explanation that wasn’t actually true, and it makes even less sense if You-Know-Who didn’t really die that night.”

“Good enough,” Harry said. “Let’s imagine that scenario for now.” His inner rationalist was looking back and facepalming again at how he’d managed to not-think-about hypotheses like that one. It wasn’t true but it was reasonable and Harry had never thought of any causal model that concrete, just vaguely suspected a connection.

Hermione nodded. “You probably know this already, but I just thought I’d say it to be sure: You’re not Voldemort, Harry.”

“I know. And that’s what you mean to me.” Harry took a breath, finding it still painful to say aloud. “Voldemort... he wasn’t a happy person. I don’t know if he was ever happy, a single day in his life.” He never could cast the Patronus Charm. “That’s one reason his cognitive patterns didn’t take me over, my dark side didn’t feel like a good place to be, it didn’t get positively reinforced. Being friends with you means that my life doesn’t have to go the way Voldemort’s did. And I was pretty lonely before Hogwarts, although I didn’t realise it then, so... yeah. I might’ve been slightly more desperate to bring you back from the dead than the average boy my age would’ve been. Though I also maintain that my decision was strictly normative moral reasoning, and if other people care less about their friends, that’s their problem, not mine.”

“I see,” Hermione said softly. She hesitated. “Harry, don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m not one hundred percent comfortable with that. It’s a big responsibility that I didn’t choose, and I don’t think it’s healthy for you to lay it on just one person.”

Harry nodded. “I know. But there’s more to the point I’m trying to make. There was a prophecy about my vanquishing Voldemort –”

“A prophecy? There was a prophecy about you? Seriously, Harry?”

“Yeah, I know. Anyway, part of it went, ‘And the Dark Lord shall mark him as his equal, but he shall have power the Dark Lord knows not.’ What

would you guess that meant?"

"Hmmm," Hermione said. Her fingers tapped thoughtfully on the roof's stone. "Your mysterious dark side is You-Know-Who's mark on you that made you his equal. The power he knew not... was the scientific method, right?"

Harry shook his head. "That's what I thought too at first – that it was going to be Muggle science, or the methods of rationality. But..." Harry exhaled. The Sun had now fully risen above the hills. This felt embarrassing to say, but he was going to say it anyway. "Professor Snape, who originally heard the prophecy – yes, that's also a thing that happened – Professor Snape said he didn't think it could just be science, that the 'power the Dark Lord knows not' needed to be something more alien to Voldemort than just that. Even if I think of it in terms of rationality, well, it turns out that the person Voldemort really was," why, Professor Quirrell, why, the thought still stabbing sickness at Harry's heart, "he'd have been able to learn the methods of rationality too, if he read the same science papers I did. Except, maybe, for one last thing..." Harry drew a breath. "At the end of all of it, during my final showdown with Voldemort, he threatened to put my parents, and my friends, into Azkaban. Unless I came up with interesting secrets to tell him, one person saved per secret. But I knew I couldn't find enough secrets to save everyone. And in the moment that I saw no way at all left to save everyone... that's when I actually started thinking. Maybe for the first time in my life, I started thinking. I thought faster than Voldemort, even though he was older than me and smarter, because... because I had a reason to think. Voldemort had a drive to be immortal, he strongly preferred not to die, but that wasn't a positive desire, it was fear, and Voldemort made mistakes because of that fear. I think the power that Voldemort knew not... was that I had something to protect."

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said gently. She hesitated. "Is that what I am to you, then? The thing that you protect?"

"No, I mean, the whole reason I'm telling you this, is that Voldemort wasn't threatening to put you in Azkaban. Even if he'd taken over the whole world, you'd have been fine. He'd already made a binding promise not to harm you, because of, um, because of reasons. So in my moment of ultimate crisis, when I reached deep down and found the power Voldemort knew not, I did it to protect everyone except you."

Hermione considered this, a slow smile spreading over her face. "Why,

Harry,” she said. “That’s the least romantic thing I’ve ever heard.”

“You’re welcome.”

“No, really, it does help,” Hermione said. “I mean, it makes the whole thing much less stalker-y.”

“I know, right?”

The two of them shared a companionable nod, both of them looking more relaxed now, and watched the sunrise together.

“I’ve been thinking,” Harry said, his own voice going soft, “about the alternate Harry Potter, the person I might have been if Voldemort hadn’t attacked my parents.” If Tom Riddle hadn’t tried to copy himself onto me. “That other Harry Potter wouldn’t have been as smart, I guess. He probably wouldn’t have studied much Muggle science, even if his mother was a Muggleborn. But that other Harry Potter would’ve had... the capacity for warmth, that he inherited from James Potter and Lily Evans, he would’ve cared about other people and tried to save his friends, I know that would have been true, because that’s something that Lord Voldemort never did, you see...” Harry’s eyes were watering. “So that part must be, the remnant.”

The Sun was well above the horizon now, the golden light illuminating both of them, casting long shadows off the other side of the rooftop platform.

“I think you’re just fine the way you are,” Hermione said. “I mean, that other Harry Potter might’ve been a nice boy, maybe, but it sounds like I would’ve had to do all his thinking for him.”

“Going by heredity, alter-Harry would have been in Gryffindor like his parents, and the two of you wouldn’t have become friends. Though James Potter and Lily Evans were the Head Boy and Head Girl of Hogwarts back in their day, so he wouldn’t have been that bad.”

“I can just imagine it,” Hermione said. “Harry James Potter, Sorted into Gryffindor, aspiring Quidditch player –”

“No. Just no.”

“Remembered by history as the sidekick of Hermione Jean Granger, who’d send out Mr. Potter to get into trouble for her, and then solve the mystery from the library by reading books and using her incredible memory.”

“You’re really enjoying this alternate universe, aren’t you.”

“Maybe he’d be best mates with Ron Weasley, the smartest boy in Gryffindor, and they’d fight side by side in my army in Defense class, and afterwards help each other with their homework –”

“Okay, enough, this is starting to creep me out.”

"Sorry," Hermione said, though she was still smiling to herself, appearing rapt in some private vision.

"Apology accepted," Harry said dryly.

The Sun rose a little further in the sky.

After a while, Hermione spoke. "Do you suppose we'll fall in love with each other later on?"

"I don't know any better than you do, Hermione. But why does it have to be about that? Seriously, why does it always have to be about that? Maybe when we're older we'll fall in love, and maybe we won't. Maybe we'll stay in love, and maybe we won't." Harry turned his head slightly, the Sun was hot on his cheek and he wasn't wearing sunscreen. "No matter how it goes, we shouldn't try to force our lives into a pattern. I think when people try to force patterns onto this sort of thing, that's when they end up unhappy."

"No forced patterns?" Hermione said. Her eyes had taken on a mischievous look. "That sounds like a more complicated way of saying no rules. Which I guess seems a lot more reasonable to me than it would've at the start of this year. If I'm going to be a Sparkling Unicorn Princess and have my own time machine, I might as well give up on rules, I suppose."

"I'm not saying that rules are always bad, especially when they actually fit people, instead of them being blindly imitated like Quidditch. But weren't you the one who rejected the 'hero' pattern in favor of just doing the things she could?"

"I suppose so." Hermione turned her head again to gaze down at the grounds below Hogwarts, for the Sun was too bright to look at now – though, Harry thought, Hermione's retinas would always heal now, it was safe for her alone to look directly into the light. "You said, Harry, that you thought I was always destined to be the hero. I've been considering, and I suspect you're completely wrong. If this had been meant to be, things would've been a lot easier all round. Just doing the things you can do – you have to make that happen, you have to choose it, over and over again."

"That might not conflict with your being a destined hero," Harry said, thinking of compatibilist theories of free will, and prophecies that he must not look upon in order to fulfill. "But we can talk about that later."

"You have to choose it," Hermione repeated. She pushed herself up on her hands, then popped herself backwards and onto the rooftop, rising to her feet in a smooth motion. "Just like I'm choosing to do this."

"No kissing!" Harry said, scrambling to his feet and preparing to dodge;

though the realization came to him that the Girl-Who-Revived would be much, much faster.

"I won't try to kiss you again, Mr. Potter. Not until you ask me, if you ever do. But there are all these warm feelings bubbling up inside me and I feel like I might burst if I don't do something, though it does now occur to me that it's unhealthy if girls don't know any way of expressing gratitude to boys besides kissing them." Hermione took out her wand and offered it crosswise, in the position she'd used to swear her oath of fealty to House Potter before the Wizengamot.

"Oh hell no," Harry said. "Do you realise what it took to get you out of that oath last time –"

"Don't go jumping to conclusions, you. I wasn't about to swear fealty to your House again. You've got to start trusting me to be sensible if you're going to be my mysterious young wizard. Now please hold out your wand."

Slowly, Harry took out the Elder Wand and crossed it with Hermione's ten-and-three-quarter-inches of vinewood, forcing down a last worry about her choosing the wrong thing. "Can you at least not say anything about 'until death takes me', because did I mention I have the Philosopher's Stone now? Or anything about 'the end of the world and its magic'? I'm a lot more nervous around phrases like that than I used to be."

Upon a roof floored in square stony tiles, the brilliant morning Sun blazes down upon two not-really-children-anymore, both in blue-fringed black robes, facing each other across crossed wands. One has brown eyes beneath chaotic chestnut curls, and radiates an aura of strength and beauty that is not magic only; the other has green eyes under glasses, with messy black hair above a recently inflamed scar. Below, a stone tower nobody remembers seeing from ground level stretches downwards into the broad base of the castle Hogwarts. Far beneath them are visible the green hills, and the lake. In the distance a huge red-and-black line of railcars and an engine, appearing tiny from this height, a train neither Muggle nor fully magical. The sky is nearly unclouded, but for faint tinges of orange-white where wisps of moisture reflect the sunlight. A light breeze carries the crisp chill of dawn, and the dampness of morning; but the huge blazing golden globe is now risen high above the horizon, and its incandescence casts warmth on everything it touches.

"Well, maybe after this you'll be less nervous," the hero says to her enigmatic wizard. She knows she doesn't know the whole story, but the fragment

of truth that she does hold shines bright like sunlight within her, casting warmth on her insides the way the Sun warms her face. "I do choose this, now."

Upon my life and magic I swear friendship to Harry Potter,
To help him and trust in him,
To stand with him and, um, stand by him,
And sometimes go where he can't go,
'Till the day that death takes me for real, if it ever does, I mean,
And if the world or its magic ends, we'll deal with that together.

This is the end of Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality.

I will write no sequel myself; I have said what I set out to say, and it is done.
You have my enthusiastic consent to write within this universe yourself, if
you wish.

I am happy to have written this book for you, and I am honored that you
read it. Many of you have declared yourselves my friends, and that
knowledge is shining warmly inside me.

I wish for you to live long, and prosper –
EXPECTO PATRONUM!

Contents

CONTENTS

Arc Set Five	2
86 Multiple Hypothesis Testing	5
87 Hedonic Awareness	59
88 Time Pressure, Part I	75
89 Time Pressure, Part II	93
90 Roles, Part I	101
91 Roles, Part II	115
92 Roles, Part III	127
93 Roles, Part IV	133
94 Roles, Part V	143
95 Roles, Part VI	153
96 Roles, Part VII	165
97 Roles, Part VIII	175
98 Roles, Final	191
99 Roles, Aftermath	199

Arc Set Six	201
100 Precautionary Measures, Part I	203
101 Precautionary Measures, Part II	219
102 Caring	227
103 Tests	239
104 The Truth, Part I, Riddles and Answers	247
105 The Truth, Part II	273
106 The Truth, Part III	281
107 The Truth, Part IV	285
108 The Truth, Part V, Answers and Riddles	297
109 Reflections, Part I	333
110 Reflections, Part II	347
111 Failure, Part I	353
112 Failure, Part II	375
113 Final Exam	379
114 Shut Up and Do The Impossible, Part I	387
115 Shut Up and Do The Impossible, Part II	393
116 Aftermath, Something to Protect	403
117 Something to Protect: Minerva McGonagall	409
118 Something to Protect: Professor Quirrell	415
119 Something to Protect: Albus Dumbledore	419

120 Something to Protect: Draco Malfoy	445
121 Something to Protect: Severus Snape	451
122 Something to Protect: Hermione Granger	455
Contents	486

◇
 Here
 ends Harry
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 ◇

Cartho philosophus



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