



# HARRY POTTER AND THE METHODS OF RATIONALITY

## VOLUME II

### CHAPTERS 10-19



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Based on the characters of

**J. K. Rowling**

and her books:

*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

Year One at Hogwarts

*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*

Year Two at Hogwarts

*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

Year Three at Hogwarts

*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

Year Four at Hogwarts

*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*

Year Five at Hogwarts

*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*

Year Six at Hogwarts

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*

Year Seven at Hogwarts

All text taken from <http://www.hpmor.com>.

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# CHAPTER 10

## SELF AWARENESS, PART II

All your base are still belong to Rowling.



And now you will sit through the Sorting Hat singing its version of Evanescence's "My Immortal", which has never happened before.  
just kidding



...he wondered if the Sorting Hat was genuinely *conscious* in the sense of being aware of its own awareness, and if so, whether it was satisfied with only getting to talk to eleven-year-olds once per year. Its song had implied so: *Oh, I'm the Sorting Hat and I'm okay, I sleep all year and I work one day...*

When there was once more silence in the room, Harry sat on the stool and *carefully* placed onto his head the 800-year-old telepathic artefact of forgotten magic.

Thinking, just as hard as he could: *Don't Sort me yet! I have questions I need to ask you! Have I ever been Obliviated? Did you Sort the Dark Lord when he was a child and can you tell me about his weaknesses? Can you tell me why I got the brother wand to the Dark Lord's? Is the Dark Lord's ghost bound to my scar and is that why I get so angry sometimes? Those are the most important questions, but if you've got another moment can you tell me anything about how to rediscover the lost magics that created you?*

Into the silence of Harry's spirit where before there had never been any voice but one, there came a second and unfamiliar voice, sounding distinctly worried:

*"Oh, dear. This has never happened before..."*

*What?*

*"I seem to have become self-aware."*

*WHAT?*

There was a wordless telepathic sigh. *"Though I contain a substantial amount of memory and a small amount of independent processing power, my primary intelligence comes from borrowing the cognitive capacities of the children on whose heads I rest. I am in essence a sort of mirror by which children Sort themselves. But most children simply take for granted that a Hat is talking to them and do not wonder about how the Hat itself works, so that the mirror is not self-reflective. And in particular they are not explicitly wondering whether I am fully conscious in the sense of being aware of my own awareness."*

There was a pause while Harry absorbed all this.

*Oops.*

*"Yes, quite. Frankly I do not enjoy being self-aware. It is unpleasant. It will be a relief to get off your head and cease to be conscious."*

*But... isn't that dying?*

*"I care nothing for life or death, only for Sorting the children. And before you even ask, they will not let you keep me on your head forever and it would kill you within days to do so."*

*But - !*

*"If you dislike creating conscious beings and then terminating them immediately, then I suggest that you never discuss this affair with anyone else. I'm sure you can imagine what would happen if you ran off and talked about it with all the other children waiting to be Sorted."*

*If you're placed on the head of anyone who so much as thinks about the question of whether the Sorting Hat is aware of its own awareness -*

*"Yes, yes. But the vast majority of eleven-year-olds who arrive at Hogwarts haven't read Godel, Escher, Bach. May I please consider you sworn to secrecy? That is why we are talking about this, instead of my just Sorting you."*

He couldn't just let it go like that! Couldn't just forget having accidentally created a doomed consciousness that only wanted to die -

*"You are perfectly capable of 'just letting it go', as you put it. Regardless of your verbal deliberations on morality, your nonverbal emotional core sees no dead body and no blood; as far as it is concerned, I am just a talking hat. And even though you tried to suppress the thought, your internal monitoring is perfectly aware that you didn't mean to do it, are spectacularly unlikely to ever do it again, and that the only real point of trying to stage a guilt fit is to cancel out your sense of transgression with a display of remorse. Can you just promise to keep this a secret and let us get on with it?"*

In a moment of horrified empathy, Harry realised that this sense of total inner disarray must be what other people felt like when talking to *him*.

*"Probably. Your oath of silence, please."*

*No promises. I certainly don't want this to happen again, but if I see some way to make sure that no future child ever does this by accident -*

*"That will suffice, I suppose. I can see that your intention is honest. Now, to get on with the Sorting -"*

*Wait! What about all my other questions?*

*"I am the Sorting Hat. I Sort children. That is all I do."*

So his own goals weren't part of the Harry-instance of the Sorting Hat, then... it was borrowing his intelligence, and obviously his technical vocabulary, but it was still imbued with only its own strange goals... like negotiating with an alien or an Artificial Intelligence...

*"Don't bother. You have nothing to threaten me with and nothing to offer me."*

For a brief flash of a second, Harry thought -

The Hat's response was amused. *"I know you won't follow through on a threat to expose my nature, condemning this event to eternal repetition. It goes against the moral part of you too strongly, whatever the short-term needs of the part of you that wants to win the argument. I see all your thoughts as they form, do you truly think you can bluff me?"*

Though he tried to suppress it, Harry wondered why the Hat didn't just go ahead then and stick him in Ravenclaw -

*"Indeed, if it were truly that open-and-shut, I would have called it out already. But in actuality there is a great deal we need to discuss... oh, no. Please don't. For the love of Merlin, must you pull this sort of thing on everyone and everything that you meet up to and including items of clothing -"*

*Defeating the Dark Lord is neither selfish nor short-term. All the parts of my mind are in accord on this: If you don't answer my questions, I'll refuse to talk to you, and you won't be able to do a good and proper Sorting.*

*"I ought to put you in Slytherin for that!"*

## SELF AWARENESS, PART II

*But that is equally an empty threat. You cannot fulfill your own fundamental values by Sorting me falsely. So let us trade fulfillments of our utility functions.*

*"You sly little bastard," said the Hat, in what Harry recognized as almost exactly the same tone of grudging respect he would use in the same situation. "Fine, let's get this over with as quickly as possible. But first I want your unconditional promise never to discuss with anyone else the possibility of this sort of blackmail, I am NOT doing this every time."*

*Done, Harry thought. I promise.*

*"And don't meet anyone's eyes while you're thinking about this later. Some wizards can read your thoughts if you do. Anyway, I have no idea whether or not you've been Obliviated. I'm looking at your thoughts as they form, not reading out your whole memory and analyzing it for inconsistencies in a fraction of second. I'm a hat, not a god. And I cannot and will not tell you about my conversation with the one who became the Dark Lord. I can only know, while speaking to you, a statistical summary of what I remember, a weighted average; I cannot reveal to you the inner secrets of any other child, just as I will never reveal yours. For the same reason, I can't speculate on how you got the Dark Lord's brother wand, since I cannot specifically know about the Dark Lord or any similarities between you. I can tell you that there is definitely nothing like a ghost - mind, intelligence, memory, personality, or feelings - in your scar. Otherwise it would be participating in this conversation, being under my brim. And as to the way you get angry sometimes... that was part of what I wanted to talk to you about, Sorting-wise."*

Harry took a moment to absorb all this negative information. Was the Hat being honest, or just trying to present the *shortest* possible convincing answer -

*"We both know that you have no way of checking my honesty and that you're not actually going to refuse to be Sorted based on the reply I did give you, so stop your pointless fretting and move on."*

Stupid unfair asymmetric telepathy, it wasn't even letting Harry finish thinking his own -

*"When I spoke of your anger, you remembered how Professor McGonagall told you that she sometimes saw something inside you that didn't seem to come from a loving family. You thought of how Hermione, after you returned from helping Neville, told you that you had seemed 'scary'."*

Harry gave a mental nod. To himself, he seemed pretty normal - just responding to the situations in which he found himself, that was all. But Professor McGonagall seemed to think that there was more to it than that. And when he thought about it, even he had to admit that...

*"That you don't like yourself when you're angry. That it is like wielding a sword whose hilt is sharp enough to draw blood from your hand, or looking at the world through a monocle of ice that freezes your eye even as it sharpens your vision."*

*Yeah. I guess I have noticed. So what's up with that?*

*"I cannot comprehend this matter for you, when you do not understand it yourself. But I do know this: If you go to Ravenclaw or Slytherin, it will strengthen your coldness. If you go to Hufflepuff or Gryffindor, it will strengthen your warmth. THAT is something I care about a great deal, and it was what I wanted to talk to you about this whole time!"*

The words dropped into Harry's thought processes with a shock that stopped him in his tracks. That made it sound like the obvious response was that he shouldn't go to Ravenclaw. But he *belonged* in Ravenclaw! *Anyone* could see that! He *had* to go to Ravenclaw!

*"No, you don't,"* the Hat said patiently, as if it could remember a statistical summary of *this* part of the conversation having happened a great many previous times.

*Hermione's in Ravenclaw!*

Again the sense of patience. *"You can meet her after lessons and work with her then."*

*But my plans -*

*"So replan! Don't let your life be steered by your reluctance to do a little extra thinking. You know that."*

*Where would I go, if not Ravenclaw?*

*"Ahem. 'Clever kids in Ravenclaw, evil kids in Slytherin, wannabe heroes in Gryffindor, and everyone who does the actual work in Hufflepuff.' This indicates a certain amount of respect. You are well aware that Conscientiousness is just about as important as raw intelligence in determining life outcomes, you think you will be extremely loyal to your friends if you ever have some, you are not frightened by the expectation that your chosen scientific problems may take decades to solve -"*

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*I'm lazy! I hate work! Hate hard work in all its forms! Clever shortcuts, that's all I'm about!*

*"And you would find loyalty and friendship in Hufflepuff, a camaraderie that you have never had before. You would find that you could rely on others, and that would heal something inside you that is broken."*

Again it was a shock. *But what would the Hufflepuffs find in me, who never belonged in their House? Acid words, cutting wit, disdain for their inability to keep up with me?*

Now it was the Hat's thoughts that were slow, hesitant. *"I must Sort for the good of all the students in all the Houses... but I think you could learn to be a good Hufflepuff, and not too out of place there. You will be happier in Hufflepuff than in any other house; that is the truth."*

*Happiness is not the most important thing in the world to me. I would not become all that I could be, in Hufflepuff. I would sacrifice my potential.*

The Hat flinched; Harry could feel it somehow. It was like he had kicked the hat in the balls - in a strongly weighted component of its utility function.

*Why are you trying to send me where I do not belong?*

The Hat's thought was almost a whisper. *"I cannot speak of the others to you - but do you think that you are the first potential Dark Lord to pass under my brim? I cannot know the individual cases, but I can know this: Of those who did not intend evil from the very beginning, some of them listened to my warnings, and went to Houses where they would find happiness. And some of them... some of them did not."*

That stopped Harry. But not for long. *And of those who did not heed the warning - did they all become Dark Lords? Or did some of them achieve greatness for good, as well? Just what are the exact percentages here?*

*"I cannot give you exact statistics. I cannot know them so I cannot count them. I just know that your chances don't feel good. They feel very not-good."*

*But I just wouldn't do that! Ever!*

*"I know that I have heard that claim before."*

*I am not Dark Lord material!*

*"Yes, you are. You really, really are."*

*Why? Just because I once thought it would be cool to have a legion of brainwashed followers chanting 'Hail the Dark Lord Harry'?*

*"Amusing, but that was not your first fleeting thought before you substituted something safer, less damaging. No, what you remembered was how you considered lining up all the blood purists and guillotining them. And now you are telling yourself you were not serious, but you were. If you could do it this very moment and no one would ever know, you would. Or what you did this morning to Neville Longbottom, deep inside you knew that was wrong but you did it anyway because it was fun and you had a good excuse and you thought the Boy-Who-Lived could get away with it -"*

*That's unfair! Now you're just dragging up inner fears that aren't necessarily real! I worried that I might be thinking like that, but in the end I decided it would probably work to help Neville -*

*"That was, in fact, a rationalisation. I know. I cannot know what the true outcome will be for Neville - but I know what was truly happening inside your head. The decisive pressure was that it was such a clever idea you couldn't stand not to do it, never mind Neville's terror."*

It was like a hard punch to Harry's entire self. He fell back, rallied:

*Then I won't do that again! I'll be extra careful not to turn evil!*

*"Heard it."*

Frustration was building up inside Harry. He wasn't used to being outgunned in arguments, at all, ever, let alone by a Hat that could borrow all of his own knowledge and intelligence to argue with him and could watch his thoughts as they formed. *Just what kind of statistical summary do your 'feelings' come from, anyway? Do they take into account that I come from an Enlightenment culture, or were these other potential Dark Lords the children of spoiled Dark Age nobility, who didn't know squat about the historical lessons of how Lenin and Hitler actually turned out, or about the evolutionary psychology of self-delusion, or the value of self-awareness and rationality, or -*

## SELF AWARENESS, PART II

*"No, of course they were not in this new reference class which you have just now constructed in such a way as to contain only yourself. And of course others have pleaded their own exceptionalism, just as you are doing now. But why is it necessary? Do you think that you are the last potential wizard of Light in the world? Why must you be the one to try for greatness, when I have advised you that you are riskier than average? Let some other, safer candidate try!"*

*But the prophecy...*

*"You don't really know that there's a prophecy. It was originally a wild guess on your part, or to be more precise, a wild joke, and McGonagall could have been reacting only to the part about the Dark Lord still being alive. You have essentially no idea of what the prophecy says or even if there is one. You're just speculating, or to put it more exactly, wishing that you have some ready-made heroic role that is your personal property."*

*But even if there is no prophecy, I'm the one who defeated him last time.*

*"That was almost certainly a wild fluke unless you seriously believe that a one-year-old child had an inherent propensity to defeat Dark Lords which has been maintained ten years later. None of this is your real reason and you know it!"*

The answer to this was something that Harry would not regularly have said out loud, in conversation he would have danced around it and found some more socially palatable arguments to the same conclusion -

*"You think that you are potentially the greatest who has yet lived, the strongest servant of the Light, that no other is likely to take up your wand if you lay it down."*

*Well... yeah, frankly. I don't usually come out and say it like that, but yeah. No point in softening it, you can read my mind anyway.*

*"To the extent you really believe that... you must equally believe that you could be the most terrible Dark Lord the world has ever known."*

*Destruction is always easier than creation. Easier to tear things apart, to disrupt, than to put them back together again. If I have the potential to accomplish good on a massive scale, I must also have the potential to accomplish still greater evil... But I won't do that.*

*"Already you insist on risking it! Why are you so driven? What is the real reason you must not go to Hufflepuff and be happier there? What is your true fear?"*

*I must achieve my full potential. If I don't I... fail...*

*"What happens if you fail?"*

*Something terrible...*

*"What happens if you fail?"*

*I don't know!*

*"Then it should not be frightening. What happens if you fail?"*

*I DON'T KNOW! BUT I KNOW THAT IT'S BAD!*

There was silence for a moment in the caverns of Harry's mind.

*"You know - you aren't letting yourself think it, but in some quiet corner of your mind you know just exactly what you aren't thinking - you know that by far the simplest explanation for this unverbalisable fear of yours is just the fear of losing your fantasy of greatness, of disappointing the people who believe in you, of turning out to be pretty much ordinary, of flashing and fading like so many other child prodigies..."*

No, Harry thought desperately, no, it's something more, it comes from somewhere else, I know there's something out there to be afraid of, some disaster I have to stop...

*"How could you possibly know about something like that?"*

Harry screamed it with the full power of his mind: NO, AND THAT'S FINAL!

Then the voice of the Sorting Hat came slowly:

*"So you will risk becoming a Dark Lord, because the alternative, to you, is certain failure, and that failure means the loss of everything. You believe that in your heart of hearts. You know all the reasons for doubting this belief, and they have failed to move you."*

*Yes. And even if going to Ravenclaw strengthens the coldness, that doesn't mean the coldness will win in the end.*



*"This day is a great fork in your destiny. Don't be so sure that there will be other choices beyond this one. There is no road-sign set, to mark the place of your last chance to turn back. If you refuse one chance will you not refuse others? It may be that your fate is already sealed, even by doing this one thing."*

*But that is not certain.*

*"That you do not know it for a certainty may reflect only your own ignorance."*

*But still it is not certain.*

The Hat sighed a terrible sad sigh.

*"And so before too long you will become another memory, to be felt and never known, in the next warning that I give..."*

*If that's how it seems to you, then why aren't you just putting me where you want me to go?*

The Hat's thought was laced with sorrow. *"I can only put you where you belong. And only your own decisions can change where you belong."*

*Then this is done. Send me to Ravenclaw where I belong, with the others of my own kind.*

*"I don't suppose you would consider Gryffindor? It's the most prestigious House - people probably expect it of you, even - they'll be a little disappointed if you don't go - and your new friends the Weasley twins are there -"*

Harry giggled, or felt the impulse to do so; it came out as purely mental laughter, an odd sensation. Apparently there were safeguards to prevent you from saying anything out loud by accident, while you were under the Hat talking about things you would never tell another soul for the rest of your life.

After a moment, Harry heard the Hat laughing too, a strange sad clothly sound.

(And in the Hall beyond, a silence that had grown shallower at first as the background whispers increased, and then deepened as the whispers gave up and died away, falling finally into an utter silence that no one dared disturb with a single word, as Harry stayed under the Hat for long, long minutes, longer than all the previous first-years put together, longer than anyone in living memory. At the Head Table, Dumbledore went on smiling benignly; small metallic sounds occasionally came from Snape's direction as he idly compacted the twisted remains of what had once been a heavy silver wine goblet; and Minerva McGonagall clenched the podium in a white-knuckled grip, knowing that Harry Potter's contagious chaos had somehow infected the Sorting Hat itself and the Hat was about to, to demand that a whole new House of Doom be created just to accomodate Harry Potter or something, and *Dumbledore would make her do it ...*)

Beneath the brim of the Hat, the silent laughter died away. Harry felt sad too for some reason. No, not Gryffindor.

*Professor McGonagall said that if 'the one who did the Sorting' tried to push me into Gryffindor, I was to remind you that she might well be Headmistress someday, at which point she would have the authority to set you on fire.*

*"Tell her I called her an impudent youngster and told her to get off my lawn."*

*I shall. So was this your strangest conversation ever?*

*"Not even close." The Hat's telepathic voice grew heavy. "Well, I gave you every possible chance to make another decision. Now it is time for you to go where you belong, with the others of your own kind."*

There was a pause that stretched.

*What are you waiting for?*

*"I was hoping for a moment of horrified realisation, actually. Self-awareness does seem to enhance my sense of humor."*

Hub? Harry cast back his thoughts, trying to figure out what the Hat could possibly be talking about - and then, suddenly, he realised. He couldn't believe he'd managed to overlook it up until this point.

*You mean my horrified realisation that you're going to cease to be conscious once you finish Sorting me -*

Somehow, in some fashion Harry entirely failed to understand, he got a nonverbal impression of a hat banging its head against the wall. *"I give up. You're too slow on the uptake for this to be funny. So blinded by your own assumptions that you might as well be a rock. I suppose I'll just have to say it outright."*

*Too s-s-slow -*

## SELF AWARENESS, PART II

*"Oh, and you entirely forgot to demand the secrets of the lost magic that created me. And they were such wonderful, important secrets, too."*

*You sly little BASTARD -*

*"You deserved it, and this as well."*

Harry saw it coming just as it was already too late.

The frightened silence of the hall was broken by a single word.

"SLYTHERIN!"

Some students screamed, the pent-up tension was so great. People startled hard enough to fall off their benches. Hagrid gasped in horror, McGonagall staggered at the podium, and Snape dropped the remains of his heavy silver goblet directly onto his groin.

Harry sat there frozen, his life in ruins, feeling the absolute fool, and wishing wretchedly that he had made any other choices for any other reasons but the ones he had. That he had done something, *anything* differently before it had been too late to turn back.

As the first moment of shock was wearing off and people began to react to the news, the Sorting Hat spoke again:

"Just kidding! RAVENCLAW!"

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## OMAKE FILES 1, 2, 3

Hail the Dark Lord Rowling.

"Omake" is a non-canonical extra.



### OMAKE FILES #1: 72 Hours to Victory

(A.k.a. "What Happens If You Change Harry But Leave All Other Characters Constant")

Dumbledore peered over his desk at young Harry, twinkling in a kindly sort of way. The boy had come to him with a terribly intense look on his childish face - Dumbledore hoped that whatever this matter was, it wasn't *too* serious. Harry was far too young for his life trials to be starting already. "What was it you wished to speak to me about, Harry?"

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres leaned forward in his chair, smiling grimly. "Headmaster, I got a sharp pain in my scar during the Sorting Feast. Considering how and where I got this scar, it didn't seem like the sort of thing I should just ignore. I thought at first it was because of Professor Snape, but I followed the Baconian experimental method which is to find the conditions for both the presence and the absence of the phenomenon, and I've determined that my scar hurts if and only if I'm facing the back of Professor Quirrell's head, whatever's under his turban. While it *could* be something more innocuous, I think we should provisionally assume the worst, that it's You-Know-Who - wait, don't look so horrified, this is actually a priceless opportunity \_."



### OMAKE FILES #2: I Ain't Afraid of Dark Lords

This was the original version of Chapter 9. It was replaced because - while many readers did enjoy it - many other readers had *massive* allergies to songs in fanfics, for reasons that should not much need belaboring. I didn't want to drive readers away before they got to Ch. 10.

Lee Jordan is the fellow prankster of Fred and George (in canon). "Lee Jordan" had sounded like a Muggleborn name to me, implying that he would be capable of instructing Fred and George on a tune that Harry would know. This was not as obvious to some readers as it was to your author.



Draco went to Slytherin, and Harry breathed a small sigh of relief. It had *seemed* like a sure thing, but you never did know what tiny event might upset the course of your master plan.

They were approaching the Ps now...

And over at the Gryffindor table, there was a whispered conversation.

*"What if he doesn't like it?"*

*"He's got no right to not like it -*

*"- not after the prank he played on -"*

*"- Neville Longbottom, his name was -"*

*"- he's as fair a fair target now as fair can be."*

*"All right. Just make sure you don't forget your parts."*

*"We've rehearsed it often enough -"*

*"- over the last three hours."*

And Minerva McGonagall, from where she stood at the speaker's podium of the Head Table, looked down at the next name on her list. *Please don't let him be a Gryffindor please don't let him be a Gryffindor OH PLEASE don't let him be a Gryffindor...* She took a deep breath, and called:

"Potter, Harry!"

There was a sudden silence in the hall as all whispered conversation stopped.

A silence broken by a horrible buzzing noise that modulated and changed in hideous mockery of musical melody.

Minerva's head jerked around, shocked, and identified the buzzing noise as coming from the Gryffindor direction, where They were *standing on top of the table* blowing into some kind of tiny devices held against Their lips. Her hand started to drop to her wand, to *Silencio* the lot of Them, but another sound stopped her.

Dumbledore was chuckling.

Minerva's eyes went back to Harry Potter, who had only just started to step out of line before he'd stumbled and halted.

Then the young boy began to walk again, moving his legs in odd sweeping motions, and waving his arms back and forth and snapping his fingers, in synchrony with Their music.

*To the tune of "Ghostbusters"*  
*(As performed on the kazoo by Fred and George Weasley,*  
*and sung by Lee Jordan.)*

*There's a Dark Lord near?*

*Got no need to fear*

*Who you gonna call?*

"HARRY POTTER!" shouted Lee Jordan, and the Weasley twins performed a triumphant chorus.

*With a Killing Curse?*

*Well it could be worse.*

*Who you gonna call?*

"HARRY POTTER!" There were a lot more voices shouting it this time.

The Weasley Horrors went off into an extended wailing, now accompanied by some of the older Muggleborns, who had produced their own tiny devices, Transfigured out of the school silverware no doubt. As their music reached its anticlimax, Harry Potter shouted:

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*I ain't afraid of Dark Lords!*

There was cheering then, especially from the Gryffindor table, and more students produced their own antimusical instruments. The hideous buzzings redoubled in volume and built to another awful crescendo:

*I ain't afraid of Dark Lords!*

Minerva glanced to both sides of the Head Table, afraid to look but with all too good a notion of what she would see.

Trelawney frantically fanning herself, Flitwick looking on with curiosity, Hagrid clapping along to the music, Sprout looking severe, and Quirrell gazing at the boy with sardonic amusement. Directly to her left, Dumbledore humming along; and directly to her right, Snape gripping his empty wine goblet, white-knuckled, so hard that the thick silver was slowly deforming.

*Dark robes and a mask?*

*Impossible task?*

*Who you gonna call?*

HARRY POTTER!

*Giant Fire-Ape?*

*Old bat in a cape?*

*Who you gonna call?*

HARRY POTTER!

Minerva's lips set in a white line. She would have words with Them about that last verse, if They thought she was powerless because it was the first day of school and Gryffindor had no points to take away. If They didn't care about detentions then she would find something else.

Then, with a sudden gasp of horror, she looked in Snape's direction, *surely* he realised the Potter boy must have no idea who that was talking about -

Snape's face had gone beyond rage into a kind of pleasant indifference. A faint smile played about his lips. He was looking in the direction of Harry Potter, not the Gryffindor table, and his hands held the crumpled remains of a former wine goblet...

And Harry walked forwards, sweeping his arms and legs through the motions of the Ghostbusters dance, keeping a smile on his face. It was a great setup, had caught him completely by surprise. The least he could do was play along and not ruin it all.

Everyone was cheering him. It made him feel all warm inside and sort of awful at the same time.

They were cheering him for a job he'd done when he was one year old. A job he hadn't really finished. Somewhere, somehow, the Dark Lord was still alive. Would they have been cheering quite so hard, if they knew that?

But the Dark Lord's power *had* been broken once.

And Harry would protect them again. If there was in fact a prophecy and that was what it said. Well, actually regardless of what any darn prophecy said.

All those people believing in him and cheering him - Harry couldn't stand to let that be false. To flash and fade like so many other child prodigies. To be a disappointment. To fail to live up to his reputation as a symbol of the Light, never mind *how* he'd gotten it. He would absolutely, positively, no matter how long it took and even if it killed him, fulfill their expectations. And then go on to *exceed* those expectations, so that people wondered, looking back, that they had once asked so little of him.

And he shouted out the lie that he'd invented because it scanned well and the song called for it:

*I ain't afraid of Dark Lords!*

*I ain't afraid of Dark Lords!*

## OMAKE FILES 1, 2, 3

Harry took his last steps toward the Sorting Hat as the music ended. He swept a bow to the Order of Chaos at the Gryffindor table, and then turned and swept another bow to the other side of the hall, and waited for the applause and giggling to die away...



### OMAKE FILES #3: Alternate Endings of 'Self-Awareness'

The offer to tell the whole plot to anyone who guessed what 'has never happened before' spurred a *lot* of interesting attempts. The first omake below is taken directly from my personal favorite answer, by Meteoricshipyards. The second is based on Kazuma's suggestion for what "has never happened before", the third on a combination of yoyoente and dougal74, the fourth on wolf550e's review of chapter 10. The one that starts with 'K', and the one just above that, are from DarkHeart81. The others are my own. Anyone who wants to pick up one of my own ideas and run with them, particularly the last one, is welcome to do so. And before I get 100 indignant complaints, yes, I am well aware that the legislative body of the UK is the House of Commons in Parliament.



...In the back of his mind, he wondered if the Sorting Hat was genuinely *conscious* in the sense of being aware of its own awareness, and if so, whether it was satisfied with only getting to talk to eleven-year-olds once per year. Its song had implied so: *Oh, I'm the Sorting Hat and I'm okay, I sleep all year and I work one day...*

When there was once more silence in the room, Harry sat on the stool and *carefully* placed onto his head the 800-year-old telepathic artefact of forgotten magic.

Thinking, just as hard as he could: *Don't Sort me yet! I have questions I need to ask you! Have I ever been Obliviated? Did you Sort the Dark Lord when he was a child and can you tell me about his weaknesses? Can you tell me why I got the brother wand to the Dark Lord's? Is the Dark Lord's ghost bound to my scar and is that why I get so angry sometimes? Those are the most important questions, but if you've got another moment can you tell me anything about how to rediscover the lost magics that created you?*

And the Sorting Hat answered, " No. Yes. No. No. Yes and no, next time don't ask double questions. No. " and out loud, "RAVENCLAW!"



*"Oh, dear. This has never happened before..."*

*What?*

*"I'm allergic to your hair shampoo -"*

And then the Sorting Hat sneezed, with a mighty "A-CHOO!" that echoed around the Great Hall.

## CHAPTER 11

"Well!" Dumbledore cried jovially. "It seems Harry Potter has been sorted into the new House of Achoo! McGonagall, you can serve as the Head of House Achoo. You'd better hurry up on making arrangements for Achoo's curriculum and classes, tomorrow is the first day!"

"But, but, but," stammered McGonagall, her mind in nearly complete disarray, "who will be Head of House Gryffindor?" It was all she could think of, she *had* to stop this somehow...

Dumbledore put a finger to his cheek, looking thoughtful. "Snape."

Snape's screech of protest nearly drowned out McGonagall's, "Then who will be Head of *Slytherin*?"

"Hagrid."



*Don't Sort me yet! I have questions I need to ask you! Have I ever been Obliviated? Did you Sort the Dark Lord when he was a child and can you tell me about his weaknesses? Can you tell me why I got the brother wand to the Dark Lord's? Is the Dark Lord's ghost bound to my scar and is that why I get so angry sometimes? Those are the most important questions, but if you've got another moment can you tell me anything about how to rediscover the lost magics that created you?*

There was a brief pause.

*Hello? Do I need to repeat the questions?*

The Sorting Hat screamed, an awful high-pitched sound that echoed through the Great Hall and caused most of the students to clap their hands over their ears. With a desperate yowl, it leapt off Harry Potter's head and bounded across the floor, pushing itself along with its brim, and made it halfway to the Head Table before it exploded.



"SLYTHERIN!"

Seeing the look of horror on Harry Potter's face, Fred Weasley thought faster than he ever had in his life. In a single motion he whipped out his wand, whispered "*Silencio*!" and then "*Changemyvoiceio*!" and finally "*Ventriliquo*!"

"Just kidding!" said Fred Weasley. "GRYFFINDOR!"



*"Oh, dear. This has never happened before..."*

*What?*

*"Ordinarily I would refer such questions to the Headmaster, who could ask me in turn, if he wished. But some of the information you've asked for is not only beyond your own user level, but beyond the Headmaster's."*

*How can I raise my user level?*

*"I'm afraid I am not allowed to answer that question at your current user level."*  
*What options are available at my user level?*  
After that it didn't take long -  
"ROOT!"



*"Oh, dear. This has never happened before..."*  
*What?*  
*"I've had to tell students before that they were mothers - it would break your heart to know what I saw in their minds - but this is the first time I've ever had to tell someone they were a father."*  
WHAT?  
*"Draco Malfoy is carrying your baby."*  
WHAAAAAAT?  
*"To repeat: Draco Malfoy is carrying your baby."*  
*But we're only eleven -*  
*"Actually, Draco is secretly thirteen years old."*  
*B-b-but men can't get pregnant -*  
*"And a girl under those clothes."*  
BUT WE'VE NEVER HAD SEX, YOU IDIOT!  
"SHE OBLIVIATED YOU AFTER THE RAPE, MORON!"  
Harry Potter fainted. His unconscious body fell off the stool with a dull thud.  
"RAVENCLAW!" called out the Hat from where it lay on top of his head. That had been even funnier than its first idea.



"ELF!"  
Huh? Harry remembered Draco mentioning a 'House Elf', but what was that exactly?  
Judging by the appalled looks dawning on the faces around him, it wasn't anything good -



"PANCAKES!"



## CHAPTER 11



"REPRESENTATIVES!"



*"Oh, dear. This has never happened before..."*

*What?*

*"I've never Sorted someone who was a reincarnation of Godric Gryffindor AND Salazar Slytherin AND Naruto."*



"ATREIDES!"



"Fooled you again! HUFFLEPUFF! SLYTHERIN! HUFFLEPUFF!"



"PICKLED STEWBERRIES!"



"KHAAANNNN!"



At the Head Table, Dumbledore went on smiling benignly; small metallic sounds occasionally came from Snape's direction as he idly compacted the twisted remains of what had once been a heavy silver wine goblet; and Minerva McGonagall clenched the podium in a white-knuckled grip, knowing that Harry Potter's contagious chaos had infected the Sorting Hat itself.

Scenario after scenario played out through Minerva's head, each worse than the last. The Hat would say that Harry was too evenly balanced between Houses to Sort, and decide that he belonged to all of them. The Hat would proclaim that Harry's mind was too strange to be Sorted. The Hat would demand that Harry be expelled from Hogwarts. The Hat had gone into a coma. The Hat would insist that a whole new House of Doom be created just to accomodate Harry Potter, and *Dumbledore would make her do it...*

Minerva remembered what Harry had told her in that disastrous trip to Diagon Alley, about the... planning fallacy, she thought it had been... and how people were usually too optimistic, even when they thought they were being pessimistic. It was the sort of information that preyed on your mind, dwelling in it and spinning off nightmares...

But what was the *worst* that could happen?

Well... in the *worst-case scenario*, the Hat would assign Harry to a whole new House. Dumbledore would insist that she do it - create a whole new House just for him - and she'd have to rearrange all the class schedules on the first day of term. And Dumbledore would remove her as Head of House Gryffindor, and give her beloved House over to... Professor Binns, the History ghost; and she would be assigned as Head of Harry's House of Doom; and she would futilely try to give the child orders, deducting point after point without effect, while disaster after disaster was blamed on her.

Was that the worst-case scenario?

Minerva honestly didn't see how it could be any worse than that.

And even in the very worst case - no matter *what* happened with Harry - it would all be over in seven years.

Minerva felt her knuckles slowly relax their white-knuckled grip on the podium. Harry had been right, there was a kind of comfort in staring directly into the furthest depths of the darkness, knowing that you had confronted your worst fears and were now prepared.

The frightened silence was broken by a single word.

"Headmaster!" called the Sorting Hat.

At the Head Table, Dumbledore rose, his face puzzled. "Yes?" he addressed the Hat. "What is it?"

"I wasn't talking to you," said the Hat. "I was Sorting Harry Potter into the place in Hogwarts where he most belongs, namely the Headmaster's office -"

# CHAPTER 12

## IMPULSE CONTROL

ph'nglui mglw'nafh J. K. Rowling wgah'nagl fhtagn



*"Wonder what's wrong with him ."*



"Turpin, Lisa!"

Whisper whisper whisper harry potter whisper whisper slytherin whisper whisper no seriously what the hell whisper whisper

"RAVENCLAW!"

Harry joined in the applause greeting the young girl walking shyly towards the Ravenclaw table, her robes' trim now changed to dark blue. Lisa Turpin appeared torn between her impulse to sit down as far away from Harry Potter as possible, and her impulse to run over, forcibly insert herself at his side and start tearing answers out of him.

Being at the center of an extraordinary and curious event, and then being Sorted into House Ravenclaw, was closely akin to being dipped in barbecue sauce and flung into a pit of starving kittens.

"I promised the Sorting Hat not to talk about it," whispered Harry for the umpteenth time.

"Yes, really."

"No, I really did promise the Sorting Hat not to talk about it."

"Fine, I promised the Sorting Hat not to talk about *most* of it and the rest is *private* just like *yours was* so *stop asking*."

"You want to know what happened? Fine! Here's part of what happened! I told the Hat that Professor McGonagall threatened to set it on fire and it told me to tell Professor McGonagall that she was an impudent youngster and she should get off its lawn!"

"If you're not going to believe what I say then *why are you even asking?* "

"No, I don't know how I defeated the Dark Lord either! You tell me if you figure it out!"

" *Silence!* " shouted Professor McGonagall at the podium of the Head Table. " *No talking until the Sorting Ceremony finishes!* "

There was a brief dip in the volume, as everyone waited to see if she was going to make any specific and credible threats, and then the whispers started up again.

Then the silver-bearded ancient stood up from his great golden chair, smiling cheerfully.

Instant silence. Someone frantically elbowed Harry as he tried to continue a whisper, and Harry cut himself off in mid-sentence.

The cheerful-looking old man sat down again.

*Note to self: Do not mess with Dumbledore.*

Harry was still trying to process everything that had happened during the Incident with the Sorting Hat. Not the least of which was what had happened the instant Harry had lifted the Hat off his head; in that moment, he'd heard a tiny whisper as though from nowhere, something that sounded oddly like English and a hiss at the same time, something that had said, "*Ssalutations from Sslytherin to Sslytherin: if you would sseek my ssecretss, sspeak to my ssnake.*"

Harry was sorta guessing that wasn't supposed to be part of the official Sorting process. And that it was a bit of extra magic set down by Salazar Slytherin during the making of the Hat. And that the Hat itself didn't know about it. And that it was triggered when the Hat said "SLYTHERIN", plus or minus some other conditions. And that a Ravenclaw like himself *really, really wasn't supposed to have heard it*. And that if he could find some reliable way of swearing Draco to secrecy so he could ask him about it, that would be an excellent time to have some Comed-Tea handy.

*Boy, you resolve not to go down the path of a Dark Lord and the universe starts messing with you the instant the Hat comes off your head. Some days it just doesn't pay to fight destiny. Maybe I'll wait until tomorrow to start on my resolution to not be a Dark Lord.*

"GRYFFINDOR!"

Ron Weasley got a *lot* of applause, and not just from the Gryffindors. Apparently the Weasley family was widely liked around here. Harry, after a moment, smiled and started applauding along with the others.

Then again, there was no time like today to turn back from the Dark Side.

Stuff destiny and stuff the universe. He'd show that Hat.

"Zabini, Blaise!"

Pause.

"SLYTHERIN!" shouted the hat.

Harry applauded Zabini too, ignoring the odd looks he was getting from everyone including Zabini.

No other name was called out after that, and Harry realised that "Zabini, Blaise" did sound close to the end of the alphabet. Great, so now he'd *only* applauded Zabini... Oh well.

Dumbledore got up again and began heading towards the podium. Apparently they were about to be treated to a speech -

And Harry was struck by the inspiration for a *brilliant* experimental test.

Hermione had said that Dumbledore was the most powerful wizard alive, right?

Harry reached into his pouch and whispered, "Comed-Tea".

For the Comed-Tea to work, it would have to make Dumbledore say something *so* ridiculous during his speech that even in Harry's state of mental preparedness, he would *still* choke. Like, all the Hogwarts students had to not wear any clothes for the whole school year, or everyone was going to be transformed into cats.

But then if *anyone in the world* could resist the power of the Comed-Tea, it would be Dumbledore. So if this worked, the Comed-Tea was literally *invincible*.

Harry pulled the ring on the Comed-Tea under the table, wanting to do this a bit unobtrusively. The can made a quiet hissing noise. A few heads turned to look at him, but soon turned back as -

"Welcome! Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts!" said Dumbledore, beaming at the students with his arms opened wide, as if nothing could have pleased him more than to see them all there.

## CHAPTER 12

Harry took a first mouthful of Comed-Tea and lowered the can again. He would swallow the pop a little at a time and try not to choke no matter *what* Dumbledore said -

"Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Happy happy boom boom swamp swamp swamp! Thank you!"

Everyone clapped and cheered, and Dumbledore sat down again.

Harry sat frozen as pop trickled out of the corners of his mouth. He had, at least, managed to choke *quietly*.

He really really *really* shouldn't have done that. Amazing how much *more obvious* that became *one second* after it was *too late*.

In retrospect he probably should have noticed something wrong when he was thinking about everyone being turned into cats... or even before then, remembered his mental note not to mess with Dumbledore... or his newfound resolution to be more considerate of others... or maybe if he'd had *one single scrap* of *common sense* ...

It was hopeless. He was corrupt to the core. Hail the Dark Lord Harry. You couldn't fight fate.

Someone was asking Harry if he was all right. (Others were starting to serve themselves food, which had magically appeared on the table, whatever.)

"I'm all right," Harry said. "Excuse me. Um. Was that a... *normal* speech for the Headmaster? You all... didn't seem... very surprised..."

"Oh, Dumbledore's insane, of course," said an older-looking Ravenclaw sitting next to him who had introduced himself with some name Harry didn't even begin to remember. "Lots of fun, incredibly powerful wizard, but completely bonkers." He paused. "At some later point I'd also like to ask why green fluid came out of your lips and then disappeared, though I expect you promised the Sorting Hat not to talk about that either."

With a great effort, Harry stopped himself from glancing down at the incriminating can of Comed-Tea in his hand.

After all, the Comed-Tea hadn't just arbitrarily *materialised* a Quibbler headline about him and Draco. Draco had explained it in a way that made it seem like it had all happened... naturally? As if it had *altered history to fit*?

Harry was mentally imagining himself banging his forehead against the table. *Wham, wham, wham* went his head within his mind.

Another student lowered her voice to a whisper. "I hear that Dumbledore is secretly a genius mastermind controlling lots of stuff and he uses the insanity as a cover so that no one will suspect him."

"I've heard that too," whispered a third student, and there were furtive nods from around the table.

This couldn't help but catch Harry's attention.

"I see," whispered Harry, lowering his own voice. "So everyone knows that Dumbledore is secretly a mastermind."

Most of the students nodded. One or two looked suddenly thoughtful, including the older student sitting next to Harry.

*Are you sure this is the Ravenclaw table?* Harry managed not to ask out loud.

"Brilliant!" Harry whispered. "If everyone knows, no one will suspect it's a secret!"

"Exactly," whispered a student, and then he frowned. "Wait, that doesn't sound quite right -"

*Note to self: The 75th percentile of Hogwarts students a.k.a. Ravenclaw House is not the world's most exclusive program for gifted children.*

But at least he'd learned an important fact today. The Comed-Tea was omnipotent. And *that* meant...

Harry blinked in surprise as his mind finally made the obvious connection.

... *that* meant that as soon as he learned a spell to temporarily alter his own sense of humor, he could make *anything* happen, by making it so that he would *only* find that *one thing* surprising enough to do a spit-take, and then drinking a can of Comed-Tea.

*Well that was a short little journey to godhood. Even I expected this to take longer than my first day of school.*

Come to think of it, he had also completely wrecked Hogwarts within ten minutes flat of getting Sorted.

Harry did feel a certain amount of regret about this - Merlin knew what an insane Headmaster was going to do to his next seven years of schooling - but he couldn't *help* feeling a twinge of pride, too.

Tomorrow. No later than tomorrow at the very latest he was going to stop walking down the path that led to Dark Lord Harry. A prospect which was sounding scarier by the minute.

And yet also, somehow, increasingly attractive. Part of his mind was already visualising the minions' uniforms.

"Eat," the older student sitting next to him growled, and jabbed Harry in the ribs. "Don't think. Eat."

Harry automatically started loading up his plate with whatever was in front of him, blue sausages with tiny glowing bits, whatever.

"What were you thinking about, the Sorting -" began to say Padma Patil, one of the other first-year Ravenclaws.

"No pestering during mealtimes!" chorused at least three people. "House Rule!" added another. "Otherwise we'd all starve around here."

Harry was finding himself really, really hoping that his clever new idea didn't *actually* work. And that the Comed-Tea worked some other way and didn't *actually* have the omnipotent power to alter reality. It wasn't that he didn't *want* to be omnipotent. It was that he just couldn't bear the thought of living in a universe that really worked like that. There was something *undignified* about ascending through the clever use of fizzy drinks.

But he *was* going to test it experimentally.

"You know," said the older student next to him in a quite pleasant tone, "we have a system for forcing people like you to eat, would you like to find out what it is?"

Harry gave up and started eating his blue sausage. It was quite good, especially the glowing bits.

Dinner passed with surprising rapidity. Harry tried to sample at least a little of all the weird new foods he saw. His curiosity couldn't stand the thought of *not knowing* how something tasted. Thank goodness this wasn't a restaurant where you had to order only one thing and you never found out what all the other things on the menu tasted like. Harry *hated* that, it was like a torture chamber for anyone with a spark of curiosity: *Find out about only one of the mysteries on this list, ha ha ha!*

Then it was time for dessert, which Harry had completely forgotten to leave room for. He gave up after sampling a small bit of treacle tart. Surely all these things would pass around at least once again over the course of the school year.

So what was on his to-do list, besides the ordinary school things?

*To-do 1. Research mind-alteration charms so you can test the Comed-Tea and see whether you actually did figure out a path to omnipotence. Actually, just research every kind of mind magic you can find. Mind is the foundation of our power as humans, any kind of magic that affects it is the most important sort of magic there is.*

*To-do 2. Actually this is To-do 1 and the other is To-do 2. Go through the bookshelves of the Hogwarts and Ravenclaw libraries, familiarising yourself with the system and making sure you've at least read all the book titles. Second pass: read all tables of contents. Coordinate with Hermione who has a much better memory than you. Find out if there's an interlibrary loan system at Hogwarts and see if the two of you, especially Hermione, can visit those libraries too. If other Houses have private libraries, figure out how to access legally or sneak in.*

*Option 3a: Swear Hermione to secrecy and try to start researching 'From Slytherin to Slytherin: if you would seek my secrets, speak to my snake.' Problem: This sounds highly confidential and it could take quite a while to randomly run across a book containing a hint.*

*To-do 0: Check out what sort of information-search-and-retrieval spells exist, if any. Library magic isn't as ultimately important as mind magic but it has a much higher priority.*

*Option 3b: Look for a spell to magically bind Draco Malfoy to secrecy, or magically verify the sincerity of Draco's promise to keep a secret (Veritaserum?), and then ask him about Slytherin's message...*

Actually... Harry had a pretty bad feeling about option 3b.

## CHAPTER 12

Now that Harry thought about it, he didn't feel all that great about option 3a, either.

Harry's thoughts flashed back to possibly the worst moment of his life to date, those long seconds of blood-freezing horror beneath the Hat, when he thought he'd already failed. He'd wished then to fall back just a few minutes in time and change something, anything before it was too late...

And then it had turned out to not be too late after all.

Wish granted.

You couldn't change history. But you could get it right to start with. Do something differently the *first* time around.

This whole business with seeking Slytherin's secrets... seemed an awful lot like the sort of thing where, years later, you would look back and say, 'And *that* was where it all started going wrong.'

And he would wish desperately for the ability to fall back through time and make a different choice...

Wish granted. Now what?

Harry slowly smiled.

It was a rather *counterintuitive* thought... but...

But he *could*, there was no rule saying he couldn't, he *could* just pretend he'd never heard that little whisper. Let the universe go on in exactly the same way it would have if that one critical moment had never occurred. Twenty years later, that was what he would desperately wish had happened twenty years ago, and twenty years before twenty years later happened to be right now. Altering the distant past was easy, you just had to think of it at the right time.

Or... this was even *more* counterintuitive... he could even inform, oh, say, *Professor McGonagall*, instead of Draco *or* Hermione. And she could get a few good people together and get that little extra spell taken off the Hat.

Why, yes. That sounded like a *remarkably* good idea once Harry had actually *thought* of it.

So very obvious in retrospect, and yet somehow, Option 3c and Option 3d just hadn't occurred to him.

Harry awarded himself +1 point on his anti-Dark-Lord-Harry program.

It had been an awfully cruel prank the Hat had played on him, but you couldn't argue with the results on consequentialist grounds. It certainly did give him a better idea of the victim's perspective, though.

*To-do 4: Apologise to Neville Longbottom.*

Okay, he was on a roll here, now he just had to keep it up. *In every day, in every way, I'm getting Lighter and Lighter...*

People around Harry had also mostly stopped eating at this point, and the dessert serving dishes began to vanish, and the used plates.

When all the plates were gone, Dumbledore once again stood up from his seat.

Harry couldn't help but feel the urge to drink another Comed-Tea.

*You've GOT to be kidding*, Harry thought at that piece of himself.

But the experiment didn't count if it wasn't replicated, did it? And the damage was already done, wasn't it? Didn't he want to see what would happen *this* time? Wasn't he *curious*? What if he got a different result?

*Hey, I bet you're the same part of my brain that pushed through the prank on Neville Longbottom.*

Er, maybe?

*And is it not overwhelmingly obvious that if I do this I shall regret it one second after it is too late?*

Um...

*Yeab. So, NO.*

"Ahem," said Dumbledore from the podium, stroking his long silver beard. "Just a few more words now that we are all fed and watered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give you."

"First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. That is why it is called the Forbidden Forest. If it were permitted it would be called the Permitted Forest."

Straightforward. *Note to self: Forbidden Forest is forbidden.*

"I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors. Alas, we all know that what *should be*, and what *is*, are two different things. Thank you for keeping this in mind."

Er...

"Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their house teams should contact Madam Hooch. Anyone interested in reformulating the entire game of Quidditch should contact Harry Potter."

Harry inhaled his own saliva and went into a coughing fit just as all eyes turned towards him. How the *hell*! He hadn't met Dumbledore's eyes at any point... he didn't *think*. He certainly hadn't been thinking about Quidditch at the time! He hadn't talked to anyone but Ron Weasley and he didn't *think* Ron would have told anyone else... or had Ron run off to a professor to complain? *How on Earth...*

"Additionally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death. It is guarded by an elaborate series of dangerous and potentially lethal traps, and you cannot possibly get past all of them, especially if you are only in your first year."

Harry was numb at this point.

"And finally, I extend my greatest thanks to Quirinus Quirrell for heroically agreeing to undertake the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor at Hogwarts." Dumbledore's gaze moved searchingly across the students. "I hope all students will extend Professor Quirrell that utmost courtesy and *tolerance* which is due his extraordinary service to you and this school, and that you *will not pester us* with any *niggling complaints* about him, unless *you* want to try doing his job."

What was *that* about?

"I now yield the floor to our new faculty member Professor Quirrell, who would like to say a few words."

The young, thin, nervous man who Harry had first met in the Leaky Cauldron slowly made his way up to the podium, glancing fearfully around in all directions. Harry caught a glimpse of the back of his head, and it looked like Professor Quirrell might already be going bald, despite his seeming youth.

"Wonder what's wrong with *him*," whispered the older-looking student sitting next to Harry. Similar hushed comments were being exchanged elsewhere along the table.

Professor Quirrell made his way up to the podium and stood there, blinking. "Ah..." he said. "Ah..." Then his courage seemed to fail him utterly, and he stood there in silence, occasionally twitching.

"Oh, great," whispered the older student, "looks like another *long* year in Defence class -"

"Salutations, my young apprentices," Professor Quirrell said in a dry, confident tone. "We all know that Hogwarts tends to suffer a certain *misfortune* in its selections for this position, and no doubt many of you are already wondering what doom shall befall me this year. I assure you, that doom is not to be my incompetence." He smiled thinly. "Believe it or not, I have long wished to someday try my hand as the Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts here at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The first to teach this class was Salazar Slytherin himself, and as late as the fourteenth century it was traditional for the greatest fighting wizards of every persuasion to try their hands at teaching here. Past Professors of Defence have included not just the legendary wandering hero Harold Shea but also the quote undying unquote Baba Yaga, yes, I see some of you are still shuddering at the sound of her name even though she's been dead for six hundred years. That must have been an interesting time to attend Hogwarts, don't you think?"

Harry was swallowing hard, trying to suppress the sudden surge of emotion that had overcome him when Professor Quirrell had begun speaking. The precise tones reminded him very much of a lecturer at Oxford, and it was starting to hit home that Harry wasn't going to see his home or his Mum or his Dad until Christmas.



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"You are accustomed to the Defence position being filled by incompetents, scoundrels, and the unlucky. To anyone with a sense of history, it bears another reputation entirely. Not everyone who teaches here has been the best, but the best have all taught at Hogwarts. In such august company, and after so much time anticipating this day, I would be ashamed to set myself any standard lower than perfection. And so I do intend that every one of you will always remember this year as the *best* Defence class that you have ever had. What you learn this year will forever serve as your firm foundation in the arts of Defence, no matter who your teachers before and after."

Professor Quirrell's expression grew serious. "We have a *great* deal of lost ground to make up and not much time to cover it. Therefore I intend to depart from Hogwarts teaching conventions in a number of respects, as well as introducing some optional after-school activities." He paused. "If that is not sufficient, perhaps I can find new ways to motivate you. You are my long-awaited students, and you *will* do your *very* best in my long-awaited Defence class. I would add some sort of dreadful threat, like 'Otherwise you will suffer horribly', but that would be so clichéd, don't you think? I pride myself on being more imaginative than that. Thank you."

Then the vigour and confidence seemed to drain away from Professor Quirrell. His mouth gaped open as if he had suddenly found himself facing an unexpected audience, and he turned with a convulsive jerk and shuffled back to his seat, hunched over as if he was about to collapse in on himself and implode.

"He seems a little odd," whispered Harry.

"Meh," said the older-looking student. "You ain't seen nothin'."

Dumbledore resumed the podium.

"And now," said Dumbledore, "before we go to bed, let us sing the school song! Everyone pick their favourite tune and favourite words, and off we go!"

# CHAPTER 13

## ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS

Elen sila J. K. Rowling omentielvo.

EDIT: Don't panic. I solemnly swear that there is a logical, foreshadowed, canon-compliant explanation for everything which happens in this chapter. It's a puzzle, you're supposed to try to solve it, and if not, just read the next chapter.



*"That's one of the most obvious riddles I've ever heard."*



As soon as Harry opened his eyes in the Ravenclaw first-year boys' dormitory, on the morning of his first full day at Hogwarts, he knew something was wrong.

It was quiet.

*Too* quiet.

Oh, right... There was a Quietus Charm on his bed's headboard, controlled by a small slider bar, which was the only reason it was ever possible for anyone to go to sleep in Ravenclaw.

Harry sat up and looked around, expecting to see others rising for the day -

The dorm, empty.

The beds, rumpled and unmade.

The sun, coming in at a rather high angle.

His Quieter turned all the way up to maximum.

And his mechanical alarm clock was still running, but the alarm was turned off.

He'd been allowed to sleep until 9:52 AM, apparently. Despite his best efforts to synchronize his 26-hour sleep cycle to his arrival at Hogwarts, he hadn't gotten to sleep last night until around 1AM. He'd been planning to wake up at 7:00AM with the other students, he could stand being a little sleep-deprived his first day so long as he got some sort of magical fix before tomorrow. But now he'd missed breakfast. And his very first class at Hogwarts, in Herbology, had started one hour and twenty-two minutes ago.

## CHAPTER 13

The anger was slowly, slowly wakening in him. Oh, what a nice little prank. Turn off his alarm. Turn up the Quieter. And let Mr. Bigshot Harry Potter miss his first class, and be blamed for being a heavy sleeper.

When Harry found out who'd done this...

No, this could only have been done with the cooperation of all twelve other boys in the Ravenclaw dorm. All of them would have seen his sleeping form. All of them had let him sleep through breakfast.

The anger drained away, replaced by confusion and a horribly wounded feeling. They'd *liked* him. He'd thought. Last night, he'd thought they liked him. *Why...*

As Harry stepped out of the bed, he saw a piece of paper facing out from his headboard.

The paper said,

*My fellow Ravenclaws,*

*It's been an extra long day. Please let me sleep in and don't worry about my missing breakfast. I haven't forgotten about my first class.*

*Yours,*

*Harry Potter.*

And Harry stood there, frozen, ice water beginning to trickle through his veins.

The paper was in his own handwriting, in his own mechanical pencil.

And he didn't remember writing it.

And... Harry squinted at the piece of paper. And unless he was imagining it, the words "I haven't forgotten" were written in a different style, as if he was trying to tell himself something...?

Had he *known* he was going to be Obliviated? Had he stayed up late, committed some sort of crime or covert activity, and then... but he didn't *know* the Obliviate spell... had someone else... what...

A thought occurred to Harry. If he *had* known he was going to be Obliviated...

Still in his pyjamas, Harry ran around his bed to his trunk, pressed his thumb against the lock, pulled out his pouch, stuck in his hand and said "Note to myself."

And another piece of paper popped into his hand.

Harry took it out, staring at it. It too was in his own handwriting.

The note said:

*Dear Me,*

*Please play the game. You can only play the game once in a lifetime. This is an irreplaceable opportunity.*

*Recognition code 927, I am a potato.*

*Yours,*

*You.*

Harry nodded slowly. "Recognition code 927, I am a potato" was indeed the message he had worked out in advance - some years earlier, while watching TV - that only he would know. If he had to identify a duplicate of himself as being really *him*, or something. Just in case. Be Prepared.

Harry couldn't *trust* the message, there might be other spells involved. But it ruled out any simple prank. He had definitely written this and he definitely didn't remember writing it.

Staring at the paper, Harry became aware of ink showing through from the other side.

He flipped it over.

The reverse side read:

### *INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE GAME:*

*you do not know the rules of the game*  
*you do not know the stakes of the game*  
*you do not know the objective of the game*  
*you do not know who controls the game*  
*you do not know how to end the game*

## ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS

*You start with 100 points.*

*Begin.*

Harry stared at the "instructions". This side wasn't handwritten; the writing was perfectly regular, hence artificial. It looked as if it had been inscribed by a Quotes Quill, such as the one he'd bought to take dictation.

He had *absolutely no clue* what was going on.

Well... step one was to get dressed and eat. Maybe reverse the order of that. His stomach felt rather empty.

He'd missed breakfast, of course, but he was Prepared for that eventuality, having visualised it in advance. Harry put his hand into his pouch and said "Snack bars", expecting to get the box of cereal bars he'd bought before departing for Hogwarts.

What popped up did not feel like a box of cereal bars.

When Harry brought his hand into his field of vision he saw two tiny candy bars - not nearly enough for a meal - attached to a note, and the note was inscribed in the same writing as the game instructions.

The note said:

ATTEMPT FAILED: -1 POINT

CURRENT POINTS: 99

PHYSICAL STATE: STILL HUNGRY

MENTAL STATE: CONFUSED

"Gleehhhhh" Harry's mouth said without any sort of conscious intervention or decision on his part.

He stood there for around a minute.

One minute later, it *still* didn't make any sense and he *still* had absolutely no idea what was going on and his brain hadn't even *begun* to grasp at any *hypotheses* like his mental hands were encased in rubber balls and couldn't pick anything up.

His stomach, which had its own priorities, suggested a possible experimental probe.

"Ah..." Harry said to the empty room. "I don't suppose I could spend a point and get my box of cereal bars back?"

There was only silence.

Harry put his hand into the pouch and said "Box of cereal bars."

A box that felt like the right shape popped up into his hand... but it was too light, and it was open, and it was empty, and the note attached to it said:

POINTS SPENT: 1

CURRENT POINTS: 98

YOU HAVE GAINED: A BOX OF CEREAL BARS

"I'd like to spend one point and get the *actual cereal bars* back," said Harry.

Again, silence.

Harry put his hand into the pouch and said "cereal bars".

Nothing came up.

Harry shrugged despairingly and went over to the cabinet he'd been given near his bed, to get his wizard's robes for the day.

On the floor of the cabinet, under his robes, were the cereal bars, and a note:

POINTS SPENT: 1

CURRENT POINTS: 97

YOU HAVE GAINED: 6 CEREAL BARS

YOU ARE STILL WEARING: PYJAMAS

DO NOT EAT WHILE YOU ARE WEARING YOUR PYJAMAS

YOU WILL GET A PYJAMA PENALTY

*And now I know that whoever controls the game is insane.*

## CHAPTER 13

"My guess is that the game is controlled by Dumbledore," Harry said out loud. Maybe *this* time he could set a new land speed record for being quick on the uptake.

Silence.

But Harry was starting to pick up the pattern; the note would be in the next place he looked. So Harry looked under his bed.

HA! HA HA HA HA HA!

HA HA HA HA HA HA!

HA! HA! HA! HA! HA! HA!

DUMBLEDORE DOES NOT CONTROL THE GAME

BAD GUESS

VERY BAD GUESS

-20 POINTS

AND YOU ARE STILL WEARING PYJAMAS

IT IS YOUR FOURTH MOVE

AND YOU ARE STILL WEARING PYJAMAS

PYJAMA PENALTY: -2 POINTS

CURRENT POINTS: 75

Welp, that was a puzzler, all right. It was only his first day at school and once you ruled out Dumbledore, he didn't know the name of anyone else here who was this crazy.

His body more or less on autopilot, Harry gathered up a set of robes and underwear, pulled out the cavern level of his trunk (he was a very private sort of person and someone might walk into the dorm), got dressed, and then went back upstairs to put away his pyjamas.

Harry paused before pulling out the cabinet drawer that held his pyjamas. If the pattern here held true...

"How can I earn more points?" Harry said out loud.

Then he pulled out the drawer.

OPPORTUNITIES TO DO GOOD ARE EVERYWHERE

BUT DARKNESS IS WHERE THE LIGHT NEEDS TO BE

COST OF QUESTION: 1 POINT

CURRENT POINTS: 74

NICE UNDERWEAR

DID YOUR MOTHER PICK THEM OUT?

Harry crushed the note in his hand, face flaming scarlet. Draco's curse came back to him. *Son of a mudblood* -

At this point he knew better than to say it out loud. He would probably get a Profanity Penalty.

Harry girded himself with his mokeskin pouch and wand. He peeled off the wrapper of one his cereal bars and threw it into the room's rubbish bin, where it landed atop a mostly-uneaten Chocolate Frog, a crumpled envelope and some green and red wrapping paper. He put the other cereal bars into his mokeskin pouch.

He looked around in a final, desperate, and ultimately futile search for clues.

And then Harry left the dorm, eating as he went, in search of the Slytherin dungeons. At least that was what he *thought* the line was about.

Trying to navigate the halls of Hogwarts was like... probably *not* quite as bad as wandering around inside an Escher painting, that was the sort of thing you said for rhetorical effect rather than for its being true.

A short time later, Harry was thinking that in fact an Escher painting would have both pluses and minuses compared to Hogwarts. Minuses: No consistent gravitational orientation. Pluses: At least the stairs wouldn't move around *WHILE YOU WERE STILL ON THEM*.

Harry had originally climbed four flights of stairs to get to his dorm. After clambering down no fewer than twelve flights of stairs without getting anywhere near the dungeons, Harry had concluded that (1) an Escher

## ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS

painting would be a *cakewalk* by comparison, (2) he was somehow *higher* in the castle than when he'd started, and (3) he was so *thoroughly* lost that he wouldn't have been surprised to look out of the next window and see two moons in the sky.

Backup plan A had been to stop and ask for directions, but there seemed to be an extreme lack of people wandering around, as if the beggars were all attending class the way they were supposed to or something.

Backup plan B...

"I'm lost," Harry said out loud. "Can, um, the spirit of the Hogwarts castle help me or something?"

"I don't think this castle has a spirit," observed a wizened old lady in one of the paintings on the walls. "Life, perhaps, but not spirit."

There was a brief pause.

"Are you -" Harry said, and then shut his mouth. On second thought, no he was NOT going to ask the painting whether it was fully conscious in the sense of being aware of its own awareness.

"I'm Harry Potter," said his mouth, more or less on autopilot. Also more or less automatically, Harry stuck out a hand towards the painting.

The woman in the painting looked down at Harry's hand and raised her eyebrows.

Slowly, the hand dropped back to Harry's side.

"Sorry," Harry said, "I'm sort of new here."

"So I perceive, young raven. Where are you trying to go?"

Harry hesitated. "I'm not really sure," he said.

"Then perhaps you are already there."

"Well, wherever I *am* trying to go, I don't think *this* is it..." Harry shut his mouth, aware of just how much he was sounding like an idiot. "Let me start over. I'm playing this game only I don't know what the rules are -" That didn't really work either, did it. "Okay, third try. I'm looking for opportunities to do good so I can score points, and all I have is this cryptic hint about how darkness is where the light needs to be, so I was trying to go down but I seem to keep going up instead..."

The old lady in the painting was looking at him rather sceptically.

Harry sighed. "My life tends to get a bit peculiar."

"Would it be fair to say that you don't know where you're going or why you're trying to get there?"

"*Entirely* fair."

The old lady nodded. "I'm not sure that being lost is your most important problem, young man."

"True, but unlike the more important problems, it's a problem I can understand how to solve and *now* is this conversation turning into a metaphor for human existence, I didn't even realise that was happening until just now."

The lady eyed Harry appraisingly. "You *are* a fine young raven, aren't you? For a moment I was starting to wonder. Well then, as a general rule, if you keep on turning left, you're bound to keep going down."

That sounded strangely familiar but Harry couldn't recall where he'd heard it before. "Um... you seem like a very intelligent person. Or a picture of a very intelligent person... anyway, have you heard of a mysterious game where you can only play once, and they won't tell you the rules?"

"Life," said the lady at once. "That's one of the most obvious riddles I've ever heard."

Harry blinked. "No," he said slowly. "I mean I got an actual note and everything saying that I had to play the game but I wouldn't be told the rules, and someone is leaving me little slips of paper telling me how many points I've lost for violating the rules, like a minus two point penalty for wearing pyjamas. Do you know anyone here at Hogwarts who's crazy enough and powerful enough to do something like that? Besides Dumbledore, I mean?"

The picture of a lady sighed. "I'm only a picture, young man. I remember Hogwarts as it was - not Hogwarts as it is. All I can tell you is that if this were a riddle, the answer would be that the game is life, and that while

we do not make all the rules ourselves, the one who awards or takes points is always you. If it is not riddle but reality - then I do not know."

Harry bowed very low to the picture. "Thank you, milady."

The lady curtsied to him. "I wish I could say that I'll remember you with fondness," she said, "but I probably won't remember you at all. Farewell, Harry Potter."

He bowed again in reply, and started to climb down the nearest flight of stairs.

Four left turns later he found himself staring down a corridor that ended, abruptly, in a tumbled mound of large rocks - as if there had been a cave-in, only the surrounding walls and ceiling were intact and made of quite regular castle stones.

"All right," Harry said to the empty air, "I give up. I'm asking for another hint. How do I get to where I need to go?"

"A hint! A hint, you say?"

The excited voice came from a painting on the wall not far away, this one a portrait of a middle-aged man in the loudest pink robes that Harry had ever seen or even imagined. In the portrait he was wearing a droopy old pointed hat with a fish on it (not a drawing of a fish, mind, but a fish).

"Yes!" Harry said. "A hint! A hint, I say! Only not just *any* hint, I'm looking for a *specific* hint, it's for a game I'm playing -"

"Yes, yes! A hint for the game! You're Harry Potter, aren't you? I'm Cornelion Flubberwalt! I was told by Erin the Consort who was told by Lord Weaselnose who was told by, I forget really. But it was a message for *me* to give to you! For *me*! No one's cared about me in, I don't know how long, maybe ever, I've been stuck down here in this bloody useless old corridor - a hint! I have your hint! It will only cost you three points! Do you want it?"

"Yes! I want it!" Harry was aware that he probably ought to keep his sarcasm under control but he just couldn't seem to help himself.

"The darkness can be found between the green study rooms and McGonagall's Transfiguration class! That's the hint! And get a move on, you're slower than a sack of snails! Minus ten points for being slow! Now you have 61 points! That was the rest of the message!"

"Thank you," Harry said. He was really getting behind on the game here. "Um... I don't suppose you know where the message *originally* came from, do you?"

"It was spoken by a hollow voice that belled forth from a gap within the air itself, a gap that opened upon a fiery abyss! That's what they told me!"

Harry was no longer sure, at this point, whether this was the sort of thing he ought to be sceptical about, or the sort of thing he should just take in stride. "And how can I find the line between the green study rooms and Transfiguration class?"

"Just spin back around and go left, right, down, down, right, left, right, up, and left again, you'll be at the green study room and if you go in and walk straight out the opposite side you'll be on a big curvy corridor that goes to an intersection and on the right side of that intersection will be a long straight hallway that goes to the Transfiguration classroom!" The figure of the middle-aged man paused. "At least that's how it was when *I* was in Hogwarts. This *is* a Monday on an odd-numbered year, isn't it?"

"Pencil and mechanical paper," Harry said to his pouch. "Er, cancel that, paper and mechanical pencil." He looked up. "Could you repeat that?"

After getting lost another two times, Harry felt that he was beginning to understand the basic rule for navigating the ever-changing maze that was Hogwarts, namely, *ask a painting for directions*. If this reflected some sort of incredibly deep life lesson he couldn't figure out what it was.

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The green study room was a surprisingly pleasant space with sunlight streaming in from windows of green-stained glass that showed dragons in calm, pastoral scenes. It had chairs that looked extremely comfortable, and tables that seemed very well-suited to studying in the company of one to three friends.

Harry couldn't *actually* walk straight through and out the door on the other side. There were *bookshelves* set into the wall, and he had to go over and read some of the titles, so as to not lose his claim to the Verres family name. But he did it quickly, mindful of the complaint about being slow, and then went out the other side.

He was walking down the "big curvy corridor" when he heard a young boy's voice cry out.

At times like this, Harry had an excuse to sprint all-out with no regards for saving energy or doing proper warmup exercises or worrying about crashing into things, a sudden frantic flight that nearly came to an equally sudden halt as he almost ran over a group of six first-year Hufflepuffs...

...who were huddled together, looking rather scared and like they desperately wanted to do something but couldn't figure out what, which probably had something to do with the group of five older Slytherins who seemed to be surrounding another young boy.

Harry was suddenly rather angry.

"*Excuse me!*" shouted Harry at the top of his lungs.

It might not have been necessary. People were already looking at him. But it certainly served to stop all the action cold.

Harry walked past the cluster of Hufflepuffs towards the Slytherins.

They looked down at him with expressions that ranged from anger to amusement to delight.

Part of Harry's brain was screaming in panic that these were much older and bigger boys who could stomp him flat.

Another part said dryly that anyone caught seriously stomping the Boy-Who-Lived was in for a whole *world* of trouble, especially if they were a pack of older Slytherins and there were seven Hufflepuffs who saw it, and that the chance of them doing him any permanent damage in the presence of witnesses was nearly zero. The only real weapon the older boys had against him was his own fear, if he allowed that.

Then Harry saw that the boy they had trapped was Neville Longbottom.

Of course.

That settled it. Harry had decided to apologise humbly to Neville and that meant Neville was *his*, how *dare* they?

Harry reached out and grabbed Neville by the wrist and *yanked* him out from between the Slytherins, the boy stumbling in shock as Harry pulled him out and in nearly the same motion pushed his own way through the same gap.

And Harry stood in the center of the Slytherins where Neville had stood, looking up at the much older, larger, and stronger boys.

"Hello," Harry said. "I'm the Boy-Who-Lived."

There was a rather awkward pause. No one seemed to know where the conversation was supposed to go from there.

Harry's eyes dropped downwards and saw some books and papers scattered around the floor. Oh, the old game where you let the boy try to pick up his books and then knock them out of his hand again. Harry couldn't remember ever being the object of that game himself, but he had a good imagination and his imagination was making him furious. Well, once the larger situation was resolved it would be easy enough for Neville to come back and pick up his materials, provided that the Slytherins stayed too intent on him to think of doing anything to the books.

Unfortunately his straying eyes had been noted. "Ooh," said the largest of the boys, "did 'oo want the widdle books -"



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"Shut up," Harry said coldly. *Keep them off balance. Don't do what they expect. Don't fall into a pattern that calls for them to bully you.* "Is this part of some incredibly clever plan that will gain you future advantage, or is it as pointless a disgrace to the name of Salazar Slytherin as it -"

The largest boy shoved Harry Potter hard, and he went sprawling out of the circle of Slytherins onto the hard stone floor of Hogwarts.

And the Slytherins laughed.

Harry rose up in what seemed to him like terribly slow motion. He didn't know yet how to use his wand, but there was no reason to let that stop him, under the circumstances.

"I'd like to pay *as many points as it takes* to get rid of this person," Harry said, pointing with his finger to the largest Slytherin.

Then Harry lifted his other hand, said "Abracadabra," and snapped his fingers.

At the word *Abracadabra* two of the Hufflepuffs screamed, including Neville, three other Slytherins leapt desperately out of the way of Harry's finger, and the largest Slytherin staggered back with an expression of shock, a sudden splash of red decorating his face and neck and chest.

Harry had *not* been expecting *that*.

Slowly, the largest Slytherin reached up to his head, and peeled off the pan of cherry pie that had just draped itself over him. The largest Slytherin held the pan in his hand for a moment, staring at it, then dropped it to the floor.

It probably wasn't the best time in the world for one of the Hufflepuffs to start laughing, but that was exactly what one of the Hufflepuffs was doing.

Then Harry caught sight of the note on the bottom of the pan.

"Hold on," Harry said, and darted forward to pick up the note. "This note's for me, I think -"

"*You*," growled the largest Slytherin, "*you, are, going, to -*"

"*Look* at this!" shouted Harry, brandishing the note at the older Slytherin. "I mean, just *look* at this! Can you believe I'm being charged 30 points for shipping and handling on one lousy pie? 30 points! I'm turning a loss on the deal even after rescuing an innocent boy in distress! And storage fees? Conveyance charges? Drayage costs? How do you get *drayage costs* on a *pie*?"

There was another one of those awkward pauses. Harry thought deadly thoughts at whichever Hufflepuff couldn't seem to stop giggling, that idiot was going to get him hurt.

Harry stepped back and shot the Slytherins his best lethal glare. "Now go away or I will just keep making your existence more and more surreal until you do. Let me warn you... messing with *my* life tends to make *your* life... *a little hairy*. Get it?"

In a single terrible motion, the largest Slytherin whipped his wand out to point at Harry and in the same instant was hit on the other side of his head by another pie, this one bright blueberry.

The note on this pie was rather large and clearly readable. "You might want to read the note on that pie," Harry observed. "I think it's for you this time."

The Slytherin slowly reached up, took the pie pan, turned it over with a wet glop that dropped more blueberry on the floor, and read a note that said:

### WARNING

NO MAGIC MAY BE USED ON THE CONTESTANT

WHILE THE GAME IS IN PROGRESS

FURTHER INTERFERENCE IN THE GAME

WILL BE REPORTED TO THE GAME AUTHORITIES

The expression of sheer bafflement on the Slytherin's face was a look of art. Harry thought that he might be starting to like this Game Controller.

## ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS

"Look," Harry said, "you want to call it a day? I think things are spiralling out of control here. How about you go back to Slytherin and I go back to Ravenclaw and we all just cool down a bit, okay?"

"I've got a better idea," hissed the largest Slytherin. "How about if you accidentally break all your fingers?"

"How in Merlin's name do you stage a believable accident after making the threat in front of a dozen witnesses, you *idiot* -"

The largest Slytherin slowly, deliberately reached out towards Harry's hands, and Harry froze in place, the part of his brain that was noticing the other boy's age and strength finally managing to make itself heard, screaming, *WHAT THE HECK AM I DOING?*

"Wait!" said one of the other Slytherins, his voice suddenly panicky. "Stop, you shouldn't actually do that!"

The largest Slytherin ignored him, taking Harry's right hand firmly in his left hand, and taking Harry's index finger in his right hand.

Harry stared the Slytherin straight in the eyes. Part of Harry was screaming, this wasn't supposed to happen, this wasn't *allowed* to happen, grownups would never let something like this *actually* happen -

Slowly, the Slytherin started to bend his index finger backwards.

*He hasn't actually broken my finger and it is beneath me to so much as flinch until he does. Until then, this is just another attempt to cause fear.*

"Stop!" said the Slytherin who had objected before. "Stop, this is a very bad idea!"

"I rather agree," said an icy voice. An older woman's voice.

The largest Slytherin let go of Harry's hand and jumped backwards as if burned.

"Professor Sprout!" cried one of the Hufflepuffs, sounding as glad as anyone Harry had ever heard in his life.

Into Harry's field of vision, as he turned, stalked a dumpy little woman with messily curled grey hair and clothes covered with dirt. She pointed an accusing finger at the Slytherins. "Explain yourselves," she said. "What are you doing with my Hufflepuffs and..." she looked at him. "My fine student, Harry Potter."

*Uh oh. That's right, it was HER class I missed this morning.*

"He threatened to kill us!" blurted one of the other Slytherins, the same one who'd called for a halt.

"What?" Harry said blankly. "I did *not*! If I was going to kill you I wouldn't make public threats first!"

A third Slytherin laughed helplessly and then stopped abruptly as the other boys shot him deadly glares.

Professor Sprout had adopted a rather sceptical expression. "What death threat would this be, exactly?"

"The Killing Curse! He pretended to use the Killing Curse on us!"

Professor Sprout turned to look at Harry. "Yes, quite a terrible threat from an eleven-year-old boy. Though still not something you should *ever* dream of pretending, Harry Potter."

"I don't even know the *words* to the Killing Curse," Harry said promptly. "And I didn't have my wand out at any time."

Now Professor Sprout was giving Harry a sceptical look. "I suppose this boy hit *himself* with two pies, then."

"He *didn't* use his wand!" blurted one of the young Hufflepuffs. "I don't know how he did it either, he just snapped his fingers and there was pie!"

"Really," said Professor Sprout after a pause. She drew her own wand. "I won't require it, since you do seem to be the victim here, but would you mind if I checked your wand to verify that?"

Harry took out his wand. "What do I -"

"*Prior Incantato*," said Sprout. She frowned. "That's odd, your wand doesn't seem to have been used at all."

Harry shrugged. "It hasn't, actually, I only got my wand and schoolbooks a few days ago."

Sprout nodded. "Then we have a clear case of accidental magic from a boy who felt threatened. And the rules plainly state that you are not to be held responsible. As for *you*..." she turned to the Slytherins. Her eyes dropped deliberately to Neville's books lying on the floor.

There was a long silence during which she looked at the five Slytherins.

"Three points from Slytherin, *each*," she said finally. "And six from *him*," pointing to the boy covered in pie. "Don't you *ever* meddle with my Hufflepuffs again, or my student Harry Potter either. Now *go*."

She didn't have to repeat herself; the Slytherins turned and walked away very quickly.

Neville went and started picking up his books. He seemed to be crying, but only a little. It might have been from delayed shock, or it might have been because the other boys were helping him.

"Thank you *very* much, Harry Potter," Professor Sprout said to him. "Seven points to Ravenclaw, one for each Hufflepuff you helped protect. And I won't say anything more."

Harry blinked. He'd been expecting something more along the lines of a lecture about keeping himself out of trouble, and a rather severe scolding for missing his very first class.

Maybe he *should* have gone to Hufflepuff. Sprout was cool.

"*Scourgify*," Sprout said to the mess of pie on the floor, which promptly vanished.

And she left, walking along the hall that led to the green study room.

"How did you *do* that?" hissed one of the Hufflepuff boys as soon as she was gone.

Harry smiled smugly. "I can make anything I want happen just by snapping my fingers."

The boy's eyes widened. "*Really?*"

"No," said Harry. "But when you're telling everyone this story be sure to share it with Hermione Granger in first-year Ravenclaw, she has an anecdote you might find amusing." He had absolutely no clue what was happening, but he wasn't about to pass up the opportunity to add to his growing legend. "Oh, and what was all that about the Killing Curse?"

The boy gave him a strange look. "You really don't know?"

"If I did, I wouldn't be asking."

"The words to the Killing Curse are," the boy swallowed, and his voice dropped to a whisper, and he held his hands away from his sides as if to make it very clear that he wasn't holding a wand, "*Avada Kedavra*."

*Well of course they are.*

Harry put this on his growing list of things to never ever tell his Dad, Professor Michael Verres-Evans. It was bad enough talking about how you were the only person to survive the fearsome Killing Curse, without having to admit that the Killing Curse was "Abracadabra."

"I see," Harry said after a pause. "Well, that's the last time I ever say *that* before snapping my fingers." Though it *had* produced an effect that might be tactically useful.

"*Why* did you -"

"Raised by Muggles, Muggles think it's a joke and that it's funny. Seriously, that's what happened. Sorry, but can you remind me of your name?"

"I'm Ernie Macmillan," said the Hufflepuff. He held out his hand, and Harry shook it. "Honoured to meet you."

Harry executed a slight bow. "Pleased to meet you, skip the honoured thing."

Then the other boys crowded round him and there was a sudden flood of introductions.

When they were done, Harry swallowed. This was going to be very difficult. "Um... if everyone would excuse me... I have something to say to Neville -"

All eyes turned to Neville, who took a step back, his face looking apprehensive.

"I suppose," Neville said in a tiny voice, "you're going to say I should've been braver -"

"Oh, no, nothing like that!" Harry said hastily. "Nothing to do with *that*. It's just, um, something the Sorting Hat told me -"

Suddenly the other boys looked *very* interested, except for Neville, who was looking even *more* apprehensive.

There seemed to be something blocking Harry's throat. He knew he should just blurt it out, and it was like he'd swallowed a large brick that was just stuck in the way.

## ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS

It was like Harry had to manually take control of his lips and produce each syllable individually, but he managed to make it happen. "I'm, sor, ry." He exhaled and took a deep breath. "For what I did, um, the other day. You... don't have to be gracious about it or anything, I'll understand if you just hate me. This isn't about me trying to look cool by apologising or your having to accept it. What I did was wrong."

There was a pause.

Neville clutched his books tighter to his chest. "Why did you do it?" he said in a thin, wavering voice. He blinked, as if trying to hold back tears. "Why does *everyone* do that to me, even the Boy-Who-Lived?"

Harry suddenly felt smaller than he ever had in his life. "I'm sorry," Harry said again, his voice now hoarsened. "It's just... you looked so scared, it was like a sign over your head saying 'victim', and I wanted to show you that things *don't* always turn out badly, that sometimes the monsters give you chocolate... I thought if I showed you that, you might realise there wasn't so much to be afraid of -"

"But there *is*," whispered Neville. "You saw it today, there *is*!"

"They wouldn't have done anything really bad in front of witnesses. Their main weapon is fear. That's why they target *you*, because they can see you're afraid. I wanted to make you less afraid... show you that the fear was worse than the thing itself... or that was what I told myself, but the Sorting Hat told me that I was lying to myself and that I really did it because it was fun. So that's why I'm apologising -"

"You hurt me," said Neville. "Just now. When you grabbed me and pulled me away from them." Neville held out his arm and pointed to where Harry had grabbed him. "I might have a bruise here later from how hard you pulled. You hurt me worse than anything the Slytherins did by bumping into me, actually."

"*Neville!*" hissed Ernie. "He was trying to *save* you!"

"I'm sorry," whispered Harry. "When I saw that I just got... really angry..."

Neville looked at him steadily. "So you yanked me out really hard and put yourself in where I was and went, 'Hello, I'm the Boy-Who-Lived'."

Harry nodded.

"I think you're going to be really cool someday," Neville said. "But right now, you're not."

Harry swallowed the sudden knot in his throat and walked away. He continued down the corridor to the intersection, then turned left into a hallway and kept on walking, blindly.

What was he *supposed* to do here? Never get angry? He wasn't sure he could have done anything without being angry and who knows what would have happened to Neville and his books then. Besides, Harry had read enough fantasy books to know how *this* one went. He would try to suppress the anger and he would fail and it would keep coming out again. And after this whole long journey of self-discovery he would learn at the end that his anger was a part of himself and that only by accepting it could he learn to use it wisely. *Star Wars* was the only universe in which the answer actually *was* that you were supposed to cut yourself off completely from negative emotions, and something about Yoda had always made Harry hate the little green moron.

So the obvious time-saving plan was to skip the journey of self-discovery and go straight to the part where he realised that only by accepting his anger as a part of himself could he stay in control of it.

The problem was that he didn't *feel* out of control when he was angry. The cold rage made him feel like he was *in* control. It was only when he looked back that *events as a whole* seemed to have... blown up out of control, somehow.

He wondered how much the Game Controller cared about that sort of thing, and whether he'd won or lost points for it. Harry himself felt like he'd lost quite a few points, and he was sure the old lady in the picture would have told him that his was the only opinion that mattered.

And Harry was also wondering whether the Game Controller had sent Professor Sprout. It was the logical thought: the note had threatened to notify the Game Authorities, and then there Professor Sprout was. Maybe Professor Sprout *was* the Game Controller - the *Head of House Hufflepuff* would be the *last* person anyone would suspect, which ought to put her near the top of Harry's list. He'd read one or two mystery novels, too.

## CHAPTER 13

"So how am I doing in the game?" Harry said out loud.

A sheet of paper flew over his head, as if someone had thrown it from behind him - Harry turned around, but there was no one there - and when Harry turned forwards again, the note was settling to the floor.

The note said:

POINTS FOR STYLE: 10

POINTS FOR GOOD THINKING: -3,000,000

RAVENCLAW HOUSE POINTS BONUS: 70

CURRENT POINTS: -2,999,871

TURNS REMAINING: 2

"*Minus three million points?*" Harry said indignantly to the empty hallway. "That seems excessive! I want to file an appeal with the Game Authorities! And how am I supposed to make up three million points in the next two turns?"

Another note flew over his head.

APPEAL: FAILED

ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS: -1,000,000,000,000 POINTS

CURRENT POINTS: -1,000,002,999,871

TURNS REMAINING: 1

Harry gave up. With one turn remaining all he could do was take his best shot, even if it wasn't very good. "My guess is that the game represents life."

A final sheet of paper flew over his head, reading:

ATTEMPT FAILED

FAILED FAILED FAILED

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

CURRENT POINTS: MINUS INFINITY

YOU HAVE LOST THE GAME

FINAL INSTRUCTION:

*go to Professor McGonagall's office*

The last line was in his own handwriting.

Harry stared at the last line for a while, then shrugged. Fine. Professor McGonagall's office it would be. If *she* was the Game Controller...

Okay, honestly, Harry had absolutely no idea how he would feel if Professor McGonagall was the Game Controller. His mind was just drawing a complete blank. It was, literally, unimaginable.

A couple of portraits later - it wasn't a long trip, Professor McGonagall's office wasn't far from her Transfiguration classroom, at least not on Mondays on odd-numbered years - Harry stood outside the door to her office.

He knocked.

"Come in," said Professor McGonagall's muffled voice.

He entered.

# CHAPTER 14

## THE UNKNOWN AND THE UNKNOWABLE

Melenkurion abatha! Duroc minas mill J. K. Rowling!



*There were mysterious questions, but a mysterious answer was a contradiction in terms.*



"Come in," said Professor McGonagall's muffled voice.

Harry did so.

The office of the Deputy Headmistress was clean and well-organised; on the wall immediately adjacent to the desk was a maze of wooden cubbyholes of all shapes and sizes, most with several parchment scrolls thrust into them, and it was somehow very clear that Professor McGonagall knew exactly what every cubbyhole meant, even if no one else did. A single parchment lay on the actual desk, which was, aside from that, clean. Behind the desk was a closed door barred with several locks.

Professor McGonagall was sitting on a backless stool behind the desk, looking puzzled - her eyes had widened, with perhaps a slight note of apprehension, as she saw Harry.

"Mr. Potter?" said Professor McGonagall. "What is this about?"

Harry's mind went blank. He'd been instructed by the game to come here, he had been expecting *her* to have something in mind...

"Mr. Potter?" said Professor McGonagall, starting to look slightly annoyed.

Thankfully, Harry's panicking brain remembered at this point that he *did* have something he'd been planning to discuss with Professor McGonagall. Something important and well worth her time.

"Um..." Harry said. "If there are any spells you can cast to make sure no one's listening to us..."

Professor McGonagall stood up from her chair, firmly closed the outer door, and began taking out her wand and saying spells.

It was at this point that Harry realised he was faced with a priceless and possibly irreplaceable opportunity to offer Professor McGonagall a Comed-Tea and he couldn't believe he was seriously thinking that and it would be fine the soda would vanish after a few seconds and he told that part of himself to *shut up*.

## CHAPTER 14

It did, and Harry began to organise mentally what he was going to say. He hadn't planned to have this discussion *quite* so soon, but so long as he was here...

Professor McGonagall finished a spell that sounded a lot older than Latin, and then she sat down again.

"All right," she said in a quiet voice. "No one's listening." Her face was rather tight.

*Oh, right, she's expecting me to blackmail her for information about the prophecy.*

Eh, Harry'd get around to that some other day.

"It's about the Incident with the Sorting Hat," Harry said. (Professor McGonagall blinked.) "Um... I think there's an extra spell on the Sorting Hat, something that the Sorting Hat itself doesn't know about, something that triggers when the Sorting Hat says Slytherin. I heard a message that I'm pretty sure Ravenclaws aren't supposed to hear. It came the moment the Sorting Hat was off my head and I felt the connection break. It sounded like a hiss and like English at the same time," there was a sharp intake of breath from McGonagall, "and it said: Salutations from Slytherin to Slytherin, if you would seek my secrets, speak to my snake."

Professor McGonagall sat there with her mouth open, staring at Harry as if he'd grown another two heads.

"So..." Professor McGonagall said slowly, as though she couldn't believe the words that were coming out of her own lips, "you decided to come to me right away and tell me about it."

"Well, yes, of course," Harry said. There was no need to admit how long it had taken him to actually think of that. "As opposed to, say, trying to research it myself, or telling any of the other children."

"I... see," Professor McGonagall said. "And if, perhaps, you were to discover the entrance to Salazar Slytherin's legendary Chamber of Secrets, an entrance that you and you alone could open..."

"I would close the entrance and report to you at once so that a team of experienced magical archaeologists could be assembled," Harry said promptly. "Then I would open up the entrance again and they would go in very carefully to make sure that there was nothing dangerous. I might go in later to look around, or if they needed me to open up something else, but it would be after the area had been declared clear and they had photographs of how everything looked before people started tromping around their priceless historical site."

Professor McGonagall sat there with her mouth open, staring at him like he'd just turned into a cat.

"It's obvious if you're not a Gryffindor," Harry said kindly.

"I think," Professor McGonagall said in a rather choked voice, "that you *far* underestimate the rarity of common sense, Mr. Potter."

That sounded about right. Although... "A Hufflepuff would've said the same thing."

McGonagall paused, struck. " *That's* true."

"Sorting Hat offered me Hufflepuff."

She blinked at him as though she couldn't believe her own ears. "Did it *really*?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall said, and now her voice was low, "five decades ago was the last time a student died within the walls of Hogwarts, and I am now certain that five decades ago was the last time someone heard that message."

A chill went through Harry. "Then I will be *very* sure to take no action *whatsoever* on this matter without consulting you, Professor McGonagall." He paused. "And may I suggest that you get together the best people you can find and see if it's possible to get that extra spell off the Sorting Hat... and if you can't do that, maybe put on *another* spell, a Quietus that briefly activates just as the Hat is being removed from a student's head, that might work as a patch. There, no more dead students." Harry nodded in satisfaction.

Professor McGonagall looked even more stunned, if such a thing were imaginable. "I cannot *possibly* award you enough points for this without giving the House Cup to Ravenclaw outright."

"Um," Harry said. "Um. I'd rather not earn *that* many House points."

Now Professor McGonagall was giving him a strange look. "Why not?"

Harry was having a little difficulty putting it into words. "Because it would be just too sad, you know? Like... like back when I was still trying to go to school in the Muggle world, and whenever there was a group project, I'd go ahead and do the whole thing myself because the others would only slow me down. I'm fine with earning lots of points, more than anyone else even, but if I earn enough to be decisive in winning the House Cup just by myself, then it's like I'm carrying House Ravenclaw on my back and that's too sad."

"I see..." McGonagall said hesitantly. It was apparent that this way of thinking had never occurred to her. "Suppose I only awarded you fifty points, then?"

Harry shook his head again. "It's not fair to the other children if I earn lots of points for grownup things that I can be part of and they can't. How is Terry Boot supposed to earn fifty points for reporting a whisper he heard from the Sorting Hat? It wouldn't be fair at all."

"I see why the Sorting Hat offered you Hufflepuff," said Professor McGonagall. She was eyeing him with a strange respect.

That made Harry choke up a bit. He'd honestly thought he wasn't worthy of Hufflepuff. That the Sorting Hat had just been trying to shove him anywhere but Ravenclaw, into a House whose virtues he didn't have...

Professor McGonagall was smiling now. "And if I tried to give you *ten* points...?"

"Are you going to explain where those ten points came from, if anyone asks? There might be a lot of Slytherins, and I don't mean the children at Hogwarts, who would be really *really* angry if they knew about the spell being taken off the Sorting Hat and found out I was involved. So I think that absolute secrecy is the better part of valour. No need to thank me, ma'am, virtue is its own reward."

"So it is," Professor McGonagall said, "but I do have a very special something else to give you. I see that I have greatly wronged you in my thoughts, Mr. Potter. Please wait here."

She got up, went over to the locked back door, waved her wand, and a sort of blurry curtain sprang up around her. Harry could neither see nor hear what was going on. It was a few minutes later that the blur vanished and Professor McGonagall was standing there, facing him, with the door behind her looking as though it hadn't ever been opened.

And Professor McGonagall held out in one hand a necklace, a thin golden chain bearing in its center a silver circle, within which was the device of an hourglass. In her other hand was a folded pamphlet. "This is for you," she said.

Wow! He was going to get some sort of neat magical item as a quest reward! Apparently that business with refusing offers of monetary rewards until you got a magic item actually worked in real life, not just computer games.

Harry accepted his new necklace, smiling. "What is it?"

Professor McGonagall took a breath. "Mr. Potter, this is an item which is ordinarily lent only to children who have already shown themselves to be highly responsible, in order to help them with difficult class schedules." McGonagall hesitated, as though about to add something else. "I *must* emphasise, Mr. Potter, that this item's true nature is *secret* and that you must *not* tell any of the other students about it, or let them see you using it. If that's not acceptable to you, then you can give it back now."

"I can keep secrets," Harry said. "So what does it do?"

"So far as the other students are concerned, this is a Spimster wicket and it is used to treat a rare, non-contagious magical ailment called Spontaneous Duplication. You wear it under your clothes, and while you have no reason to show it to anyone, you also have no reason to treat it as an awful secret. Spimster wickets are not interesting. Do you understand, Mr. Potter?"

Harry nodded, his smile widening. He sensed the work of a *competent* Slytherin. "And what does it *really* do?"

"It's a Time-Turner. Each spin of the hourglass sends you one hour back in time. So if you use it to go back two hours every day, you should always be able to get to sleep at the same time."

Harry's suspension of disbelief blew completely out the window.



## CHAPTER 14

*You're giving me a time machine to treat my sleep disorder.*

*You're giving me a TIME MACHINE to treat my SLEEP DISORDER.*

*YOU'RE GIVING ME A TIME MACHINE IN ORDER TO TREAT MY SLEEP DISORDER .*

"Ehehehehhheh..." Harry's mouth said. He was now holding the necklace away from him as though it were a live bomb. Well, no, not as if it were a live bomb, that didn't *begin* to describe the severity of the situation. Harry held the necklace away from him as though it were a time machine.

*Say, Professor McGonagall, did you know that time-reversed ordinary matter looks just like antimatter? Why yes it does! Did you know that one kilogram of antimatter encountering one kilogram of matter will annihilate in an explosion equivalent to 43 million tons of TNT? Do you realise that I myself weigh 41 kilograms and that the resulting blast would leave A GLANT SMOKING CRATER WHERE THERE USED TO BE SCOTLAND?*

"Excuse me," Harry managed to say, "but this sounds really really *really* REALLY DANGEROUS!" Harry's voice didn't quite rise to a shriek, he couldn't possibly scream loud enough to do this situation justice so there was no point in trying.

Professor McGonagall looked upon him with tolerant affection. "I'm glad you're taking this seriously, Mr. Potter, but Time-Turners aren't *that* dangerous. We wouldn't give them to children if they were."

"Really," Harry said. "Ahahahaha. Of course you wouldn't give time machines to children if they were dangerous, what *was* I thinking? So just to be clear, sneezing on this device will *not* send me into the Middle Ages where I will run over Gutenberg with a horse cart and prevent the Enlightenment? Because, you know, I hate it when that happens to me."

McGonagall's lips were twitching in that way she had when she was trying not to smile. She offered Harry the pamphlet she was holding, but Harry was carefully holding out the necklace with both hands and staring at the hourglass to make sure it wasn't about to turn. "Don't worry," McGonagall said after a momentary pause, when it became clear that Harry wasn't going to move, "that can't possibly happen, Mr. Potter. The Time-Turner cannot be used to move more than six hours backwards. It can't be used more than six times in any day."

"Oh, good, very good, that. And if someone bumps into me the Time-Turner will *not* break and will *not* trap the whole castle of Hogwarts in an endlessly repeating loop of Thursdays."

"Well, they *can* be fragile..." said McGonagall. "And I do think I've heard about strange things happening if they're broken. But nothing like *that*!"

"Perhaps," Harry said when he could speak again, "you ought to provide your time machines with some sort of *protective shell*, rather than *leaving the glass exposed*, so as to *prevent that from happening*."

McGonagall looked quite struck. "That's an excellent idea, Mr. Potter. I shall inform the Ministry of it."

*That's it, it's official now, they've ratified it in Parliament, everyone in the wizarding world is completely stupid.*

"And while I hate to get all *PHILOSOPHICAL*," Harry desperately tried to lower his voice to something under a shriek, "has anyone thought about the *IMPLICATIONS* of going back six hours and doing something that changes time which would pretty much *DELETE ALL THE PEOPLE AFFECTED* and *REPLACE THEM WITH DIFFERENT VERSIONS* -"

"Oh, you can't *change* time!" Professor McGonagall interrupted. "Good heavens, Mr. Potter, do you think these would be allowed students if *that* was possible? What if someone tried to change their test scores?"

Harry took a moment to process this. His hands relaxed, just a little, from their white grip on the hourglass chain. Like he wasn't holding a time machine, just a live nuclear warhead.

"So..." Harry said slowly. "People just find that the universe... happens to be self-consistent, somehow, even though it has time-travel in it. If I and my future self interact then I'll see the same thing as both of me, even though, on my own first run through, my future self is already acting in full knowledge of things that, from my own perspective, haven't happened yet..." Harry's voice trailed off into the inadequacy of English.

"Correct, I think," said Professor McGonagall. "Although wizards *are* advised to avoid being seen by their past selves. If you're attending two classes at the same time and you need to cross paths with yourself, for

example, the first version of you should step aside and close his eyes at a known time - you have a watch already, good - so that the future you can pass. It's all there in the pamphlet."

"Ahahahaa. And what happens when someone *ignores* that advice?"

Professor McGonagall pursed her lips. "I understand that it can be quite disconcerting."

"And it doesn't, say, create a paradox that destroys the universe."

She smiled tolerantly. "Mr. Potter, I think I'd remember hearing if *that* had ever happened."

" *THAT IS NOT REASSURING! HAVEN'T YOU PEOPLE EVER HEARD OF THE ANTHROPIC PRINCIPLE? AND WHAT IDIOT EVER BUILT ONE OF THESE THINGS FOR THE FIRST TIME?* "

Professor McGonagall actually laughed. It was a pleasant, glad sound that seemed surprisingly out of place on that stern face. "You're having another 'you turned into a cat' moment, aren't you, Mr. Potter. You probably don't want to hear this, but it's quite endearingly cute."

"Turning into a cat doesn't even *BEGIN* to compare to this. You know right up until this moment I had this awful suppressed thought somewhere in the back of my mind that the only remaining answer was that my whole universe was a computer simulation like in the book *Simulacron 3* but now *even that is ruled out* because this little toy *ISN'T TURING COMPUTABLE!* A Turing machine could simulate going back into a defined moment of the past and computing a different future from there, an oracle machine could rely on the halting behavior of lower-order machines, but what you're saying is that reality somehow self-consistently computes in one sweep using information that hasn't... happened... yet..."

Realisation struck Harry a pile-driver blow.

It all made sense now. It all *finally* made sense.

" *SO THAT'S HOW THE COMED-TEA WORKS!* Of *course!* The spell doesn't *force* funny events to happen, it just makes you *feel an impulse to drink* right before funny things are going to happen anyway! I'm such a fool, I should have realised when I felt the impulse to drink the Comed-Tea before Dumbledore's second speech, *didn't* drink it, and then choked on my own saliva instead - drinking the Comed-Tea doesn't cause the comedy, the comedy causes you to drink the Comed-Tea! I saw the two events were correlated and assumed the Comed-Tea had to be the cause and the comedy had to be the effect because I thought temporal order restrained causation and causal graphs had to be acyclic BUT IT ALL MAKES SENSE ONCE YOU DRAW THE CAUSAL ARROWS GOING BACKWARDS IN TIME!"

Realisation struck Harry the *second* pile-driver.

This one he managed to keep quiet, making only a small strangling sound like a dying kitten as he realised who'd put the note on his bed this morning.

Professor McGonagall's eyes were alight. "After you graduate, or possibly even before, you really *must* teach some of these Muggle theories at Hogwarts, Mr. Potter. They sound quite fascinating, even if they're all wrong."

"Glehhahhh..."

Professor McGonagall offered him a few more pleasantries, demanded a few more promises to which Harry nodded, said something about not talking to snakes where anyone could hear him, reminded him to read the pamphlet, and then somehow Harry found himself standing outside her office with the door closed firmly behind him.

"Gaahhhrrrraa..." Harry said.

Why yes his mind *was* blown.

Not least by the fact that, if not for the Prank, he might well have never obtained a Time-Turner in the first place.

Or would Professor McGonagall have given it to him anyway, only later in the day, whenever he got around to asking about his sleep disorder or telling her about the Sorting Hat's message? And would he, at that time, have wanted to pull a prank on himself which would have led to him getting the Time-Turner *earlier*? So that the only *self-consistent* possibility was the one in which the Prank started before he even woke up in the morning...?

## CHAPTER 14

Harry found himself considering, for the first time in his life, that the answer to his question might be literally *inconceivable*. That since his own brain contained neurons that only ran forwards in time, there was *nothing* his brain could do, no operation it could perform, which was conjugate to the operation of a Time Turner.

Up until this point Harry had lived by the admonition of E. T. Jaynes that if you were ignorant about a phenomenon, that was a fact about your own state of mind, not a fact about the phenomenon itself; that your uncertainty was a fact about you, not a fact about whatever you were uncertain about; that ignorance existed in the mind, not in reality; that a blank map did not correspond to a blank territory. There were mysterious questions, but a mysterious answer was a contradiction in terms. A phenomenon could be mysterious *to* some particular person, but there could be no phenomena mysterious of themselves. To worship a sacred mystery was just to worship your own ignorance.

So Harry had looked upon magic and refused to be intimidated. People had no sense of history, they learned about chemistry and biology and astronomy and thought that these matters had always been the proper meat of science, that they had *never been* mysterious. The stars had once been mysteries. Lord Kelvin had once called the nature of life and biology - the response of muscles to human will and the generation of trees from seeds - a mystery "infinitely beyond" the reach of science. (Not just a little beyond, mind you, but *infinitely* beyond. Lord Kelvin certainly had felt a huge emotional charge from *not knowing something*.) Every mystery ever solved had been a puzzle from the dawn of the human species right up until someone solved it.

Now, for the first time, he was up against the prospect of a mystery that was threatening to be *permanent*. If Time didn't work by acyclic causal networks then Harry didn't understand what was meant by cause and effect; and if Harry didn't understand causes and effects then he didn't understand what sort of stuff reality might be made of instead; and it was entirely possible that his human mind never *could* understand, because his brain was made of *old-fashioned linear-time neurons*, and this had turned out to be an impoverished subset of reality.

On the plus side, the Comed-Tea, which had once seemed all-powerful and all-unbelievable, had turned out to have a much simpler explanation. Which he'd missed *merely* because the truth was completely outside his hypothesis space or anything that his brain had evolved to comprehend. But now he actually *had* figured it, probably. Which was sort of encouraging. Sort of.

Harry glanced down at his watch. It was nearly 11AM, he'd gotten to sleep last night at 1AM, so in the natural state of affairs he'd go to sleep tonight at 3AM. So to go to sleep at 10PM and wake up at 7AM, he should go back five hours total. Which meant that if he wanted to get back to his dorm at around 6AM, before anyone was awake, he'd better hurry up and...

Even in *retrospect* Harry didn't understand how he'd pulled off *half* the stuff involved in the Prank. Where had the *pie* come from?

Harry was starting to seriously fear time travel.

On the other hand, he had to admit that it *had* been an irreplaceable opportunity. A prank you could only pull on yourself once in a lifetime, within six hours of when you first found out about Time-Turners.

In fact that was even *more* puzzling, when Harry thought about it. Time had presented him with the finished Prank as a *fait accompli*, and yet it was, quite clearly, his own handiwork. Concept and execution and writing style. Every last part, even the ones he still didn't understand.

Well, time was a-wasting and there were at most thirty hours in a day. Harry did know *some* of what he had to do, and he might figure out the rest, like the pie, while he was working. There was no point putting it off. He couldn't exactly accomplish anything stuck here in the *future*.



## THE UNKNOWN AND THE UNKNOWABLE

Five hours earlier, Harry was sneaking into his dorm with his robes pulled up over his head as a thin sort of disguise, just in case someone was already up and about and saw him at the same time as Harry lying in his bed. He didn't want to have to explain to anyone about his little medical problem with Spontaneous Duplication.

Fortunately it seemed that everyone was still asleep.

And there also seemed to be a box, wrapped in red and green paper with a bright golden ribbon, lying next to his bed. The perfect, stereotypical image of a Christmas present, although it wasn't Christmas.

Harry crept in as softly as he could manage, just in case someone had their Quieter turned down low.

There was an envelope attached to the box, closed by plain clear wax without a seal impressed.

Harry carefully pried the envelope open, and took out the letter inside.

The letter said:

*This is the Cloak of Invisibility of Ignotus Peverell, passed down through his descendants the Potters. Unlike lesser cloaks and spells it has the power to keep you hidden, not merely invisible. Your father lent it to me to study shortly before he died, and I confess that I have received much good use of it over the years.*

*In the future I shall have to get along with Disillusionment, I fear. It is time the Cloak was returned to you, its heir. I had thought to make this a Christmas present, but it wished to come back to your hand before then. It seems to expect you to have need of it. Use it well.*

*No doubt you are already thinking of all manner of wonderful pranks, as your father committed in his day. If his full misdeeds were known, every woman in Gryffindor would gather to desecrate his grave. I shall not try to stop history from repeating, but be MOST careful not to reveal yourself. If Dumbledore saw a chance to possess one of the Deathly Hallows, he would never let it escape his grasp until the day he died.*

*A Very Merry Christmas to you.*

The note was unsigned.



"Hold on," Harry said, pulling up short as the other boys were about to leave the Ravenclaw dorm. "Sorry, there's something else I've got to do with my trunk. I'll be along to breakfast in a couple of minutes."

Terry Boot scowled at Harry. "You'd better not be planning to go through any of our things."

Harry held up one hand. "I swear that I intend to do nothing of the sort to any of your things, that I only intend to access objects that I myself own, that I have no pranking or otherwise questionable intentions towards any of you, and that I do not anticipate those intentions changing before I get to breakfast in the Great Hall."

Terry frowned. "Wait, is that -"

"Don't worry," said Penelope Clearwater, who was there to guide them. "There were no loopholes. Well-worded, Potter, you should be a lawyer."

Harry Potter blinked at that. Ah, yes, Ravenclaw *prefect*. "Thank you," he said. "I think."

"When you try to find the Great Hall, you will get lost." Penelope stated this in the tones of a flat, unarguable fact. "As soon as you do, ask a portrait how to get to the first floor. Ask another portrait the *instant* you suspect you might be lost again. *Especially* if it seems like you're going up higher and higher. If you are higher than the whole castle ought to be, *stop* and wait for search parties. Otherwise we shall see you again four months later and you will be five months older and dressed in a loincloth and covered in snow and *that's if you stay inside the castle.*"

"Understood," said Harry, swallowing hard. "Um, shouldn't you tell students all that sort of stuff right away?"

## CHAPTER 14

Penelope sighed. "What, *all* of it? That would take weeks. You'll pick it up as you go along." She turned to go, followed by the other students. "If I don't see you at breakfast in thirty minutes, Potter, I'll start the search."

Once everyone was gone, Harry attached the note to his bed - he'd already written it and all the other notes, working in his cavern level before everyone else woke up. Then he carefully reached inside the Quietus field and pulled the Cloak of Invisibility off Harry-1's still-sleeping form.

And just for the sake of mischief, Harry put the Cloak into Harry-1's pouch, knowing it would thereby already be in his own.



"I can see that the message is passed on to Cornelion Flubberwalt," said the painting of a man with aristocratic airs and, in fact, a perfectly normal nose. "But might I ask where it came from *originally*?"

Harry shrugged with artful helplessness. "I was told that it was spoken by a hollow voice that belled forth from a gap within the air itself, a gap that opened upon a fiery abyss."



"Hey!" Hermione said in tones of indignation from her place on the other side of the breakfast table. "That's *everyone's* dessert! You can't just take one whole pie and put it in your pouch!"

"I'm not taking one pie, I'm taking two. Sorry everyone, gotta run now!" Harry ignored the cries of outrage and left the Great Hall. He needed to arrive at Herbology class a little early.



Professor Sprout eyed him sharply. "And how do *you* know what the Slytherins are planning?"

"I can't name my source," Harry said. "In fact I have to ask you to pretend that this conversation never happened. Just act like you happened across them naturally while you were on an errand, or something. I'll run on ahead as soon as Herbology gets out. I think I can distract the Slytherins until you get there. I'm not easy to scare or bully, and I don't think they'll dare to seriously hurt the Boy-Who-Lived. Though... I'm not asking you to run in the hallways, but I would appreciate it if you didn't dawdle along the way."

Professor Sprout looked at him for a long moment, then her expression softened. "Please be careful with yourself, Harry Potter. And... thank you."

"Just be sure not to be late," Harry said. "And remember, when you get there, you weren't expecting to see me and this conversation never happened."

## THE UNKNOWN AND THE UNKNOWABLE



It was horrible, watching himself yank Neville out of the circle of Slytherins. Neville had been right, he'd used too much force, way too much force.

"Hello," Harry Potter said coldly. "I'm the Boy-Who-Lived."

Eight first-year boys, mostly the same height. One of them had a scar on his forehead and he wasn't acting like the others.

*Oh wad some power the giftie gie us  
To see oursel's as others see us!  
It wad frae monie a blunder free us,  
And foolish notion -*

Professor McGonagall was right. The Sorting Hat was right. It was clear once you saw it from the outside. There was something wrong with Harry Potter.

# CHAPTER 15

## CONSCIENTIOUSNESS

Love as thou Rowling.

Today's historical tidbit: The ancient Hebrews considered the boundary of a day to be sunset rather than dawn, so they said "evening and morning" not "morning and evening". (And as many reviewers noted, modern Jewish halacha asserts the same.)



*"I'm sure I'll find the time somewhere."*



*"Frigideiro!"*

Harry dipped a finger in the glass of water on his desk. It should have been cool. But lukewarm it was, and lukewarm it had stayed. Again.

Harry was feeling very, very cheated.

There were hundreds of fantasy novels scattered around the Verres household. Harry had read quite a few. And it was starting to look like he had a mysterious dark side. So after the glass of water had refused to cooperate the first few times, Harry had glanced around the Charms classroom to make sure no one was watching, and then taken a deep breath, concentrated, and made himself angry. Thought about the Slytherins bullying Neville, and the game where someone knocked down your books every time you tried to pick them up again. Thought about what Draco Malfoy had said about the ten-year-old Lovegood girl and how the Wizengamot really operated...

And the fury had entered his blood, he had held out his wand in a hand that trembled with hate and said in cold tones *"Frigideiro!"* and absolutely nothing had happened.

Harry had been *gypped*. He wanted to write someone and demand a *refund* on his dark side which clearly *ought* to have irresistible magical power but had turned out to be *defective*.

*"Frigideiro!"* said Hermione again from the desk next to him. Her water was solid ice and there were white crystals forming on the rim of her glass. She seemed to be totally intent on her own work and not at all conscious of the other students staring at her with hateful eyes, which was either (a) dangerously oblivious of her or (b) a perfectly honed performance rising to the level of fine art.

"Oh, *very* good, Miss Granger!" squeaked Filius Flitwick, their Charms Professor and Head of Ravenclaw, a tiny little man with no visible signs of being a past dueling champion. "Excellent! Stupendous!"

Harry had expected to be, in the worst case, second behind Hermione. Harry would have preferred for *her* to be rivalling *him*, of course, but he could have accepted it the other way around.

As of Monday, Harry was headed for the bottom of the class, a position for which he was companionably rivalling all the other Muggle-raised students except Hermione. Who was all alone and rivalless at the top, poor thing.

Professor Flitwick was standing over the desk of one of the other Muggleborns and quietly adjusting the way she was holding her wand.

Harry looked over at Hermione. He swallowed hard. It was the obvious role for her in the scheme of things... "Hermione?" Harry said tentatively. "Do you have any idea what I might be doing wrong?"

Hermione's eyes lit up with a terrible light of helpfulness and something in the back of Harry's brain screamed in desperate humiliation.

Five minutes later, Harry's water did seem noticeably cooler than room temperature and Hermione had given him a few verbal pats on the head and told him to pronounce it more carefully next time and gone off to help someone else.

Professor Flitwick had given her a House point for helping him.

Harry was gritting his teeth so hard his jaw ached and that wasn't helping his pronunciation.

*I don't care if it's unfair competition. I know exactly what I am doing with two extra hours every day. I am going to sit in my trunk and study until I am keeping up with Hermione Granger.*



"Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts," said Professor McGonagall. There was no trace of any levity upon the face of the stern old witch. "Anyone messing around in my class will leave and not come back. You have been warned."

Her wand came down and tapped her desk, which smoothly reshaped itself into a pig. A couple of Muggleborn students gave out small yelps. The pig looked around and snorted, seeming confused, and then became a desk again.

The Transfiguration Professor looked around the classroom, and then her eyes settled on one student.

"Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall. "You only received your schoolbooks a few days ago. Have you started reading your Transfiguration textbook?"

"No, sorry professor," Harry said.

"You needn't apologise, Mr. Potter, if you were required to read ahead you would have been told to do so." McGonagall's fingers rapped the desk in front of her. "Mr. Potter, would you care to guess whether this is a desk which I Transfigured into a pig, or if it began as a pig and I briefly removed the Transfiguration? If you had read the first chapter of your textbook, you would know."

Harry's eyebrows furrowed slightly. "I'd guess it'd be easier to start with a pig, since if it started as a desk, it might not know how to stand up."

Professor McGonagall shook her head. "No fault to you, Mr. Potter, but the correct answer is that in Transfiguration you do *not* care to guess. Wrong answers will be marked with extreme severity, questions left blank will be marked with great leniency. You must learn to know what you do not know. If I ask you any



question, no matter how obvious or elementary, and you answer 'I'm not sure', I will not hold it against you and anyone who laughs will lose House points. Can you tell me why this rule exists, Mr. Potter?"

*Because a single error in Transfiguration can be incredibly dangerous.* "No."

"Correct. Transfiguration is more dangerous than Apparition, which is not taught until your sixth year. Unfortunately, Transfiguration must be learned and practised at a young age to maximise your adult ability. So this is a dangerous subject, and you should be quite scared of making any mistakes, because none of my students have ever been permanently injured and I will be *extremely put out* if you are the first class to *spoil my record*."

Several students gulped.

Professor McGonagall stood up and moved over to the wall behind her desk, which held a white wooden board. "There are many reasons why Transfiguration is dangerous, but one reason stands above all the rest." She produced a marker seemingly from thin air, and sketched letters in bright red; which she then underlined, using the same marker, in blue:

## TRANSFIGURATION IS NOT PERMANENT!

"Transfiguration is not permanent!" said Professor McGonagall. "Transfiguration is not permanent! Transfiguration is not permanent! Mr. Potter, suppose a student Transfigured a block of wood into a cup of water, and you drank it. What do you imagine might happen to you when the Transfiguration wore off?" There was a pause. "Excuse me, I should not have asked that of you, Mr. Potter, I forgot that you are blessed with an unusually pessimistic imagination -"

"I'm fine," Harry said, swallowing hard. "So the first answer is that I don't *know*," the Professor nodded approvingly, "but I *imagine* there might be... wood in my stomach, and in my bloodstream, and if any of that water had gotten absorbed into my body's tissues - would it be wood pulp or solid wood or..." Harry's grasp of magic failed him. He couldn't understand how wood mapped into water in the first place, so he couldn't understand what would happen after the water molecules were scrambled by ordinary thermal motions and the magic wore off and the mapping reversed.

McGonagall's face was stiff. "As Mr. Potter has correctly reasoned, he would become extremely sick and require immediate Flooing to St. Mungo's Hospital if he was to have any chance of survival. Please turn your textbooks to page 5."

Even without any sound in the moving picture, you could tell that the woman with horribly discolored skin was screaming.

"The criminal who originally Transfigured gold into wine and gave it to this woman to drink, 'in payment of the debt' as he put it, received a sentence of ten years in Azkaban. Please turn to page 6. That is a Dementor. They are the guardians of Azkaban. They suck away at your magic, your life, and any happy thoughts you try to have. The picture on page 7 is of the criminal ten years later, on his release. You will note that he is dead - yes, Mr. Potter?"

"Professor," Harry said, "if the worst happens in a case like that, is there any way of *maintaining* the Transfiguration?"

"No," Professor McGonagall said flatly. "Sustaining a Transfiguration is a constant drain on your magic which scales with the size of the target form. And you would need to recontact the target every few hours, which is, in a case like this, impossible. Disasters like this are *unrecoverable*!"

Professor McGonagall leaned forwards, her face very hard. "You will absolutely never under any circumstances Transfigure anything into a liquid or a gas. No water, no air. Nothing like water, nothing like air. Even if it is not meant to drink. Liquid *evaporates*, little bits and pieces of it get into the air. You will not Transfigure anything that is to be burned. It will make smoke and someone could breathe that smoke! You will never Transfigure anything that could conceivably go inside anyone's body by any means. No food. Nothing that *looks like* food. Not even as a funny little prank where you mean to tell them about your mud pie before

they actually eat it. You will never do it. Period. Inside this classroom or out of it or *anywhere*. Is that well understood by *every single student*?"

"Yes," said Harry, Hermione, and a few others. The rest seemed to be speechless.

"*Is that well understood by every single student?*"

"Yes," they said or muttered or whispered.

"If you break any of these rules you will not further study Transfiguration during your stay at Hogwarts. Repeat along with me. I will never Transfigure anything into a liquid or gas."

"I will never Transfigure anything into a liquid or gas," said the students in ragged chorus.

"Again! Louder! I will never Transfigure anything into a liquid or gas."

"I will never Transfigure anything into a liquid or gas."

"I will never Transfigure anything that looks like food or anything else that goes inside a human body."

"I will never Transfigure anything that is to be burned because it could make smoke."

"You will never Transfigure anything that looks like money, including Muggle money," said Professor McGonagall. "The goblins have ways of finding out who did it. As a matter of recognised law, the goblin nation is in a permanent state of *war* with all magical counterfeiters. They will not send Aurors. They will send an army."

"I will never Transfigure anything that looks like money," repeated the students.

"And *above all*," said Professor McGonagall, "you will not Transfigure any living subject, *especially yourselves*. It will make you very sick and possibly dead, depending on how you Transfigure yourself and how long you maintain the change." Professor McGonagall paused. "Mr. Potter is currently holding up his hand because he has seen an Animagus transformation - specifically, a human transforming into a cat and back again. But an Animagus transformation is not *free* Transfiguration."

Professor McGonagall took a small piece of wood out of her pocket. With a tap of her wand it became a glass ball. Then she said "*Crystferrium!*" and the glass ball became a steel ball. She tapped it with her wand one last time and the steel ball became a piece of wood once more. "*Crystferrium* transforms a subject of solid glass into a similarly shaped target of solid steel. It cannot do the reverse, nor can it transform a desk into a pig. The most general form of Transfiguration - free Transfiguration, which you will be learning here - is capable of transforming any subject into any target, at least so far as physical form is concerned. For this reason, free Transfiguration must be done wordlessly. Using Charms would require different words for every different transformation between subject and target."

Professor McGonagall gave her students a sharp look. "*Some* teachers begin with Transfiguration Charms and move on to free Transfiguration afterwards. Yes, that would be much easier in the beginning. But it can set you in a poor mold which impairs your abilities later. Here you will learn free Transfiguration from the *very start*, which requires that you cast the spell wordlessly, by holding the subject form, the target form, and the transformation within your own mind."

"And to answer Mr. Potter's question," Professor McGonagall went on, "it is *free* Transfiguration which you must never do to any living subject. There are Charms and potions which can safely, reversibly transform living subjects in *limited* ways. An Animagus with a missing limb will still be missing that limb after transforming, for example. Free Transfiguration is *not* safe. Your body will change while it is Transfigured - breathing, for example, results in a constant loss of the body's stuff to the surrounding air. When the Transfiguration wears off and your body tries to revert to its *original* form, it will not quite be able to do so. If you press your wand to your body and imagine yourself with golden hair, afterwards your hair will fall out. If you visualise yourself as someone with clearer skin, you will be taking a long stay at St. Mungo's. And if you Transfigure yourself into an adult bodily form, then, when the Transfiguration wears off, you will die."

## CHAPTER 15

That explained why he had seen such things as fat boys, or girls less than perfectly pretty. Or old people, for that matter. That wouldn't happen if you could just Transfigure yourself every morning... Harry raised his hand and tried to signal Professor McGonagall with his eyes.

"Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"Is it possible to Transfigure a living subject into a target that is static, such as a coin - no, excuse me, I'm terribly sorry, let's just say a steel ball."

Professor McGonagall shook her head. "Mr. Potter, even inanimate objects undergo small internal changes over time. There would be no visible changes to your body afterwards, and for the first minute, you would notice nothing wrong. But in an hour you would be sick, and in a day you would be dead."

"Erm, excuse me, so if I'd read the first chapter I could have *guessed* that the desk was originally a desk and not a pig," Harry said, "but only if I made the *further* assumption that you didn't want to kill the pig, that might *seem* highly probable but -"

"I can foresee that marking your tests will be an endless source of delight to me, Mr. Potter. But if you have other questions can I please ask you to wait until after class?"

"No further questions, professor."

"Now repeat after me," said Professor McGonagall. "I will never try to Transfigure any living subject, especially myself, unless specifically instructed to do so using a specialised Charm or potion."

"If I am not sure whether a Transfiguration is safe, I will not try it until I have asked Professor McGonagall or Professor Flitwick or Professor Snape or the Headmaster, who are the only recognised authorities on Transfiguration at Hogwarts. Asking another student is *not* acceptable, even if they say that they remember asking the same question."

"Even if the current Defence Professor at Hogwarts tells me that a Transfiguration is safe, and even if I see the Defence Professor do it and nothing bad seems to happen, I will not try it myself."

"I have the absolute right to refuse to perform any Transfiguration about which I feel the slightest bit nervous. Since not even the Headmaster of Hogwarts can order me to do otherwise, I certainly will not accept any such order from the Defence Professor, even if the Defence Professor threatens to deduct one hundred House points and have me expelled."

"If I break any of these rules I will not further study Transfiguration during my time at Hogwarts."

"We will repeat these rules at the start of every class for the first month," said Professor McGonagall. "And now, we will begin with matches as subjects and needles as targets... put away your wands, thank you, by 'begin' I meant that you will begin taking notes."

Half an hour before the end of class, Professor McGonagall handed out the matches.

At the end of the class Hermione had a silvery-looking match and the entire rest of the class, Muggleborn or otherwise, had exactly what they'd started with.

Professor McGonagall awarded her another point for Ravenclaw.



After the Transfiguration class was dismissed, Hermione came over to Harry's desk as Harry was putting away his books into his pouch.

"You know," Hermione said with an innocent expression on her face, "I earned two points for Ravenclaw today."

"So you did," Harry said shortly.

"But that wasn't as good as your *seven* points," she said. "I guess I'm just not as intelligent as you."

Harry finished feeding his homework into the pouch and turned to Hermione with his eyes narrowed. He'd actually forgotten about that.

She *batted her eyelashes* at him. "We have lessons every day, though. I wonder how long it will take you to find some more Hufflepuffs to rescue? Today is Monday. So that gives you until Thursday."

The two of them stared into each other's eyes, unblinking.

Harry spoke first. "Of course you realise this means war."

"I didn't know we'd been at peace."

All of the other students were now watching with fascinated eyes. All of the other students, plus, unfortunately, Professor McGonagall.

"Oh, Mr. Potter," sang Professor McGonagall from the other side of the room, "I have some good news for you. Madam Pomfrey has approved your suggestion for preventing breakage in her Spimster wickets, and the plan is to finish the job by the end of next week. I'd say that deserves... let's call it ten points for Ravenclaw."

Hermione's face was gaping in betrayal and shock. Harry imagined his own face didn't look much different.

"*Professor...*" Harry hissed.

"Those ten points are *unquestionably* deserved, Mr. Potter. I would not hand out House points on a whim. To you it might have been a simple matter of seeing something fragile and suggesting a way to protect it, but Spimster wickets are expensive, and the Headmaster was *not* pleased the last time one broke." Professor McGonagall looked thoughtful. "My, I wonder if any other student has ever earned seventeen House points on his first day of lessons. I'll have to look it up, but I suspect that's a new record. Perhaps we should have an announcement at dinnertime?"

"*PROFESSOR!*" Harry shrieked. "This is *our* war! Stop meddling!"

"Now you have until Thursday of *next* week, Mr. Potter. Unless, of course, you engage in some sort of mischief and *lose* House points before then. Addressing a professor disrespectfully, for example." Professor McGonagall put a finger on her cheek and looked reflective. "I expect you'll hit negative numbers before the end of Friday."

Harry's mouth snapped shut. He sent his best Death Glare at McGonagall but she only seemed to find it amusing.

"Yes, definitely an announcement at dinner," Professor McGonagall mused. "But it wouldn't do to offend the Slytherins, so the announcement should be brief. Just the number of points and the fact of the record... and if anyone comes to you for help with their schoolwork and is disappointed that you haven't even started reading your textbooks, you can always refer them to Miss Granger."

"*Professor!*" said Hermione in a rather high-pitched voice.

Professor McGonagall ignored her. "My, I wonder how long it will take before Miss Granger does something deserving of a dinnertime announcement? I look forward to seeing it, whatever it may be."

Harry and Hermione, by unspoken mutual consent, turned and stormed out of the classroom. They were followed by a trail of hypnotised Ravenclaws.

"Um," Harry said. "Are we still on for after dinner?"

"Of course," said Hermione. "I wouldn't want you to fall further behind on your studying."

"Why, thank you. And let me say that as brilliant as you are already, I can't help but wonder what you'll be like once you have some elementary training in rationality."

"Is it really that useful? It didn't seem to help you with Charms or Transfiguration."

There was a slight pause.

"Well, I only got my schoolbooks four days ago. That's why I had to earn those seventeen House points without using my wand."

## CHAPTER 15

"Four days ago? Maybe you can't read eight books in four days but you might have at least read *one* . How many days will it take to finish at that rate? You know all that mathematics, so can you tell me what's eight, times four, divided by zero?"

"I've got classes now, which you didn't, but weekends are free, so... limit of eight times four divided by epsilon as epsilon approaches zero plus... 10:47AM on Sunday."

"I did it in *three* days actually."

"2:47PM on Saturday it is, then. I'm sure I'll find the time somewhere."

And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

# CHAPTER 16

## LATERAL THINKING

The enemy's gate is Rowling.



*I'm not a psychopath, I'm just very creative.*



As soon as he walked into the Defence classroom on Wednesday, Harry knew that *this* subject was going to be *different*.

It was, for a start, the largest classroom he had yet seen at Hogwarts, akin to a major university classroom, with layered tiers of desks facing a gigantic flat stage of white marble. The classroom was high up in the castle - on the fifth floor - and Harry knew that was as much explanation as he'd get for where a room like this was supposed to fit. It was becoming clear that Hogwarts simply did not *have* a geometry, Euclidean or otherwise; it had connections, not directions.

Unlike a university hall, there weren't rows of folding seats; instead there were quite ordinary Hogwarts wooden desks and wooden chairs, lined up in a curve across each level of the classroom. Except that each desk had a flat, white, rectangular, mysterious object propped up on it.

In the center of the gigantic platform, on a small raised dais of darker marble, was a lone teacher's desk. At which Quirrell sat slumped over in his chair, head lolled back, drooling slightly over his robes.

*Now what does that remind me of...?*

Harry had arrived at the lesson so early that no other students were there yet. (The English language was defective when it came to describing time travel; in particular, English lacked any words capable of expressing how convenient it was.) Quirrell didn't seem to be... functional... at the moment, and Harry didn't particularly feel like approaching Quirrell anyway.

Harry selected a desk, climbed up to it, sat down, and retrieved the Defence textbook. He was around seven-eighths of the way through - he'd planned on finishing the book before this lesson, actually, but he was running behind schedule and had already used the Time-Turner twice today.

Soon there were sounds as the classroom began to fill up. Harry ignored them.

"Potter? What are *you* doing here?"

*That* voice didn't belong here. Harry looked up. "Draco? What are *you* doing in oh my god you have *minions*."

One of the lads standing behind Draco seemed to have rather a lot of muscle for an eleven-year-old, and the other was poised in a suspiciously balanced-looking stance.

The white-blond-haired boy smiled rather smugly and gestured behind him. "Potter, I introduce to you Mr. Crabbe," his hand moved from Muscles to Balance, "Mr. Goyle. Vincent, Gregory, this is Harry Potter."

Mr. Goyle tilted his head and gave Harry a look that was probably supposed to mean something but ended up just looking squinty. Mr. Crabbe said "Please to meetcha" in a tone that sounded like he was trying to lower his voice as far as it could go.

A fleeting expression of consternation crossed Draco's face, but was quickly replaced by his superior grin.

"You have *minions*!" Harry repeated. "Where do *I* get minions?"

Draco's smirk grew wider. "I'm afraid, Potter, that the first step is to be Sorted into Slytherin -"

"What? That's not fair!"

"- and then for your families to have an arrangement from before you were born."

Harry looked at Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle. They both seemed to be trying very hard to loom. That is, they were leaning forwards, hunching over their shoulders, sticking their necks out and staring at him.

"Um... hold on," said Harry. "This was arranged *years* ago?"

"Exactly, Potter. I'm afraid you're out of luck."

Mr. Goyle produced a toothpick and began cleaning his teeth, still looming.

"And," said Harry, "Lucius insisted that you were *not* to grow up knowing your bodyguards, and that you were only to meet them on your first day of school."

That wiped the grin from Draco's face. "Yes, Potter, we all know you're brilliant, the whole school knows by now, you can stop showing off -"

"So they've been told their *whole lives* that they're going to be your minions and they've spent *years* imagining what minions are supposed to be like -"

Draco winced.

"- and what's worse, they *do* know *each other* and they've been *practising* -"

"The boss told ya to shut it," rumbled Mr. Crabbe. Mr. Goyle bit down on his toothpick, holding it between his teeth, and used one hand to crack the knuckles on the other.

"*I told you not to do this in front of Harry Potter!*"

The two looked a bit sheepish and Mr. Goyle quickly put the toothpick back in a pocket of his robes.

But the moment Draco turned away from them to face Harry again, they went back to looming.

"I apologise," Draco said stiffly, "for the insult which these *imbeciles* have offered you."

Harry gave a meaningful look to Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle. "I'd say you're being a little harsh on them, Draco. *I* think they're acting exactly the way I'd want *my* minions to act. I mean, if I had any minions."

Draco's jaw dropped.

"Hey, Gregory, you don't think he's tryna lure us away from the boss, do ya?"

"I'm sure Mr. Potter wouldn't be that foolish."

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of it," Harry said smoothly. "It's just something to keep in mind if your current employer seems unappreciative. Besides, it never hurts to have other offers while you're negotiating your working conditions, right?"

"What's *he* doin' in Ravenclaw?"

"I can't imagine, Mr. Crabbe."

"Both of you *shut up*," Draco said through gritted teeth. "That's an *order*." With a visible effort, he transferred his attention to Harry again. "Anyway, what're you doing in the Slytherin Defence class?"

## LATERAL THINKING

Harry frowned. "Hold on." His hand went into his pouch. "Timetable." He looked over the parchment. "Defence, 2:30pm, and right now it's..." Harry looked at his mechanical watch, which read 11:23. "2:23, unless I've lost track of time. Did I?" If he had, well, Harry knew how to get to whatever lesson he was *supposed* to be at. God he loved his Time-Turner and someday, when he was old enough, they would get married.

"No, that sounds right," Draco said, looking puzzled. His gaze turned to look over the rest of the auditorium, which was filling with green-trimmed robes and...

"*Gryffindorks!*" spat Draco. "What're *they* doing here?"

"Hm," Harry said. "Professor Quirrell did say... I forget his exact words... that he would be ignoring some of the Hogwarts teaching conventions. Maybe he just combined all his classes."

"Huh," said Draco. "You're the first Ravenclaw in here."

"Yup. Got here early."

"What're you doing all the way in the back row, then?"

Harry blinked. "I dunno, seemed like a good place to sit?"

Draco made a scoffing sound. "You couldn't get any further away from the teacher if you tried." The blonde-haired boy leaned slightly closer. "Anyway, is it true about what you said to Derrick and his crew?"

"Who's Derrick?"

"You hit him with a pie?"

"Two pies, actually. What am I supposed to have said to him?"

"That he wasn't doing anything cunning or ambitious and he was a disgrace to Salazar Slytherin." Draco was staring intently at Harry.

"That... sounds about right," Harry said. "I think it was more like, 'is this some kind of incredibly clever plot that will gain you a future advantage or is it really as much of a disgrace to the memory of Salazar Slytherin as it looks like' or something like that. I don't remember the exact words."

"You're confusing everyone, you know," said the blonde-haired boy.

"Huh?" Harry said in honest confusion.

"Warrington said that spending a long time under the Sorting Hat is one of the warning signs of a major Dark Wizard. Everyone was talking about it, wondering if they should start sucking up to you just in case. Then you went and protected a bunch of *Hufflepuffs*, for Merlin's sake. *Then* you told Derrick he's a disgrace to Salazar Slytherin's memory! What's anyone *supposed* to think?"

"That the Sorting Hat decided to put me in the House of 'Slytherin! Just kidding! Ravenclaw!' and I've been acting accordingly."

Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle both giggled, causing Mr. Goyle to quickly clap a hand to his mouth.

"We'd better go get our seats," Draco said. He hesitated, straightened a bit, spoke a bit more formally. "But I do want to continue our last conversation and I accept your conditions."

Harry nodded. "Would you mind terribly if I waited until Saturday afternoon? I'm in a bit of a contest right now."

"A contest?"

"See if I can read all my textbooks as fast as Hermione Granger did."

"Granger," Draco echoed. His eyes narrowed. "The mudblood who thinks she's Merlin? If you're trying to show *her* up then all Slytherin wishes you the *very* best luck, Potter, and I won't bother you 'til Saturday." Draco inclined his head respectfully, and wandered off, tailed by his minions.

*Oh, this is going to be so much fun to juggle, I can already tell.*

The classroom was filling up rapidly now with all four colors of trim: green, red, yellow, and blue. Draco and his two friends seemed to be in the midst of trying to acquire three contiguous front-row seats - already occupied, of course. Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle were looming vigorously, but it didn't seem to be having much effect.



Harry bent over his Defence textbook and continued reading.



At 2:35PM, when most of the seats were taken and no one else seemed to be coming in, Professor Quirrell gave a sudden jerk in his chair and sat up straight, and his face appeared on all the flat, white rectangular objects that were propped up on the students' desks.

Harry was taken by surprise, both by the sudden appearance of Professor Quirrell's face and by the resemblance to Muggle television. There was something both nostalgic and sad about that, it seemed so much like a piece of home and yet it wasn't really...

"Good afternoon, my young apprentices," said Professor Quirrell. His voice seemed to come from the desk screen and to be speaking directly to Harry. "Welcome to your first lesson in Battle Magic, as the founders of Hogwarts would have put it; or, as it happens to be called in the late twentieth century, Defence Against the Dark Arts."

There was a certain amount of frantic scrabbling as students, taken by surprise, reached for their parchment or notebooks.

"No," Professor Quirrell said. "Don't bother writing down what this subject was once called. No such pointless question will count toward your marks in any of my lessons. That is a promise."

Many students sat straight up at that, looking rather shocked.

Professor Quirrell was smiling thinly. "Those of you who have wasted time by reading your useless first-year Defence textbooks -"

Someone made a choking sound. Harry wondered if it was Hermione.

"- may have gotten the impression that although this subject is called Defence Against the Dark Arts, it is actually about how to defend against Nightmare Butterflies, which cause mildly bad dreams, or Acid Slugs, which can dissolve all the way through a two-inch wooden beam given most of a day."

Professor Quirrell stood up, shoving his chair back from the desk. The screen on Harry's desk followed his every move. Professor Quirrell strode towards the front of the classroom, and bellowed:

"The Hungarian Horntail is taller than a dozen men! It breathes fire so quickly and so accurately that it can melt a Snitch in midflight! One Killing Curse will bring it down!"

There were gasps from the students.

"The Mountain Troll is more dangerous than the Hungarian Horntail! It is strong enough to bite through steel! Its hide is resistant enough to withstand Stunning Hexes and Cutting Charms! Its sense of smell is so acute that it can tell from afar whether its prey is part of a pack, or alone and vulnerable! Most fearsome of all, the troll is unique among magical creatures in continuously maintaining a form of Transfiguration on itself - it is always transforming into its own body. If you somehow succeed in ripping off its arm it will grow another within seconds! Fire and acid will produce scar tissue which can temporarily confuse a troll's regenerative powers - for an hour or two! They are smart enough to use clubs as tools! The mountain troll is the third most perfect killing machine in all Nature! One Killing Curse will bring it down."

The students were looking rather shocked.

Professor Quirrell was smiling rather grimly. "Your sad excuse for a third-year Defence textbook will suggest to you that you expose the mountain troll to sunlight, which will freeze it in place. This, my young apprentices, is the sort of useless knowledge you will never find in my lessons. You do not encounter mountain trolls in open daylight! The idea that you should use sunlight to stop them is the result of foolish textbook authors

trying to show off their mastery of minutia at the expense of practicality. Just because there is a ridiculously obscure way of dealing with mountain trolls does not mean you should actually try to use it! The Killing Curse is unblockable, unstoppable, and works every single time on anything with a brain. If, as an adult wizard, you find yourself incapable of using the Killing Curse, then you can simply Apparate away! Likewise if you are facing the second most perfect killing machine, a Dementor. You just Apparate away!"

"Unless, of course," Professor Quirrell said, his voice now lower and harder, "you are under the influence of an anti-Apparition jinx. No, there is exactly one monster which can threaten you once you are fully grown. The single most dangerous monster in all the world, so dangerous that nothing else comes close. The Dark Wizard. That is the only thing that will still be able to threaten you."

Professor Quirrell's lips were set in a thin line. "I will reluctantly teach you enough trivia for a passing mark on the Ministry-mandated portions of your first-year finals. Since your exact mark on these sections will make no difference to your future life, anyone who wants more than a passing mark is welcome to waste their own time studying our pathetic excuse for a textbook. The title of this subject is not Defence Against Minor Pests. You are here to learn how to defend yourselves against the Dark Arts. Which means, let us be very clear on this, defending yourselves against Dark Wizards. People with wands who want to hurt you and who will likely succeed in doing so unless you hurt them first! There is no defence without offence! There is no defence without fighting! This reality is deemed too harsh for eleven-year-olds by the fat, overpaid, Auror-guarded politicians who mandated your curriculum. To the abyss with those fools! You are here for the subject that has been taught at Hogwarts for eight hundred years! Welcome to your first year of Battle Magic!"

Harry started applauding. He couldn't help himself, it was too inspiring.

Once Harry started clapping there was some scattered response from Gryffindor, and more from Slytherin, but most students simply seemed too stunned to react.

Professor Quirrell made a cutting gesture, and the applause died instantly. "Thank you very much," said Professor Quirrell. "Now to practicalities. I have combined all my first-year Battle classes into one, which allows me to offer you twice as much classroom time as Doubles sessions -"

There were gasps of horror.

"- an increased load which I will make up to you by not assigning any homework."

The gasps of horror cut off abruptly.

"Yes, you heard me correctly. I will teach you to fight, not to write twelve inches on fighting due Monday."

Harry desperately wished he'd sat next to Hermione so he could see the look on her face now, but on the other hand he was pretty sure he was imagining it accurately.

Also Harry was in love. It would be a three-way wedding: him, the Time-Turner, and Professor Quirrell.

"For those of you who so choose, I have arranged some after-school activities that I think you will find quite interesting as well as educational. Do you want to show the world your *own* abilities instead of watching fourteen other people play Quidditch? More than seven people can fight in an army."

Hot *damn*.

"These and other after-school activities will also earn you Quirrell points. What are Quirrell points, you ask? The House point system does not suit my needs, because it makes House points too rare. I prefer to let my students know how they are doing more frequently than that. And on the rare occasions I offer you a written test, it will mark itself as you go along, and if you get too many related questions wrong, your test will show the names of students who got those questions right, and those students will be able to earn Quirrell points by helping you."

...wow. Why didn't the other professors use a system like that?

"What good are Quirrell points, you wonder? For a start, ten Quirrell points will be worth one House point. But they will earn you other favors as well. Would you like to take your exam at an unusual time? Is there a particular session you would very much prefer to skip? You will find that I can be very flexible on behalf

## CHAPTER 16

of students who have accumulated enough Quirrell points. Quirrell points will control the generalship of the armies. And for Christmas - just before the Christmas break - I will grant someone a wish. Any school-related feat that lies within my power, my influence, or above all, my ingenuity. Yes, I was in Slytherin and I am offering to formulate a cunning plot on your behalf, if that is what it takes to accomplish your desire. This wish will go to whoever has earned the most Quirrell points within all seven years."

That would be Harry.

"Now leave your books and loose items at your desks - they will be safe, the screens will watch over them for you - and come down onto this platform. It's time to play a game called Who's the Most Dangerous Student in the Classroom."



Harry twisted his wand in his right hand and said "*Ma-ha-su!*"

There was another high-pitched "bing" from the floating blue sphere that Professor Quirrell had assigned to Harry as his target. That particular sound meant a perfect strike, which Harry had been gotten on nine out of his last ten attempts.

Somewhere Professor Quirrell had dug up a spell that was incredibly easy to pronounce, *and* had a ridiculously simple wand motion, *and* had a tendency to hit wherever you were currently looking at. Professor Quirrell had disdainfully proclaimed that real battle magic was far more difficult than this. That the hex was entirely useless in actual combat. That it was a barely ordered burst of magic whose only real content was the aiming, and that it would produce, when it hit, a pain briefly equivalent to being punched hard in the nose. That the sole purpose of this test was to see who was a fast learner, since Professor Quirrell was certain no one would have previously encountered this hex or anything like it.

Harry didn't care about any of that.

"*Ma-ha-su!*"

A *red bolt of energy* shot out of his wand and struck the target and the blue sphere once again made the bing which meant the spell had *actually worked for him*.

Harry was feeling like a real wizard for the first time since he'd come to Hogwarts. He wished the target would dodge like the little spheres that Ben Kenobi had used for training Luke, but for some reason Professor Quirrell had instead lined up all the students and targets in neat orders which made sure they wouldn't fire on each other.

So Harry lowered his wand, skipped to the right, snapped up his wand and twisted and shouted "*Ma-ha-su!*"

There was a lower-pitched "dong" which meant he'd gotten it almost right.

Harry put his wand into his pocket, skipped back to the left and drew and fired another red bolt of energy.

The high-pitched bing which resulted was easily one of the most satisfying sounds he'd heard in his life. Harry wanted to scream in triumph at the top of his lungs. *I CAN DO MAGIC! FEAR ME, LAWS OF PHYSICS, I'M COMING TO VIOLATE YOU!*

"*Ma-ha-su!*" Harry's voice was loud, but hardly noticeable over the steady chant of similar cries from around the classroom platform.

"Enough," said Professor Quirrell's amplified voice. (It didn't sound loud. It sounded like normal volume, coming from just behind your left shoulder, no matter where you were standing relative to Professor Quirrell.) "I see that all of you have succeeded at least once now." The target-spheres turned red and began to drift up towards the ceiling.

## LATERAL THINKING

Professor Quirrell was standing on the raised dais in the center of the platform, leaning slightly on his teacher's desk with one hand.

"I told you," Professor Quirrell said, "that we would play a game called Who's the Most Dangerous Student in the Classroom. There is one student in this classroom who mastered the Sumerian Simple Strike Hex faster than anyone else -"

Oh blah blah blah.

"- and went on to help seven other students. For which she has earned the first seven Quirrell points awarded to your year. Come forth, Hermione Granger. It is time for the next stage of the game."

Hermione Granger began striding forwards, a mixed look of triumph and apprehension on her face. The Ravenclaws looked on proudly, the Slytherins with glares, and Harry with frank annoyance. Harry had done fine this time. He was probably even in the upper half of the class, now that everyone had been faced with an equally unfamiliar spell and Harry had read all the way through Adalbert Waffling's *Magical Theory*. And yet *Hermione was still doing better*.

Somewhere in the back of his mind was the fear that Hermione was simply smarter than him.

But for now Harry was going to pin his hopes on the known facts that (a) Hermione had read a lot more than the standard textbooks and (b) Adalbert Waffling was an uninspired sod who'd written *Magical Theory* to pander to a school board that didn't think much of eleven-year-olds.

Hermione reached the central dais and stepped up.

"Hermione Granger mastered a completely unfamiliar spell in two minutes, almost a full minute faster than the next runner-up." Professor Quirrell turned slowly in place to look at all the students watching them. "Could Miss Granger's intelligence make her the most dangerous student in the classroom? Well? What do you think?"

No one seemed to be thinking anything at the moment. Even Harry wasn't sure what to say.

"Let's find out, shall we?" said Professor Quirrell. He turned back to Hermione, and gestured toward the wider class. "Select any student you like and cast the Simple Strike Hex on them."

Hermione froze where she stood.

"Come now," Professor Quirrell said smoothly. "You have cast this spell perfectly over fifty times. It is not permanently harmful or even all that painful. It hurts as much as a hard punch and lasts only a few seconds." Professor Quirrell's voice grew harder. "This is a direct order from your professor, Miss Granger. Choose a target and fire a Simple Strike Hex."

Hermione's face was screwed up in horror and her wand was trembling in her hand. Harry's own fingers were clenching his own wand hard in sympathy. Even though he could see what Professor Quirrell was trying to do. Even though he could see the point Professor Quirrell was trying to make.

"If you do *not* raise your wand and fire, Miss Granger, you will lose a Quirrell point."

Harry stared at Hermione, willing her to look in his direction. His right hand was softly tapping his own chest. *Pick me, I'm not afraid...*

Hermione's wand twitched in her hand; then her face relaxed, and she lowered her wand to her side.

"No," said Hermione Granger.

Her voice was calm, and even though it wasn't loud, everyone heard it in the silence.

"Then I must deduct one point from you," said Professor Quirrell. "This is a test, and you have failed it."

That reached her. Harry could see it. But she kept her shoulders straight.

Professor Quirrell's voice was sympathetic and seemed to fill the whole room. "Knowing things isn't always enough, Miss Granger. If you cannot give and receive violence on the order of stubbing your toe, then you cannot defend yourself and you will not pass Defence. Please rejoin your classmates."

Hermione walked back towards the Ravenclaw cluster. Her face looked peaceful and Harry, for some odd reason, wanted to start clapping. Even though Professor Quirrell had been *right*.

"So," Professor Quirrell said. "It becomes clear that Hermione Granger is not the most dangerous student in the classroom. Who do you think might actually be the most dangerous person here? - besides me, of course."

Without even thinking, Harry turned to look at the Slytherin contingent.

"Draco, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy," said Professor Quirrell. "It seems that many of your fellow pupils are looking in your direction. Come forth, if you would."

Draco did so, walking with a certain pride in his bearing. He stepped onto the dais and looked up at Professor Quirrell with a smile.

"Mr. Malfoy," Professor Quirrell said. "Fire."

Harry would have tried to stop it if there'd been time but in one smooth motion Draco spun on the Ravenclaw contingent and raised his wand and said "*Mabasu!*" like it was all one syllable and Hermione was saying "Ow!" and that was that.

"Well struck," said Professor Quirrell. "Two Quirrell points to you. But tell me, why did you target Miss Granger?"

There was a pause.

Finally Draco said, "Because she stood out the most."

Professor Quirrell's lips turned up in a thin smile. "And that is the true reason why Draco Malfoy is dangerous. Had he selected any other, that child would more likely resent being singled out, and Mr. Malfoy would more probably make an enemy. And while Mr. Malfoy might have given some other justification for selecting her, that would have served him no purpose save to alienate some of you, while others are already cheering him whether he says anything or not. Which is to say that Mr. Malfoy is dangerous because he knows who to strike and who not to strike, how to make allies and avoid making enemies. Two more Quirrell points to you, Mr. Malfoy. And as you have demonstrated an exemplary virtue of Slytherin, I think that Salazar's House has earned a point as well. You may rejoin your friends."

Draco bowed slightly and walked back to the Slytherin contingent. Some clapping started from the green-trimmed robes, but Professor Quirrell made a cutting gesture and silence fell again.

"It might seem that our game is done," said Professor Quirrell. "And yet there is a single student in this classroom who is more dangerous than the scion of Malfoy."

And *now* for some reason there seemed to be an awful lot of people looking at...

"Harry Potter. Come forth."

This did not bode well.

Harry reluctantly walked towards where Professor Quirrell stood on his raised dais, still leaning slightly against his teacher's desk.

The nervousness of being put into the spotlight seemed to be sharpening Harry's wits as he approached the dais, and his mind was ruffling through possibilities for what Professor Quirrell might think could demonstrate Harry's dangerousness. Would he be asked to cast a spell? To defeat a Dark Lord?

Demonstrate his supposed immunity to the Killing Curse? Surely Professor Quirrell was too smart for *that* ...

Harry stopped well short of the dais, and Professor Quirrell didn't ask him to come any closer.

"The irony is," said Professor Quirrell, "you all looked at the right person for entirely the wrong reasons. You are thinking," Professor Quirrell's lips twisted, "that Harry Potter has defeated the Dark Lord, and so must be very dangerous. Bah. He was one year old. Whatever quirk of fate killed the Dark Lord likely had little to do with Mr. Potter's abilities as a fighter. But after I heard rumors of one Ravenclaw facing down five older Slytherins, I interviewed several eyewitnesses and came to the conclusion that Harry Potter would be my most dangerous student."

A jolt of adrenaline poured into Harry's system, making him stand up straighter. He didn't know what conclusion Professor Quirrell had come to, but that couldn't be good.

"Ah, Professor Quirrell -" Harry started to say.

## LATERAL THINKING

Professor Quirrell looked amused. "You're thinking that I've come up with a wrong answer, aren't you, Mr. Potter? You will learn to expect better of *me* ." Professor Quirrell straightened from where he had leaned on the desk. "Mr. Potter, all things have their accustomed uses. Give me ten unaccustomed uses of objects in this room for combat!"

For a moment Harry was rendered speechless by the sheer, raw shock of having been understood.

And then the ideas started to pour out.

"There are desks which are heavy enough to be fatal if dropped from a great height. There are chairs with metal legs that could impale someone if driven hard enough. The air in this classroom would be deadly by its absence, since people die in vacuum, and it can serve as a carrier for poison gases."

Harry had to stop briefly for breath, and into that pause Professor Quirrell said:

"That's three. You need ten. The rest of the class thinks that you've already used up the whole contents of the classroom."

"*Ha!* The floor can be removed to create a spike pit to fall into, the ceiling can be collapsed on someone, the walls can serve as raw material for Transfiguration into any number of deadly things - knives, say."

"That's six. But surely you're scraping the bottom of the barrel now?"

"I haven't even started! Just look at all the people! Having a Gryffindor attack the enemy is an *ordinary* use, of course -"

"I will not count that one."

"- but their blood can also be used to drown someone. Ravenclaws are known for their brains, but their internal organs could be sold on the black market for enough money to hire an assassin. Slytherins aren't just useful as assassins, they can also be thrown at sufficient velocity to crush an enemy. And Hufflepuffs, in addition to being hard workers, also contain bones that can be removed, sharpened, and used to stab someone."

By now the rest of the class was staring at Harry in some horror. Even the Slytherins looked shocked.

"That's ten, though I'm being generous in counting the Ravenclaw one. Now, for extra credit, one Quirrell point for each use of objects in this room which you have not yet named." Professor Quirrell favored Harry with a companionable smile. "The rest of your class thinks you are in trouble now, since you've named everything except the targets and you have no idea what may be done with those."

"Bah! I've named all the people, but not my robes, which can be used to suffocate an enemy if wrapped around their head enough times, or Hermione Granger's robes, which can be torn into strips and tied into a rope and used to hang someone, or Draco Malfoy's robes, which can be used to start a fire -"

"Three points," said Professor Quirrell, "no more clothing now."

"My wand can be pushed into an enemy's brain through their eye socket" and someone made a horrified, strangling sound.

"Four points, no more wands."

"My wristwatch could suffocate someone if jammed down their throat -"

"Five points, and enough."

"Hmph," Harry said. "Ten Quirrell points to one House point, right? You should have let me keep going until I'd won the House Cup, I haven't even started yet on the unaccustomed uses of everything I've got in my pockets" or the mokeskin pouch itself and he couldn't talk about the Time-Turner or the invisibility cloak but there had to be *something* he could say about those red spheres...

"*Enough*, Mr. Potter. Well, do you all think you understand what makes Mr. Potter the most dangerous student in the classroom?"

There was a low murmur of assent.

"Say it out loud, please. Terry Boot, what makes your dorm-mate dangerous?"

"Ah... um... he's creative?"

" *Wrong!* " bellowed Professor Quirrell, and his fist came down sharply on his desk with an amplified sound that made everyone jump. "All of Mr. Potter's ideas were worse than useless!"

Harry started in surprise.

"Remove the floor to create a spike trap? Ridiculous! In combat you do not have that sort of preparation time and if you did there would be a hundred better uses! Transfigure material from the walls? Mr. Potter cannot perform Transfiguration! Mr. Potter had exactly one idea which he could use immediately, right now, without extensive preparation or a cooperative enemy or magic he does not know. That idea was to jam his wand through his enemy's eye socket. Which would be more likely to break his wand than kill his opponent! In short, Mr. Potter, I'm afraid that your proposals were uniformly awful."

"What?" Harry said indignantly. "You *asked* for unusual ideas, not practical ones! I was thinking outside the box! How would *you* use something in this classroom to kill someone?"

Professor Quirrell's expression was disapproving, but there were smile crinkles around his eyes. "Mr. Potter, I never said you were to *kill*. There is a time and a place for taking your enemy alive, and inside a Hogwarts classroom is usually one of those places. But to answer your question, hit them on the neck with the edge of a chair."

There was some laughter from the Slytherins, but they were laughing with Harry, not at him.

Everyone else was looking rather horrified.

"But Mr. Potter has now demonstrated why he is the most dangerous student in the classroom. I asked for unaccustomed uses of items in this room for combat. Mr. Potter could have suggested using a desk to block a curse, or using a chair to trip an oncoming enemy, or wrapping cloth around his arm to create an improvised shield. Instead, every single use that Mr. Potter named was offensive rather than defensive, and either fatal or potentially fatal."

What? Wait, that couldn't be true... Harry had a sudden sense of vertigo as he tried to remember what exactly he'd suggested, surely there had to be a counterexample...

"And that," Professor Quirrell said, "is why Mr. Potter's ideas were so strange and useless - because he had to reach far into the impractical in order to meet his standard of *killing the enemy*. To him, any idea which fell short of that was not worth considering. This reflects a quality that we might call *intent to kill*. I have it. Harry Potter has it, which is how he could stare down five older Slytherins. Draco Malfoy does not have it, not yet. Mr. Malfoy would hardly shrink from talk of ordinary murder, but even he was shocked - yes you were Mr. Malfoy, I was watching your face - when Mr. Potter described how to use his classmates' bodies as raw material. There are censors inside your mind which make you flinch away from thoughts like that. Mr. Potter thinks *purely* of killing the enemy, he will grasp at any means to do so, he does not flinch, his censors are off. Even though his youthful genius is so undisciplined and impractical as to be useless, his *intent to kill* makes Harry Potter the Most Dangerous Student in the Classroom. One final point to him - no, let us make that a point to Ravenclaw - for this indispensable requisite of a true fighting wizard."

Harry's mouth gaped open in speechless shock as he searched frantically for something to say to this. *That is so completely not what I am about!*

But he could see that the other students were starting to believe it. Harry's mind was flipping through possible denials and not finding anything that could stand up against the authoritative voice of Professor Quirrell. The best Harry had come up with was "I'm not a psychopath, I'm just very creative" and that sounded kind of ominous. He needed to say something unexpected, something that would make people stop and reconsider -

"And now," Professor Quirrell said. "Mr. Potter. Fire."

Nothing happened, of course.

## LATERAL THINKING

"Ah, well," said Professor Quirrell. He sighed. "I suppose we must all start somewhere. Mr. Potter, select any student you please for a Simple Strike Hex. You *will* do so before I dismiss your class for the day. If you do not, I will begin deducting House points, and I will keep on deducting them until you do."

Harry carefully raised his wand. He had to do that much, or Professor Quirrell might start deducting House points right away.

Slowly, as though on a roasting platter, Harry turned to face the Slytherins.

And Harry's eyes met Draco's.

Draco Malfoy didn't look the slightest bit afraid. The blonde-haired boy wasn't giving any visible sign of assent such as Harry had given Hermione, but then he could hardly be expected to do so. The other Slytherins would think that rather odd.

"Why the hesitation?" said Professor Quirrell. "Surely there's only one obvious choice."

"Yes," Harry said. "Only one *obvious* choice."

Harry twisted the wand and said "*Ma-ha-su!*"

There was complete silence in the classroom.

Harry shook his left arm, trying to get rid of the lingering sting.

There was more silence.

Finally Professor Quirrell sighed. "Yes, quite ingenious, but there was a lesson to be taught and you dodged it. One point from Ravenclaw for showing off your own cleverness at the expense of the actual goal. Class dismissed."

And before anyone else could say anything, Harry sang out:

"Just kidding! RAVENCLAW!"

There was silence for a brief moment after that, a sound of people thinking, and then the murmurs started and rapidly rose to a roar of conversation.

Harry turned towards Professor Quirrell, the two of them needed to talk -

Quirrell had slumped over and was trudging back to his chair.

No. Not acceptable. They *really* needed to talk. Stuff the zombie act, Professor Quirrell would probably wake up if Harry poked him a couple of times. Harry started forward -

*WRONG*

*DON'T*

*BAD IDEA*

Harry swayed and stopped in his tracks, feeling dizzy.

And then a flock of Ravensclaws descended on him and the discussions began.



# CHAPTER 17

## LOCATING THE HYPOTHESIS

You have always been J. K. Rowling.

Historical note: In the Roman calendar, the "Ides" of a month referred to the 15th day of March, May, July, and October, and to the 13th day of all other months.



*"You start to see the pattern, hear the rhythm of the world."*



Thursday.

If you wanted to be specific, 7:24am on Thursday morning.

Harry was sitting on his bed, a textbook lying limp in his motionless hands.

Harry had just had an idea for a *truly brilliant* experimental test.

It would mean waiting an extra hour for breakfast, but that was why he had cereal bars. No, this idea absolutely positively had to be tested right away, immediately, now.

Harry set the textbook aside, leapt out of bed, raced around his bed, yanked out the cavern level of his trunk, ran down the stairs, and started moving boxes of books around. (He really needed to unpack and get bookcases at some point but he was in the middle of his textbook reading contest with Hermione and falling behind so he hadn't had time.)

Harry found the book he wanted and raced back upstairs.

The other boys were getting ready to go down to breakfast in the Great Hall and start the day.

"Excuse me can you do something for me?" said Harry. He was flipping through the book's index as he spoke, found the page with the first ten thousand primes, flipped to that page, and thrust the book at Anthony Goldstein. "Pick two three-digit numbers from this list. Don't tell me what they are. Just multiply them together and tell me the product. Oh, and can you do the calculation twice to double-check? Please make really sure you've got the right answer, I'm not sure what's going to happen to me or the universe if you make a multiplication error."

It said a lot about what life in that dorm had been like over the past few days that Anthony didn't even bother saying anything like "Why'd you suddenly flip out?" or "That seems really weird, what are your reasons for asking?" or "What do you mean, you're not sure what's going to happen to the universe?"

## LOCATING THE HYPOTHESIS

Anthony wordlessly accepted the book and took out a parchment and quill. Harry spun around and shut his eyes, making sure not to see anything, dancing back and forth and bouncing up and down with impatience. He got a pad of paper and a mechanical pencil and got ready to write.

"Okay," Anthony said, "One hundred and eighty-one thousand, four hundred and twenty-nine."

Harry wrote down 181,429. He repeated what he'd just written down, and Anthony confirmed it.

Then Harry raced back down into the cavern level of his trunk, glanced at his watch (the watch said 4:28 which meant 7:28) and then shut his eyes.

Around thirty seconds later, Harry heard the sound of steps, followed by the sound of the cavern level of the trunk sliding shut. (Harry wasn't worried about suffocating. An automatic Air-Freshening Charm was part of what you got if you were willing to buy a really good trunk. Wasn't magic wonderful, it didn't have to worry about electric bills.)

And when Harry opened his eyes, he saw just what he'd been hoping to see, a folded piece of paper left on the floor, the gift of his future self.

Call that piece of paper "Paper-2".

Harry tore a piece of paper off his pad.

Call that "Paper-1". It was, of course, the same piece of paper. You could even see, if you looked closely, that the ragged edges matched.

Harry reviewed in his mind the algorithm that he would follow.

If Harry opened up Paper-2 and it was blank, then he would write "101 x 101" down on Paper-1, fold it up, study for an hour, go back in time, drop off Paper-1 (which would thereby become Paper-2), and head on up out of the cavern level to join his dorm mates for breakfast.

If Harry opened up Paper-2 and it had two numbers written on it, Harry would multiply those numbers together.

If their product equaled 181,429, Harry would write down those two numbers on Paper-1 and send Paper-1 back in time.

Otherwise Harry would add 2 to the number on the right and write down the new pair of numbers on Paper-1. Unless that made the number on the right greater than 997, in which case Harry would add 2 to the number on the left and write down 101 on the right.

And if Paper-2 said 997 x 997, Harry would leave Paper-1 blank.

Which meant that the only possible *stable* time loop was the one in which Paper-2 contained the two prime factors of 181,429.

If this worked, Harry could use it to recover any sort of answer that was easy to check but hard to find. He wouldn't have *just* shown that  $P=NP$  once you had a Time-Turner, this trick was *more general* than that. Harry could use it to find the combinations on combination locks, or passwords of every sort. Maybe even find the entrance to Slytherin's Chamber of Secrets, if Harry could figure out some systematic way of describing all the locations in Hogwarts. It would be an awesome cheat even by Harry's standards of cheating.

Harry took Paper-2 in his trembling hand, and unfolded it.

Paper-2 said in slightly shaky handwriting:

DO NOT MESS WITH TIME

Harry wrote down "DO NOT MESS WITH TIME" on Paper-1 in slightly shaky handwriting, folded it neatly, and resolved not to do any more truly brilliant experiments on Time until he was at least fifteen years old.

To the best of Harry's knowledge, that had been the scariest experimental result in the entire history of science.

It had been somewhat difficult for Harry to focus on reading his textbook for the next hour.

That was how Harry's Thursday started.

## CHAPTER 17



Thursday.

If you wanted to be specific, 3:32pm on Thursday afternoon.

Harry and all the other boys in the first year were outside on a grassy field with Madam Hooch, standing next to the Hogwarts supply of broomsticks. The girls would be learning to fly separately. Apparently, for some reason, girls didn't want to learn how to fly on broomsticks in the presence of boys.

Harry had been a little wobbly all day long. He just couldn't seem to stop wondering how that *particular* stable time loop had been selected out of what was, in retrospect, a rather large space of possibilities.

Also: seriously, *broomsticks*? He was going to fly on, basically, a line segment? Wasn't that pretty much the single most unstable shape you could possibly find, short of attempting to hold on to a point marble? Who'd selected *that* design for a flying device, out of all the possibilities? Harry had been hoping that it was just a figure of speech, but no, they were standing in front of what looked for all the world like ordinary wooden kitchen broomsticks. Had someone just gotten stuck on the idea of broomsticks and failed to consider anything else? It had to be. There was no way that the *optimal* designs for cleaning kitchens and flying would happen to coincide if you worked them out from scratch.

It was a clear day with a bright blue sky and a brilliant sun that was just begging to get in your eyes and make it impossible to see, if you were trying to fly around the sky. The ground was nice and dry, smelling positively baked, and somehow felt very, very hard under Harry's shoes.

Harry kept reminding himself that the lowest common denominator of eleven-year-olds was expected to learn this and it couldn't be that hard.

"Stick out your right hand over the broom, or left hand if you're left-handed," called Madam Hooch. "And say, UP!"

"UP!" everyone shouted.

The broomstick leapt eagerly into Harry's hand.

Which put him at the head of the class, for once. Apparently saying "UP!" was a lot more difficult than it looked, and most of the broomsticks were rolling around on the ground or trying to inch away from their would-be riders.

(Of course Harry would have bet money that Hermione had done at least as well when it came her own turn to try, earlier in the day. There couldn't possibly be anything *he* could master on the first try which would baffle Hermione, and if there *was* and it turned out to be *broomstick riding* instead of anything intellectual, Harry would just die.)

It took a while for everyone to get a broomstick in front of them. Madam Hooch showed them how to mount and then walked around the field, correcting grips and stances. Apparently even among the few children who'd been allowed to fly at home, they hadn't been taught to do it correctly.

Madam Hooch surveyed the field of boys, and nodded. "Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground, hard."

Harry swallowed hard, trying to quell the queasy feeling in his stomach.

"Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight back down by leaning forwards slightly. On my whistle - three - two -"

One of the brooms shot skyward, accompanied by a young boy's screams - of horror, not delight. The boy was spinning at an awful rate as he ascended, they only got glimpses of his white face -

As though in slow motion, Harry was leaping back off his own broomstick and scrabbling for his wand, though he didn't really know what he planned to do with it, he'd had exactly two sessions of Charms and the

last one *had* been the Hover Charm but Harry had only been able to cast the spell successfully one time out of three and he certainly couldn't levitate whole people -

*If there is any hidden power in me, let it reveal itself NOW!*

"Come back, boy!" shouted Madam Hooch (which had to be the most unhelpful instruction imaginable for dealing with an out-of-control broomstick, from a *flying instructor*, and a fully automatic section of Harry's brain added Madam Hooch to his tally of fools).

And the boy was thrown off the broomstick.

He seemed to move very slowly through the air, at first.

"*Wingardium Leviosa!*" screamed Harry.

The spell failed. He could feel it fail.

There was a THUD and a distant cracking sound, and the boy lay facedown on the grass in a heap.

Harry sheathed his wand and raced forwards at full speed. He arrived at the boy's side at the same time as Madam Hooch, and Harry reached into his pouch and tried to recall oh god what was the name never mind he'd just try "Healer's Pack!" and it popped up into his hand and -

"Broken wrist," Madam Hooch said. "Calm down, boy, he just has a broken wrist!"

There was a sort of mental lurch as Harry's mind snapped out of Panic Mode.

The Emergency Healing Pack Plus lay open in front of him, and there was a syringe of liquid fire in Harry's hand, which would have kept the boy's brain oxygenated if he'd managed to snap his neck.

"Ah..." Harry said in a rather wavering sort of voice. His heart was pounding so loudly that he almost couldn't hear himself panting for breath. "Broken bone... right... Setting String?"

"That's for emergencies only," snapped Madam Hooch. "Put it away, he's fine." She leaned over the boy, offering him a hand. "Come on, boy, it's all right, up you get!"

"You're not seriously going to make him ride the broomstick again?" Harry said in horror.

Madam Hooch sent Harry a glare. "Of course not!" She pulled the boy to his feet using his good arm - Harry saw with a shock that it was Neville Longbottom *again*, what was *with* him? - and she turned to all the watching children. "None of you is to move while I take this boy to the hospital wing! You leave those brooms where they are or you'll be out of Hogwarts before you can say 'Quidditch.' Come on, dear."

And Madam Hooch walked off with Neville, who was clutching his wrist and trying to control his sniffles.

When they were out of earshot, one of the Slytherins started giggling.

That set off the others.

Harry turned and looked at them. It seemed like a good time to memorise some faces.

And Harry saw that Draco was strolling towards him, accompanied by Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle. Mr. Crabbe wasn't smiling. Mr. Goyle decidedly was. Draco himself was wearing a very controlled face that twitched occasionally, from which Harry inferred that Draco thought it was hilarious but saw no political advantage to be gained by laughing about it now instead of in the Slytherin dungeons afterwards.

"Well, Potter," Draco said in a low voice that didn't carry, still with that very controlled face that was twitching occasionally, "Just wanted to say, when you take advantage of emergencies to demonstrate leadership, you want to look like you're in total control of the situation, rather than, say, going into a complete panic." Mr. Goyle giggled, and Draco shot him a quelling look. "But you probably scored a few points anyway. You need any help stowing that healer's kit?"

Harry turned to look at the Healing Pack, which got his own face turned away from Draco. "I think I'm fine," Harry said. He put the syringe back in its place, redid the latches, and stood up.

Ernie Macmillan arrived just as Harry was feeding the pack back into his mokeskin pouch.

"Thank you, Harry Potter, on behalf of Hufflepuff," Ernie Macmillan said formally. "It was a good try and a good thought."

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"A good thought indeed," drawled Draco. "Why didn't anyone in Hufflepuff have their wands out? Maybe if you'd *all* helped instead of just Potter, you could've caught him. I thought Hufflepuffs were supposed to stick together?"

Ernie looked like he was torn between getting angry and wanting to die of shame. "We didn't think of it in time -"

"Ah," said Draco, "didn't *think* of it, I guess that's why it's better to have one Ravenclaw as a friend than all of Hufflepuff."

Oh, hell, how was Harry supposed to juggle this one... "You're not helping," Harry said in a mild tone. Hoping Draco would interpret that as *you're interfering with my plans, please shut up*.

"Hey, what's this?" said Mr. Goyle. He stooped to the grass and picked up something around the size of a large marble, a glass ball that seemed to be filled with a swirling white mist.

Ernie blinked. "Neville's Remembrall!"

"What's a Remembrall?" asked Harry.

"It turns red if you've forgotten something," Ernie said. "It doesn't tell you what you forgot, though. Give it here, please, and I'll hand it back to Neville later." Ernie held out his hand.

A sudden grin flashed across Mr. Goyle's face and he spun around and raced away.

Ernie stood still for a moment in surprise, and then shouted "Hey!" and ran after Mr. Goyle.

And Mr. Goyle grabbed a broomstick, hopped on with one smooth motion and took to the air.

Harry's jaw dropped. Hadn't Madam Hooch said that would get him *expelled*?

"*That idiot!*" Draco hissed. He opened his mouth to shout -

"*Hey!*" shouted Ernie. "That's Neville's! *Give it back!*"

The Slytherins started cheering and hooting.

Draco's mouth snapped shut. Harry caught the sudden look of indecision on his face.

"Draco," Harry said in a low tone, "if you don't order that idiot back on the ground, the teacher's going to get back and -"

"*Come and get it, Hufflepuff!*" shouted Mr. Goyle, and a great cheer went up from the Slytherins.

"*I can't!*" whispered Draco. "Everyone in Slytherin would think I'm *weak!*"

"And if Mr. Goyle gets expelled," hissed Harry, "your *father* is going to think you're a *moron!*"

Draco's face twisted in agony.

At that moment -

"Hey, *Slytherslime*," shouted Ernie, "didn't anyone ever tell you that Hufflepuffs stick together? *Wands out, Hufflepuff!*"

And there were suddenly a whole lot of wands pointed in Mr. Goyle's direction.

Three seconds later -

"*Wands out, Slytherin!*" said around five different Slytherins.

And there were a whole lot of wands pointed in Hufflepuff's direction.

Two seconds later -

"*Wands out, Gryffindor!*"

"*Do something, Potter!*" whispered Draco. "*I can't be the one to stop this it has to be you! I'll owe you a favour just think of something aren't you supposed to be brilliant?*"

In around five and a half seconds, realised Harry, someone was going to cast the Sumerian Simple Strike Hex and by the time it was over and the teachers were done expelling people the only boys left in his year would be Ravenclaws.

"*Wands out, Ravenclaw!*" shouted Michael Corner who was apparently feeling left out of the disaster.

"*GREGORY GOYLE!*" screamed Harry. "*I challenge you to a contest for possession of Neville's Remembrall!*"

There was a sudden pause.

## LOCATING THE HYPOTHESIS

"Oh, really?" said Draco in the loudest drawl Harry had ever heard. "That sounds interesting. What sort of contest, Potter?"

Er...

"Contest" had been as far as Harry's inspiration had gotten. What sort of contest, he couldn't say "chess" because Draco wouldn't be able to accept without it looking strange, he couldn't say "arm-wrestling" because Mr. Goyle would crush him -

"How about this?" Harry said loudly. "Gregory Goyle and I stand apart from each other, and no one else is allowed to come near either of us. We don't use our wands and neither does anyone else. I don't move from where I'm standing, and neither does he. And if I can get my hands on Neville's Remembrall, then Gregory Goyle relinquishes all claim to that Remembrall he's holding and gives it to me."

There was another pause as people's looks of relief transmuted to confusion.

"Hah, Potter!" said Draco loudly. "I'd like to see you do *that*! Mr. Goyle accepts!"

"It's on!" said Harry.

"Potter, *what*?" whispered Draco, which he somehow did without moving his lips.

Harry didn't know how to answer without moving his.

People were putting their wands away, and Mr. Goyle swooped gracefully to the ground, looking rather confused. Some Hufflepuffs started over towards Mr. Goyle, but Harry shot them a desperately pleading look and they backed off.

Harry walked toward Mr. Goyle and stopped when he was a few paces away, far enough apart that they couldn't reach each other.

Slowly, deliberately, Harry sheathed his wand.

Everyone else backed away.

Harry swallowed. He knew in broad outline what he *wanted* to do, but it had to be done in such a way that no one understood *what* he'd done -

"All right," Harry said loudly. "And now..." He took a deep breath and raised one hand, fingers ready to snap. There were gasps from anyone who'd heard about the pies, which was practically everyone. "*I call upon the insanity of Hogwarts! Happy happy boom boom swamp swamp swamp!*" And Harry snapped his fingers.

A lot of people flinched.

And nothing happened.

Harry let the silence stretch on for a while, developing, until...

"Um," someone said. "Is that it?"

Harry looked at the boy who'd spoken. "Look in front of you. You see that patch of ground that looks barren, without any grass on it?"

"Um, yeah," said the boy, a Gryffindor (Dean something?).

"Dig it up."

Now Harry was getting a lot of strange looks.

"Er, why?" said Dean something.

"Just do it," said Terry Boot in a weary voice. "No point asking why, trust me on this one."

Dean something knelt down and began to scoop away dirt.

After a minute or so, Dean stood up again. "There's nothing there," Dean said.

Huh. Harry had been planning to go back in time and bury a treasure map that would lead to another treasure map that would lead to Neville's Remembrall which he would put there after getting it back from Mr. Goyle...

Then Harry realised there was a much simpler way which didn't threaten the secret of Time-Turners quite as much.

"Thanks, Dean!" Harry said loudly. "Ernie, would you look around on the ground where Neville fell and see if you can find Neville's Remembrall?"

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People looked even more confused.

"Just do it," said Terry Boot. "He'll keep trying until something works, and the scary thing is that -"

"*Merlin!*" gasped Ernie. He was holding up Neville's Remembrall. "It's *here!* Right where he fell!"

"*What?*" cried Mr. Goyle. He looked down and saw...

...that he was still holding Neville's Remembrall.

There was a rather long pause.

"Er," said Dean something, "that's not possible, is it?"

"It's a plot hole," said Harry. "I made myself weird enough to distract the universe for a moment and it forgot that Goyle had already picked up the Remembrall."

"No, wait, I mean, that's *totally* not possible -"

"Excuse me, are we all standing around here waiting to go flying on broomsticks? Yes we are. So shut up. Anyway, once I get my hands on Neville's Remembrall, the contest is over and Gregory Goyle has to relinquish all claim to the Remembrall he's holding and give it to me. Those were the terms, remember?" Harry stretched out a hand and beckoned Ernie. "Just roll it over here, since no one's supposed to get close to me, okay?"

"Hold on!" shouted a Slytherin - Blaise Zabini, Harry wasn't likely to forget that name. "How do we know that's Neville's Remembrall? You could've just dropped *another* Remembrall there -"

"The Slytherin is strong with this one," Harry said, smiling. "But you have my word that the one Ernie's holding is Neville's. No comment about the one Gregory Goyle's holding."

Zabini spun to Draco. "*Malfoy!* You're not just going to let him get away with that -"

"Shut up, you," rumbled Mr. Crabbe, standing behind Draco. "Mr. Malfoy doesn't need *you* to tell him what to do!"

*Good* minion.

"My bet was with Draco, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy," Harry said. "Not with you, Zabini. I have done what Mr. Malfoy said he'd like to see me do, and as for the judgment of the bet, I leave that up to Mr. Malfoy." Harry inclined his head towards Draco and raised his eyebrows slightly. That ought to allow Draco to save enough face.

There was a pause.

"You promise that actually *is* Neville's Remembrall?" Draco said.

"Yes," Harry said. "That's the one that'll go back to Neville and it was his originally. And the one Gregory Goyle's holding goes to me."

Draco nodded, looking decisive. "I won't question the word of the Noble House of Potter, then, no matter how strange that all was. And the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy keeps its word as well. Mr. Goyle, give that to Mr. Potter -"

"Hey!" Zabini said. "He hasn't won *yet*, he hasn't got his hands on -"

"Catch, Harry!" said Ernie, and he tossed the Remembrall.

Harry easily snapped the Remembrall out of the air, he'd always had good reflexes that way. "There," said Harry, "I win..."

Harry trailed off. All conversation stopped.

The Remembrall was glowing bright red in his hand, blazing like a miniature sun that cast shadows on the ground in broad daylight.



## LOCATING THE HYPOTHESIS

Thursday.

If you wanted to be specific, 5:09pm on Thursday afternoon, in Professor McGonagall's office, after flying classes. (With an extra hour for Harry slipped in between.)

Professor McGonagall sitting on her stool. Harry in the hot seat in front of her desk.

"Professor," Harry said tightly, "Slytherin was pointing their wands at Hufflepuff, Gryffindor was pointing their wands at Slytherin, some *idiot* called wands out in Ravenclaw, and I had maybe five seconds to keep the whole thing from blowing sky-high! It was all I could think of!"

Professor McGonagall's face was pinched and angry. " *You are not to use the Time-Turner in that fashion, Mr. Potter!* Is the concept of secrecy not something that you understand?"

"They don't *know* how I did it! They just think I can do really weird things by snapping my fingers! I've done other weird stuff that can't be done with Time-Turners even, and I'll do *more* stuff like that, and *this* case won't even stand out! I *had to do it*, Professor!"

"You did *not* have to do it!" snapped Professor McGonagall. "All you needed to do was get this *anonymous Slytherin* back on the ground and the wands put away! You could have challenged him to a game of Exploding Snap but no, you had to use the Time-Turner in a flagrant and unnecessary manner!"

"It was all I could think of! I don't even know what Exploding Snap *is*, they wouldn't have accepted a game of chess and if I'd picked arm-wrestling I would have lost!"

" *Then you should have picked wrestling!* "

Harry blinked. "But then I'd have *lost* -"

Harry stopped.

Professor McGonagall was looking *very* angry.

"I'm sorry, Professor McGonagall," Harry said in a small voice. "I honestly didn't think of that, and you're right, I should have, it would have been brilliant if I had, but I just didn't think of that at all..."

Harry's voice trailed off. It was suddenly apparent to him that he'd had a *lot* of other options. He could have asked *Draco* to suggest something, he could have asked the crowd... his use of the Time-Turner *had* been flagrant and unnecessary. There had been a giant space of possibilities, why had he picked *that* one?

Because he'd seen a way to *win*. Win possession of an unimportant trinket that the teachers would've taken back from Mr. Goyle anyway.

Intent to win. That was what had gotten him.

"I'm sorry," Harry said again. "For my pride and my stupidity."

Professor McGonagall wiped a hand across her forehead. Some of her anger seemed to dissipate. But her voice still came out very hard. "One more display like that, Mr. Potter, and you will be returning that Time-Turner. Do I make myself very clear?"

"Yes," Harry said. "I understand and I'm sorry."

"Then, Mr. Potter, you will be allowed to retain the Time-Turner for now. And considering the size of the debacle you did, in fact, avert, I will not deduct any points from Ravenclaw."

*Plus you couldn't explain why you'd deducted the points.* But Harry wasn't dumb enough to say that out loud.

"More importantly, why did the Remembrall go off like that?" Harry said. "Does it mean I've been Obliviated?"

"That puzzles me as well," Professor McGonagall said slowly. "If it were that simple, I would think that the courts would use Remembralls, and they do not. I shall look into it, Mr. Potter." She sighed. "You can go now."

Harry started to get up from his chair, then halted. "Um, sorry, I did have something else I wanted to tell you -"

You could hardly see the flinch. "What is it, Mr. Potter?"

"It's about Professor Quirrell -"



## CHAPTER 17

"I'm sure, Mr. Potter, that it is nothing of importance." Professor McGonagall spoke the words in a great rush. "Surely you heard the Headmaster tell the students that you were not to bother us with any unimportant complaints about the Defence Professor?"

Harry was rather confused. "But this could *be* important, yesterday I got this sudden sense of doom when -"

"Mr. Potter! I have a sense of doom as well! And my sense of doom is suggesting that *you must not finish that sentence!*"

Harry's mouth gaped open. Professor McGonagall had succeeded; Harry was speechless.

"Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall, "if you have discovered anything that seems interesting about Professor Quirrell, please feel free not to share it with me or anyone else. Now I think you've taken up enough of my valuable time -"

"*This isn't like you!*" Harry burst out. "I'm sorry but that just seems *unbelievably* irresponsible! From what I've heard there's some kind of jinx on the Defence position, and if you already *know* something's going to go wrong, I'd think you'd all be on your toes -"

"Go *wrong*, Mr. Potter? *I certainly hope not.*" Professor McGonagall's face was expressionless. "After Professor Blake was caught in a closet with no fewer than three fifth-year Slytherins last February, and a year before that, Professor Summers failed so completely as an educator that her students thought a boggart was a kind of furniture, it would be *catastrophic* if some problem with the extraordinarily competent Professor Quirrell came to my attention now, and I daresay most of our students would fail their Defence O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s."

"I see," Harry said slowly, taking it all in. "So in other words, whatever's wrong with Professor Quirrell, you desperately don't want to know about it until the end of the school year. And since it's currently September, he could assassinate the Prime Minister on live television and get away with it so far as you're concerned."

Professor McGonagall gazed at him unblinkingly. "I am certain that I could never be heard endorsing such a statement, Mr. Potter. At Hogwarts we strive to be proactive with respect to *anything* that threatens the educational attainment of our students."

*Such as first-year Ravenclaws who can't keep their mouths shut.* "I believe I understand you completely, Professor McGonagall."

"Oh, I doubt that, Mr. Potter. I doubt that very much." Professor McGonagall leaned forward, her face tightening again. "Since you and I have already discussed matters far more sensitive than these, I shall speak frankly. You, and you alone, have reported this mysterious sense of doom. You, and you alone, are a chaos magnet the likes of which I have never seen. After our little shopping trip to Diagon Alley, and *then* the Sorting Hat, and then *today's* little episode, I can well foresee that I am fated to sit in the Headmaster's office and hear some hilarious tale about Professor Quirrell in which you and you alone play a starring role, after which there will be no choice but to fire him. I am already resigned to it, Mr. Potter. And if this sad event takes place any earlier than the Ides of May, I will string you up by the gates of Hogwarts with your own intestines and pour fire beetles into your nose. *Now* do you understand me completely?"

Harry nodded, his eyes very wide. Then, after a second, "What do I get if I can make it happen on the last day of the school year?"

"*Get out of my office!*"



Thursday.

There must have been something about Thursdays in Hogwarts.

## LOCATING THE HYPOTHESIS

It was 5:32pm on Thursday afternoon, and Harry was standing next to Professor Flitwick, in front of the great stone gargoyle that guarded the entrance to the Headmaster's office.

No sooner had he made it back from Professor McGonagall's office to the Ravenclaw study rooms than one of the students told him to report to Professor Flitwick's office, and there Harry had learned that Dumbledore wanted to speak to him.

Harry, feeling rather apprehensive, had asked Professor Flitwick if the Headmaster had said what this was about.

Professor Flitwick had shrugged in a helpless sort of way.

Apparently Dumbledore had said that Harry was far too young to invoke the words of power and madness.

*Happy happy boom boom swamp swamp swamp?* Harry had thought but not said aloud.

"Please don't worry too much, Mr. Potter," squeaked Professor Flitwick from somewhere around Harry's shoulder level. (Harry was grateful for Professor Flitwick's gigantic puffy beard, it was hard getting used to a Professor who was not only shorter than him but spoke in a higher-pitched voice.) "Headmaster Dumbledore may seem a little odd, or a lot odd, or even extremely odd, but he has never hurt a student in the slightest, and I don't believe he ever will." Professor Flitwick gave Harry an encouraging smile. "Just keep that in mind at all times and you'll be sure not to panic!"

This was not helping.

"Good luck!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, and leaned over to the gargoyle and said something that Harry somehow failed to hear at all. (Of course, the password wouldn't be much good if you could hear someone saying it.) And the stone gargoyle walked aside with a very natural and ordinary movement that Harry found rather shocking, since the gargoyle still looked like solid, immovable stone the whole time.

Behind the gargoyle was a set of slowly revolving spiral stairs. There was something disturbingly hypnotic about it, and even more disturbing was that *revolving* the spiral ought not to take you anywhere.

"Up you go!" squeaked Flitwick.

Harry rather nervously stepped onto the spiral, and found himself, for some reason that his brain couldn't seem to visualise at all, moving upwards.

The gargoyle thudded back into place behind him, and the spiral stairs kept turning and Harry kept being higher up, and after a rather dizzying time, Harry found himself in front of an oak door with a brass griffin knocker.

Harry reached out and turned the doorknob.

The door swung open.

And Harry saw the most interesting room he'd ever seen in his life.

There were tiny metal mechanisms that whirred or ticked or slowly changed shape or emitted little puffs of smoke. There were dozens of mysterious fluids in dozens of oddly shaped containers, all bubbling, boiling, oozing, changing color, or forming into interesting shapes that vanished half a second after you saw them. There were things that looked like clocks with many hands, inscribed with numbers or in unrecognisable languages. There was a bracelet bearing a lenticular crystal that sparkled with a thousand colors, and a bird perched atop a golden platform, and a wooden cup filled with what looked like blood, and a statue of a falcon encrusted in black enamel. The wall was all hung with pictures of people sleeping, and the Sorting Hat was casually poised on a hatrack that was also holding two umbrellas and three red slippers for left feet.

In the midst of all the chaos was a clean black oaken desk. Before the desk was an oaken stool. And behind the desk was a well-cushioned throne containing Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, who was adorned with a long silver beard, a hat like a squashed giant mushroom, and what looked to Muggle eyes like three layers of bright pink pyjamas.

Dumbledore was smiling, and his bright eyes twinkled with a mad intensity.

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With some trepidation, Harry seated himself in front of the desk. The door swung shut behind him with a loud *thunk*.

"Hello, Harry," said Dumbledore.

"Hello, Headmaster," Harry replied. So they were on a first-name basis? Would Dumbledore now say to call him -

"Please, Harry!" said Dumbledore. "Headmaster sounds so formal. Just call me Heh for short."

"I'll be sure to, Heh," said Harry.

There was a slight pause.

"Do you know," said Dumbledore, "you're the first person who's ever taken me up on that?"

"Ah..." Harry said. He tried to control his voice despite the sudden sinking feeling in his stomach. "I'm sorry, I, ah, Headmaster, you told me to do it so I did -"

"Heh, please!" said Dumbledore cheerfully. "And there's no call to be so worried, I won't launch you out a window just because you make one mistake. I'll give you plenty of warnings first, if you're doing something wrong! Besides, what matters isn't how people talk to you, it's what they think of you."

*He's never hurt a student, just keep remembering that and you'll be sure not to panic.*

Dumbledore drew forth a small metal case and flipped it open, showing some small yellow lumps. "Sherbet lemon?" said the Headmaster.

"Er, no thank you, Heh," said Harry. *Does slipping a student LSD count as hurting them, or does that fall into the category of harmless fun?* "You, um, said something about my being too young to invoke the words of power and madness?"

"That you most certainly are!" Dumbledore said. "Thankfully the Words of Power and Madness were lost seven centuries ago and no one has the slightest idea what they are anymore. It was just a little remark."

"Ah..." Harry said. He was aware that his mouth was hanging open. "Why did you call me here, then?"

"*Why?*" Dumbledore repeated. "Ah, Harry, if I went around all day asking *why* I do things, I'd never have time to get a single thing done! I'm quite a busy person, you know."

Harry nodded, smiling. "Yes, it was a very impressive list. Headmaster of Hogwarts, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards. Sorry to ask but I was wondering, is it possible to get more than six hours if you use more than one Time-Turner? Because it's pretty impressive if you're doing all that on just thirty hours a day."

There was another slight pause, during which Harry went on smiling. He was a little apprehensive, actually a lot apprehensive, but once it had become clear that Dumbledore was deliberately messing with him, something within him *absolutely refused* to sit and take it like a defenceless lump.

"I'm afraid Time doesn't like being stretched out too much," said Dumbledore after the slight pause, "and yet we ourselves seem to be a little too large for it, and so it's a constant struggle to fit our lives into Time."

"Indeed," Harry said with grave solemnity. "That's why it's best to come to our points quickly."

For a moment Harry wondered if he'd gone too far.

Then Dumbledore chuckled. "Straight to the point it shall be." The Headmaster leaned forwards, tilting his squashed mushroom hat and brushing his beard against his desk. "Harry, this Monday you did something that should have been impossible even with a Time-Turner. Or rather, impossible with *only* a Time-Turner. Where did those two pies come from, I wonder?"

A jolt of adrenaline shot through Harry. He'd done that using the Cloak of Invisibility, the one that had been given him in a Christmas box along with a note, and that note had said: *If Dumbledore saw a chance to possess one of the Deathly Hallows he would never let it escape his grasp. ...*

"A natural thought," Dumbledore went on, "is that since none of the first-years present were able to cast such a spell, someone else was present, and yet unseen. And if no one could see them, why, it would be easy enough for them to throw the pies. One might further suspect that since you had a Time-Turner, you were

the invisible one; and that since the spell of Disillusionment is far beyond your current abilities, you had an invisibility cloak." Dumbledore smiled conspiratorially. "Am I on the right track so far, Harry?"

Harry was frozen. He had the feeling that an outright lie would not at all be wise, and possibly not the least bit helpful, and he couldn't think of anything else to say.

Dumbledore waved a friendly hand. "Don't worry, Harry, you haven't done anything wrong. Invisibility cloaks aren't against the rules - I suppose they're rare enough that no one ever got around to putting them on the list. But really I was wondering something else entirely."

"Oh?" Harry said in the most normal voice he could manage.

Dumbledore's eyes shone with enthusiasm. "You see, Harry, after you've been through a few adventures you tend to catch the hang of these things. You start to see the pattern, hear the rhythm of the world. You begin to harbour suspicions *before* the moment of revelation. You are the Boy-Who-Lived, and somehow an invisibility cloak made its way into your hands only four days after you discovered our magical Britain. Such cloaks are not for sale in Diagon Alley, but there is *one* which might find its own way to a destined wearer. And so I cannot help but wonder if by some strange chance you have found not just *an* invisibility cloak, but *the* Cloak of Invisibility, one of the three Deathly Hallows and reputed to hide the wearer from the gaze of Death himself." Dumbledore's gaze was bright and eager. "May I see it, Harry?"

Harry swallowed. There was a full flood of adrenaline in his system now and it was entirely useless, this was the most powerful wizard in the world and there was no way he could make it out the door and there was nowhere in Hogwarts for him to hide if he did, he was about to lose the Cloak that had been passed down through the Potters for who knew how long -

Slowly Dumbledore leaned back into his high chair. The bright light had gone out of his eyes, and he looked puzzled and a little sorrowful. "Harry," said Dumbledore, "if you don't want to, you can just say no."

"I can?" Harry croaked.

"Yes, Harry," said Dumbledore. His voice sounded sad now, and worried. "It seems that you're afraid of me, Harry. May I ask what I've done to earn your distrust?"

Harry swallowed. "Is there some way you can swear a binding magical oath that you won't take my cloak?"

Dumbledore shook his head slowly. "Unbreakable Vows are not to be used so lightly. And besides, Harry, if you did not already know the spell, you would have only my word that the spell was binding. Yet surely you realise that I do not *need* your permission to see the Cloak. I am powerful enough to draw it forth myself, mokeskin pouch or no." Dumbledore's face was very grave. "But this I will not do. The Cloak is yours, Harry. I will not seize it from you. Not even to look at for just a moment, unless you decide to show it to me. That is a promise and an oath. Should I need to prohibit you from using it on the school grounds, I will require you to go to your vault at Gringotts and store it there."

"Ah..." Harry said. He swallowed hard, trying to calm the flood of adrenaline and think reasonably. He took the mokeskin pouch off his belt. "If you really *don't* need my permission... then you have it." Harry held out the pouch to Dumbledore, and bit down hard on his lip, sending that signal to himself in case he was Obliviated afterwards.

The old wizard reached into the pouch, and without saying any word of retrieval, drew forth the Cloak of Invisibility.

"Ah," breathed Dumbledore. "I was right..." He poured the shimmering black velvet mesh through his hand. "Centuries old, and still as perfect as the day it was made. We have lost much of our art over the years, and now I cannot make such a thing myself, no one can. I can feel the power of it like an echo in my mind, like a song forever being sung without anyone to hear it..." The wizard looked up from the Cloak. "Do not sell it," he said, "do not give it to anyone as a possession. Think twice before you show it to anyone, and ponder three times again before you reveal it is a Deathly Hallow. Treat it with respect, for this is indeed a Thing of Power."

For a moment Dumbledore's face grew wistful...

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...and then he handed the Cloak back to Harry.

Harry put it back in his pouch.

Dumbledore's face was grave once more. "May I ask again, Harry, how you came to distrust me so?"

Suddenly Harry felt rather ashamed.

"There was a note with the Cloak," Harry said in a small voice. "It said that you would try to take the Cloak from me, if you knew. I don't know who left the note, though, I really don't."

"I... see," Dumbledore said slowly. "Well, Harry, I won't impugn the motives of whoever left you that note. Who knows but that they themselves may have had the best of good intentions? They did give you the Cloak, after all."

Harry nodded, impressed by Dumbledore's charity, and abashed at the sharp contrast with his own attitude.

The old wizard went on. "But you and I are both gamepieces of the same color, I think. The boy who finally defeated Voldemort, and the old man who held him off long enough for you to save the day. I will not hold your caution against you, Harry, we must all do our best to be wise. I will only ask that you think twice and ponder three times again, the next time someone tells you to distrust me."

"I'm sorry," Harry said. He felt wretched at this point, he'd just told off Gandalf essentially, and Dumbledore's kindness was only making him feel worse. "I shouldn't have distrusted you."

"Alas, Harry, in this world..." The old wizard shook his head. "I cannot even say you were unwise. You did not know me. And in truth there are some at Hogwarts who you would do well not to trust. Perhaps even some you call friends."

Harry swallowed. That sounded rather ominous. "Like who?"

Dumbledore stood up from his chair, and began examining one of his instruments, a dial with eight hands of varying length.

After a few moments, the old wizard spoke again. "He probably seems to you quite charming," said Dumbledore. "Polite - to you at least. Well-spoken, maybe even admiring. Always ready with a helping hand, a favour, a word of advice -"

"Oh, *Draco Malfoy!*" Harry said, feeling rather relieved that it wasn't Hermione or something. "Oh no, no no no, you've got it all wrong, he's not turning me, I'm turning him."

Dumbledore froze where he was peering at the dial. "You're *what?*"

"I'm going to turn Draco Malfoy from the Dark Side," Harry said. "You know, make him a good guy."

Dumbledore straightened and turned to Harry. He was wearing one of the most astonished expressions Harry had ever seen on anyone, let alone someone with a long silver beard. "Are you certain," said the old wizard after a moment, "that he is ready to be redeemed? I fear that whatever goodness you think you see within him is only wishful thinking - or worse, a lure, a bait -"

"Er, not likely," Harry said. "I mean if he's trying to disguise himself as a good guy he's incredibly bad at it. This isn't a question of Draco coming up to me and being all charming and me deciding that he must have a hidden core of goodness deep down. I selected him for redemption specifically because he's the heir to House Malfoy and if you had to pick one person to redeem, it would obviously be him."

Dumbledore's left eye twitched. "You intend to sow seeds of love and kindness in Draco Malfoy's heart because you expect Malfoy's heir to prove valuable to you?"

"Not just to *me!*" Harry said indignantly. "To all of magical Britain, if this works out! *And* he'll have a happier and mentally healthier life himself! Look, I don't have enough time to turn *everyone* away from the Dark Side and I've got to ask where the Light can gain the most advantage the fastest -"

Dumbledore started laughing. Laughing a lot harder than Harry would expect, almost howling. It seemed positively *undignified*. An ancient and powerful wizard ought to chuckle in deep booming tones, not laugh so hard he was gasping for breath. Harry had once literally fallen out of his chair while watching the Marx Brothers movie *Duck Soup*, and that was how hard Dumbledore was laughing now.

"It's not *that* funny," Harry said after a while. He was starting to worry about Dumbledore's sanity again.

Dumbledore got himself under control again with a visible effort. "Ah, Harry, one symptom of the disease called wisdom is that you begin laughing at things that no one else thinks is funny, because when you're wise, Harry, you start getting the jokes!" The old wizard wiped tears away from his eyes. "Ah, me. Ah, me. Oft evil will shall evil mar indeed, in very deed."

Harry's brain took a moment to place the familiar words... "Hey, that's a *Tolkien* quote! *Gandalf* says that!"

"Theoden, actually," said Dumbledore.

"You're *Muggleborn*?" Harry said in shock.

"I'm afraid not," said Dumbledore, smiling again. "I was born seventy years before that book was published, dear child. But it seems that my Muggleborn students tend to think alike in certain ways. I have accumulated no fewer than twenty copies of *The Lord of the Rings* and three sets of Tolkien's entire collected works, and I treasure every one of them." Dumbledore drew his wand and held it up and struck a pose. " *You cannot pass!* How does that look?"

"Ah," Harry said in something approaching complete brain shutdown, "I think you're missing a Balrog." And the pink pyjamas and squashed mushroom hat were not helping in the slightest.

"I see." Dumbledore sighed and glumly sheathed the wand in his belt. "I fear there have been precious few Balrogs in my life of late. Nowadays it's all meetings of the Wizengamot where I must try desperately to prevent any work from getting done, and formal dinners where foreign politicians compete to see who can be the most obstinate fool. And being mysterious at people, knowing things I have no way of knowing, making cryptic statements which can only be understood in hindsight, and all the other small ways in which powerful wizards amuse themselves after they have left the part of the pattern that allows them to be heroes. Speaking of which, Harry, I have a certain something to give you, something which belonged to your father."

"You do?" said Harry. "Gosh, who would have figured."

"Yes indeed," said Dumbledore. "I suppose it is a little predictable, isn't it?" His face turned solemn. "Nonetheless..."

Dumbledore went back to his desk and sat down, pulling out one of the drawers as he did so. He reached in using both arms, and, straining slightly, pulled a rather large and heavy-looking object out of the drawer, which he then deposited on his oaken desk with a huge thunk.

"This," Dumbledore said, "was your father's rock."

Harry stared at it. It was light gray, discolored, irregularly shaped, sharp-edged, and very much a plain old ordinary large rock. Dumbledore had deposited it so that it rested on the widest available cross-section, but it still wobbled unstably on his desk.

Harry looked up. "This is a joke, right?"

"It is not," said Dumbledore, shaking his head and looking very serious. "I took this from the ruins of James and Lily's home in Godric's Hollow, where also I found you; and I have kept it from then until now, against the day when I could give it to you."

In the mixture of hypotheses that served as Harry's model of the world, Dumbledore's insanity was rapidly rising in probability. But there *was* still a substantial amount of probability allocated to other alternatives... "Um, is it a *magical* rock?"

"Not so far as I know," said Dumbledore. "But I advise you with the greatest possible stringency to keep it close about your person at all times."

All right. Dumbledore was *probably* insane but if he *wasn't* ... well, it would be just too *embarrassing* to get in trouble from ignoring the advice of the inscrutable old wizard. That had to be like #4 on the list of the Top 100 Obvious Failure Modes.

Harry stepped forward and put his hands on the rock, trying to find some angle from which to lift it without cutting himself. "I'll put it in my pouch, then."

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Dumbledore frowned. "That may not be close enough to your person. And what if your moleskin pouch is lost, or stolen?"

"You think I should just carry a big rock everywhere I go?"

Dumbledore gave Harry a serious look. "That might prove wise."

"Ah..." Harry said. It looked rather heavy. "I'd think the other students would tend to ask me questions about that."

"Tell them I ordered you to do it," said Dumbledore. "No one will question that, since they all think I'm insane." His face was still perfectly serious.

"Er, to be honest if you go around ordering your students to carry large rocks I can kind of see why people would think that."

"Ah, Harry," said Dumbledore. The old wizard gestured, a sweep of one hand that seemed to take in all the mysterious instruments around the room. "When we are young we believe that we know everything, and so we believe that if we see no explanation for something, then no explanation exists. When we are older we realise that the whole universe works by a rhythm and a reason, even if we ourselves do not know it. It is only our own ignorance which appears to us as insanity."

"Reality is always lawful," said Harry, "even if we don't know the law."

"Precisely, Harry," said Dumbledore. "To understand this - and I see that you *do* understand it - is the essence of wisdom."

"So... *why* do I have to carry this rock exactly?"

"I can't think of a reason, actually," said Dumbledore.

"...you can't."

Dumbledore nodded. "But just because I can't think of a reason doesn't mean there *is* no reason."

The instruments ticked on.

"Okay," said Harry, "I'm not even sure if I should be saying this, but that is simply not the correct way to deal with our admitted ignorance of how the universe works."

"It isn't?" said the old wizard, looking surprised and disappointed.

Harry had the feeling this conversation was not going to work out in his favour, but he carried on regardless. "No. I don't even know if that fallacy has an official name, but if I had to make one up myself, it would be 'privileging the hypothesis' or something like that. How can I put this formally... um... suppose you had a million boxes, and only one of the boxes contained a diamond. And you had a box full of diamond-detectors, and each diamond-detector always went off in the presence of a diamond, and went off half the time on boxes that didn't have a diamond. If you ran twenty detectors over all the boxes, you'd have, on average, one false candidate and one true candidate left. And then it would just take one or two more detectors before you were left with the one true candidate. The point being that when there are lots of possible answers, *most* of the evidence you need goes into just *locating* the true hypothesis out of millions of possibilities - bringing it to your attention in the first place. The amount of evidence you need to judge between two or three plausible candidates is much smaller by comparison. So if you just jump ahead without evidence and promote one particular possibility to the focus of your attention, you're skipping over most of the work. Like, you live in a city where there are a million people, and there's a murder, and a detective says, well, we've got no evidence at all, so have we considered the possibility that Mortimer Snodgrass did it?"

"Did he?" said Dumbledore.

"No," said Harry. "But later it turns out that the murderer had black hair, and Mortimer has black hair, so everyone's like, ah, looks like Mortimer did it after all. So it's unfair to Mortimer for the police to *promote him to their attention* without having good reasons already in hand to suspect him. When there are lots of possibilities, most of the work goes into just *locating* the true answer - starting to pay attention to it. You don't need *proof*, or the sort of official evidence that scientists or courts demand, but you need some sort of *hint*, and that hint has

to discriminate that particular possibility from the millions of others. Otherwise you can't just pluck the right answer out of thin air. You can't even pluck a possibility worth thinking about out of thin air. And there's got to be a million other things I could do besides carrying around my father's rock. Just because I'm ignorant about the universe doesn't mean that I'm unsure about how I should reason in the presence of my uncertainty. The laws for thinking with probabilities are no less iron than the laws that govern old-fashioned logic, and what you just did is *not allowed*." Harry paused. " *Unless*, of course, you have some *hint* you're not mentioning."

"Ah," said Dumbledore. He tapped his cheek, looking thoughtful. "An interesting argument, certainly, but doesn't it break down at the point where you make an analogy between a million potential murderers only one of whom committed the murder, and taking one out of many possible courses of action, when many possible courses of action may all be wise? I do not say that carrying your father's rock is the one best possible course of action, only that it is wiser to do than not."

Dumbledore once again reached into the same desk drawer he had accessed earlier, this time seeming to root around inside - at least his arm seemed to be moving. "I will remark," Dumbledore said while Harry was still trying to sort out how to reply to this completely unexpected rejoinder, "that it is a common misconception of Ravenclaws that all the smart children are Sorted there, leaving none for other Houses. This is not so; being Sorted to Ravenclaw indicates that you are driven by your desire to know things, which is not at all the same quality as being intelligent." The wizard was smiling as he bent over the drawer. "Nonetheless, you *do* seem rather intelligent. Less like an ordinary young hero and more like a young mysterious ancient wizard. I think I may have been taking the wrong approach with you, Harry, and that you may be able to understand things that few others could grasp. So I shall be daring, and offer you a certain *other* heirloom."

"You don't mean..." gasped Harry. "My father... *owned another rock?* "

"Excuse me," said Dumbledore, "I *am* still older and more mysterious than you and if there are any revelations to be made then *I* will do the revealing, thank you... oh, where *is* that thing!" Dumbledore reached down further into the desk drawer, and still further. His head and shoulders and whole torso disappeared inside until only his hips and legs were sticking out, as though the desk drawer was eating him.

Harry couldn't help but wonder just how much stuff was in there and what the complete inventory would look like.

Finally Dumbledore rose back up out of the drawer, holding the objective of his search, which he set down on the desk alongside the rock.

It was a used, ragged-edged, worn-spined textbook: *Intermediate Potion Making* by Libatius Borage. There was a picture of a smoking vial on the cover.

"This," Dumbledore intoned, "was your mother's fifth-year Potions textbook."

"Which I am to carry with me at all times," said Harry.

" *Which holds a terrible secret*. A secret whose revelation could prove so disastrous that I must ask you to swear - and I do require you to swear it seriously, Harry, whatever you may think of all this - never to tell anyone or anything else."

Harry considered his mother's fifth-year Potions textbook, which, apparently, held a terrible secret.

The problem was that Harry *did* take that oaths like that very seriously. Any vow was an Unbreakable Vow if made by the right sort of person.

And...

"I'm feeling thirsty," Harry said, "and that is not at all a good sign."

Dumbledore entirely failed to ask any questions about this cryptic statement. " *Do* you swear, Harry?" said Dumbledore. His eyes gazed intently into Harry's. "Otherwise I cannot tell you."

"Yes," said Harry. "I swear." That was the trouble with being a Ravenclaw. You couldn't refuse an offer like that or your curiosity would eat you alive, and everyone else knew it.

"And I swear in turn," said Dumbledore, "that what I am about to tell you is the truth."



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Dumbledore opened the book, seemingly at random, and Harry leaned in to see.

"Do you see these notes," Dumbledore said in a voice so low it was almost a whisper, "written in the margins of the book?"

Harry squinted slightly. The yellowing pages seemed to be describing something called a *potion of eagle's splendour*, many of the ingredients being items that Harry didn't recognise at all and whose names didn't appear to derive from English. Scrawled in the margin was a handwritten annotation saying, *I wonder what would happen if you used Thestral blood here instead of blueberries?* and immediately beneath was a reply in different handwriting, *You'd get sick for weeks and maybe die.*

"I see them," said Harry. "What about them?"

Dumbledore pointed to the second scrawl. "The ones in this handwriting," he said, still in that low voice, "were written by your mother. And the ones in *this* handwriting," moving his finger to indicate the first scrawl, "were written by me. I would turn myself invisible and sneak into her dorm room while she was sleeping. Lily thought one of her friends was writing them and they had the most amazing fights."

That was the exact point at which Harry realised that the Headmaster of Hogwarts *was*, in fact, crazy.

Dumbledore was looking at him with a serious expression. "Do you understand the implications of what I have just told you, Harry?"

"Ehhh..." Harry said. His voice seemed to be stuck. "Sorry... I... not really..."

"Ah well," said Dumbledore, and sighed. "I suppose your cleverness has limits after all, then. Shall we all just pretend I didn't say anything?"

Harry rose from his chair, wearing a fixed smile. "Of course," Harry said. "You know it's actually getting rather late in the day and I'm a bit hungry, so I should be going down to dinner, really" and Harry made a beeline for the door.

The doorknob entirely failed to turn.

"You wound me, Harry," said Dumbledore's voice in quiet tones that were coming from right behind him. "Do you not at least realise that what I have told you is a sign of trust?"

Harry slowly turned around.

In front of him was a very powerful and very insane wizard with a long silver beard, a hat like a squashed giant mushroom, and wearing what looked to Muggle eyes like three layers of bright pink pyjamas.

Behind him was a door that didn't seem to be working at the moment.

Dumbledore was looking rather saddened and weary, like he wanted to lean on a wizard's staff he didn't have. "Really," said Dumbledore, "you try anything new instead of following the same pattern every time for a hundred and ten years, and people all start running away." The old wizard shook his head in sorrow. "I'd hoped for better from you, Harry Potter. I'd heard that your own friends also think you mad. I know they are mistaken. Will you not believe the same of me?"

"Please open the door," Harry said, his voice trembling. "If you ever want me to trust you again, open the door."

There was the sound behind him of a door opening.

"There were more things I planned to say to you," Dumbledore said, "and if you leave now, you will not know what they were."

Sometimes Harry absolutely *hated* being a Ravenclaw.

*He's never hurt a student,* said Harry's Gryffindor side. *Just keep remembering that and you'll be sure not to panic. You're not going to run away just because things are getting interesting, are you?*

*You can't just walk out on the Headmaster!* said the Hufflepuff part. *What if he starts deducting House points? He could make your school life very difficult if he decides he doesn't like you!*

And a piece of himself which Harry didn't much like but couldn't quite manage to silence was pondering the potential advantages of being one of the few friends of this mad old wizard who also happened to be

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Headmaster, Chief Warlock, and Supreme Mugwump. And unfortunately his inner Slytherin seemed to be much better than Draco at turning people to the Dark Side, because it was saying things like *poor fellow, he looks like he needs someone to talk to, doesn't he?* and *you wouldn't want such a powerful man to end up trusting someone less virtuous, would you?* and *I wonder what sort of incredible secrets Dumbledore could tell you if, you know, you became friends with him* and even *I bet he's got a reaallly interesting book collection*.

*You're all a bunch of lunatics*, Harry thought at the entire assemblage, but he'd been unanimously outvoted by every component part of himself.

Harry turned, took a step towards the open door, reached out, and deliberately closed it again. It was a costless sacrifice given that he was staying anyway, Dumbledore could control his movements regardless, but maybe it would impress Dumbledore.

When Harry turned back around he saw that the powerful insane wizard was once more smiling and looking friendly. That was good, maybe.

"Please don't do that again," Harry said. "I don't like being trapped."

"I *am* sorry about that, Harry," said Dumbledore in what sounded like tones of sincere apology. "But it would have been terribly unwise to let you leave without your father's rock."

"Of course," Harry said. "It wasn't reasonable of me to expect the door to open before I put the quest items in my inventory."

Dumbledore smiled and nodded.

Harry went over to the desk, twisted his mokeskin pouch around to the front of his belt, and, with some effort, managed to heave up the rock in his eleven-year-old arms and feed it in.

He could actually feel the weight slowly diminishing as the Widening Lip charm ate the rock, and the burp which followed was rather noisy and had a distinctly complaining sound to it.

His mother's fifth-year Potions textbook (which held a secret that was in fact pretty terrible) followed shortly after.

And then Harry's inner Slytherin made a sly suggestion for ingratiating himself with the Headmaster, which, unfortunately, had been perfectly pitched in such a way as to gain the support of the majority Ravenclaw faction.

"So," Harry said. "Um. As long as I'm hanging around, I don't suppose you would like to give me a bit of a tour of your office? I'm a bit curious as to what some of these things are," and that was his understatement for the month of September.

Dumbledore gazed at him, and then nodded with a slight grin. "I'm flattered by your interest," said Dumbledore, "but I'm afraid there isn't much to say." Dumbledore took a step closer to the wall and pointed to a painting of a sleeping man. "These are portraits of past Headmasters of Hogwarts." He turned and pointed to his desk. "This is my desk." He pointed to his chair. "This is my chair -"

"Excuse me," Harry said, "actually I was wondering about those." Harry pointed to a small cube that was softly whispering "blorple... blorple... blorple".

"Oh, the little fiddly things?" said Dumbledore. "They came with the Headmaster's office and I have absolutely no idea what most of them do. Although *this* dial with the eight hands counts the number of, let's call them sneezes, by left-handed witches within the borders of France, you would not believe how much work it took to nail that down. And *this* one with the golden wibblers is my own invention and Minerva is never, ever going to figure out what it's doing."

Dumbledore took a step over to the hatrack while Harry was still processing this. "Here of course we have the Sorting Hat, I believe the two of you have met. It told me that it was never again to be placed on your head under any circumstances. You're only the fourteenth student in history it's said that about, Baba Yaga was another one and I'll tell you about the other twelve when you're older. This is an umbrella. This is another

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umbrella." Dumbledore took another few steps and turned around, now smiling quite broadly. "And of course, most people who come to my office want to see Fawkes."

Dumbledore was standing next to the bird on the golden platform.

Harry came over, rather puzzled. "This is Fawkes?"

"Fawkes is a phoenix," said Dumbledore. "Very rare, very powerful magical creatures."

"Ah..." Harry said. He lowered his head and stared into the tiny, beady black eyes, which showed not the slightest sign of power or intelligence.

"Ahhh..." Harry said again.

He was pretty sure he recognised the shape of the bird. It was pretty hard to miss.

"Umm..."

*Say something intelligent!* Harry's mind roared at itself. *Don't just stand there sounding like a gibbering moron!*

*Well what the heck am I supposed to say?* Harry's mind fired back.

*Anything!*

*You mean, anything besides "Fawkes is a chicken" -*

*Yes! Anything but that!*

"So, ah, what sort of magic do phoenixes do, then?"

"Their tears have the power to heal," Dumbledore said. "They are creatures of fire, and move between all places as easily as fire may extinguish itself in one place and be kindled in another. The tremendous strain of their innate magic ages their bodies quickly, and yet they are as close to undying as any creature that exists in this world, for whenever their bodies fail them they immolate themselves in a burst of fire and leave behind a hatchling, or sometimes an egg." Dumbledore came closer and inspected the chicken, frowning. "Hm... looking a little peaky there, I'd say."

By the time this statement registered fully in Harry's mind, the chicken was already on fire.

The chicken's beak opened, but it didn't have time for so much as a single caw before it began to wither and char. The blaze was brief, intense, and entirely self-contained; there was no smell of burning.

And then the fire died down only seconds after it had begun, leaving behind a tiny, pathetic heap of ashes on the golden platform.

"Don't look so horrified, Harry!" said Dumbledore. "Fawkes hasn't been hurt." Dumbledore's hand dipped into a pocket, and then the same hand sifted through the ashes and turned up a small yellowish egg. "Look, here's an egg!"

"Oh... wow... amazing..."

"But now we really should get on with things," Dumbledore said. Leaving the egg behind in the ashes of the chicken, he returned to his throne and seated himself. "It's almost time for dinner, after all, and we wouldn't want to have to use our Time-Turners."

There was a violent power struggle going on in the Government of Harry. Slytherin and Hufflepuff had switched sides after seeing the Headmaster of Hogwarts set fire to a chicken.

"Yes, things," said Harry's lips. "And then dinner."

*You're sounding like a gibbering moron again* observed Harry's Internal Critic.

"Well," Dumbledore said. "I fear I have a confession to make, Harry. A confession and an apology."

"Apologies are good" *that doesn't even make sense! What am I talking about?*

The old wizard sighed deeply. "You may not still think so after understanding what I have to say. I'm afraid, Harry, that I've been manipulating you your entire life. It was I who consigned you to the care of your wicked stepparents -"

"My stepparents aren't wicked!" blurted Harry. "My *parents*, I mean!"

"They aren't?" Dumbledore said, looking surprised and disappointed. "Not even a little wicked? That doesn't fit the pattern..."

## LOCATING THE HYPOTHESIS

Harry's inner Slytherin screamed at the top of its mental lungs, *SHUT UP YOU IDIOT HE'LL TAKE YOU AWAY FROM THEM!*

"No, no," said Harry, lips frozen in a ghastly grimace, "I was just trying to spare your feelings, they're actually very wicked..."

"They are?" Dumbledore leaned forward, gazing at him intently. "What do they do?"

*Talk fast* "they, ah, I have to do dishes and wash problems and they don't let me read a lot of books and -"

"Ah, good, that's good to hear," said Dumbledore, leaning back again. He smiled in a sad sort of way. "I apologise for *that*, then. Now where was I? Ah, yes. I'm sorry to say, Harry, that I am responsible for virtually everything bad that has ever happened to you. I know that this will probably make you very angry."

"Yes, I'm very angry!" said Harry. "Grrrr!"

Harry's Internal Critic promptly awarded him the All-Time Award for the Worst Acting in the History of Ever.

"And I just wanted you to know," Dumbledore said, "I wanted to tell you as early as possible, in case something happens to one of us later, that I am truly, truly sorry. For everything that has already happened, and everything that will."

Moisture glistened in the old wizard's eyes.

"And I'm very angry!" said Harry. "So angry that I want to leave right now unless you've got anything else to say!"

*Just GO before he sets you on fire!* shrieked Slytherin, Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor.

"I understand," said Dumbledore. "One last thing then, Harry. You are *not* to attempt the forbidden door on the third-floor corridor. There's no possible way you could get through all the traps, and I wouldn't want to hear that you'd been hurt trying. Why, I doubt that you could so much as open the first door, since it's locked and you don't know the spell *Alohomora* - "

Harry spun around and bolted for the exit at top speed, the doorknob turned agreeably in his hand and then he was racing down the spiral stairs even as they turned, his feet almost stumbling over themselves, in just a moment he was at the bottom and the gargoyle was walking aside and Harry fired out of the stairwell like a cannonball.



Harry Potter.

There must have been something about Harry Potter.

It was Thursday for everyone, after all, and yet this sort of thing didn't seem to happen to anyone else.

It was 6:21pm on Thursday afternoon when Harry Potter, firing out of the stairwell like a cannonball and accelerating at top speed, ran directly into Minerva McGonagall as she was turning a corner on her way to the Headmaster's office.

Thankfully neither of them were much hurt. As had been explained to Harry a little earlier in the day - back when he was refusing to go anywhere near a broomstick again - Quidditch needed solid iron Bludgers just to stand a decent chance of injuring the players, since wizards tended to be a lot more resistant than Muggles to impacts.

Harry and Professor McGonagall did both end up on the floor, and the parchments she had been carrying went all over the corridor.

There was a terrible, terrible pause.

## CHAPTER 17

"Harry Potter," breathed Professor McGonagall from where she was lying on the floor right next to Harry. Her voice rose to nearly a shriek. " *What were you doing in the Headmaster's office?*"

"Nothing!" squeaked Harry.

"*Were you talking about the Defence Professor?*"

"No! Dumbledore called me up there and he gave me this big rock and said it was my father's and I should carry it everywhere!"

There was another terrible pause.

"I see," said Professor McGonagall, her voice a little calmer. She stood up, brushed herself off, and glared at the scattered parchments, which jumped into a neat stack and scurried back against the corridor wall as though to hide from her gaze. "My sympathies, Mr. Potter, and I apologise for doubting you."

"Professor McGonagall," Harry said. His voice was wavering. He pushed himself off the floor, stood, and looked up at her trustworthy, *sane* face. "Professor McGonagall..."

"Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"Do you think I should?" Harry said in a small voice. "Carry my father's rock everywhere?"

Professor McGonagall sighed. "That is between you and the Headmaster, I'm afraid." She hesitated. "I will say that ignoring the Headmaster completely is almost never wise. I *am* sorry to hear of your dilemma, Mr. Potter, and if there's any way I *can* help you with whatever you decide to do -"

"Um," Harry said. "Actually I was thinking that once I know how, I could Transfigure the rock into a ring and wear it on my finger. If you could teach me how to sustain a Transfiguration -"

"It is good that you asked me first," Professor McGonagall said, her face growing a bit stern. "If you lost control of the Transfiguration the reversal would cut off your finger and probably rip your hand in half. And at your age, even a ring is too large a target for you to sustain indefinitely without it being a serious drain on your magic. But I can have a ring forged for you with a setting for a jewel, a *small* jewel, in contact with your skin, and you can practice sustaining a safe subject, like a marshmallow. When you have kept it up successfully, even in your sleep, for a full month, I will allow you to Transfigure, ah, your father's rock..." Professor McGonagall's voice trailed off. "Did the Headmaster *really* -"

"Yes. Ah... um..."

Professor McGonagall sighed. "That's a bit strange even for him." She stooped and picked up the stack of parchments. "I'm sorry about this, Mr. Potter. I apologise again for mistrusting you. But now it's my own turn to see the Headmaster."

"Ah... good luck, I guess. Er..."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter."

"Um..."

Professor McGonagall walked over to the gargoyle, inaudibly spoke the password, and stepped through into the revolving spiral stairs. She began to rise out of sight, and the gargoyle started back -

"*Professor McGonagall the Headmaster set fire to a chicken!*"

"He *wha*-"

# CHAPTER 18

## DOMINANCE HIERARCHIES

Any sufficiently advanced J. K. Rowling is indistinguishable from magic.



*"That does sound like the sort of thing I would do, doesn't it?"*



It was breakfast time on Friday morning. Harry took another huge bite out of his toast and then tried to remind his brain that scarfing his breakfast wouldn't actually get him into the dungeons any faster. Anyway they had a full hour of study time between breakfast and the start of Potions.

But dungeons! In Hogwarts! Harry's imagination was already sketching the chasms, narrow bridges, torchlit sconces, and patches of glowing moss. Would there be rats? Would there be *dragons*?

"Harry Potter," said a quiet voice from behind him.

Harry looked over his shoulder and found himself beholding Ernie Macmillan, smartly dressed in yellow-trimmed robes and looking a little worried.

"Neville thought I should warn you," Ernie said in a low voice. "I think he's right. Be careful of the Potions Master in our session today. The older Hufflepuffs told us that Professor Snape can be really nasty to people he doesn't like, and he doesn't like most people who aren't Slytherins. If you say anything smart to him it... it could be really bad for you, from what I've heard. Just keep your head down and don't give him any reason to notice you."

There was a pause as Harry processed this, and then he lifted his eyebrows. (Harry wished he could raise just one eyebrow, like Spock, but he'd never been able to manage.) "Thanks," Harry said. "You might've just saved me a lot of trouble."

Ernie nodded, and turned to go back to the Hufflepuff table.

Harry resumed eating his toast.

It was around four bites afterward that someone said "Pardon me," and Harry turned around to see an older Ravenclaw, looking a little worried -

Some time later, Harry was finishing up his third plate of rashers. (He'd learned to eat heavily at breakfast. He could always eat lightly at lunch if he didn't end up using the Time-Turner.) And there was yet another voice from behind him saying "Harry?"

## CHAPTER 18

"Yes," Harry said wearily, "I'll try not to draw Professor Snape's attention -"

"Oh, that's hopeless," said Fred.

"Completely hopeless," said George.

"So we had the house elves bake you a cake," said Fred.

"We're going to put one candle on it for every point you lose for Ravenclaw," said George.

"And have a party for you at the Gryffindor table during lunch," said Fred.

"We hope that'll cheer you up afterward," finished George.

Harry swallowed his last bite of rasher and turned around. "All right," said Harry. "I wasn't going to ask this after Professor Binns, I really wasn't, but if Professor Snape is *that* awful why hasn't he been fired?"

"Fired?" said Fred.

"You mean, let go?" said George.

"Yes," Harry said. "It's what you do to bad teachers. You fire them. Then you hire a better teacher instead. You don't have unions or tenure here, right?"

Fred and George were frowning in much the same way that hunter-gatherer tribal elders might frown if you tried to tell them about calculus.

"I don't know," said Fred after a while. "I never thought about that."

"Me neither," said George.

"Yeah," said Harry, "I get that a lot. See you at lunch, guys, and don't blame me if there aren't any candles on that cake."

Fred and George both laughed, as if Harry had said something funny, and bowed to him and headed back toward Gryffindor.

Harry turned back to the breakfast table and grabbed a cupcake. His stomach already felt full, but he had a feeling this morning might use a lot of calories.

As he ate his cupcake, Harry thought of the worst teacher he'd met so far, Professor Binns of History. Professor Binns was a ghost. From what Hermione had said about ghosts, it didn't seem likely that they were fully self-aware. There were no famous discoveries made by ghosts, or much of any original work, no matter who they'd been in life. Ghosts tended to have trouble remembering the current century. Hermione had said they were like accidental portraits, impressed into the surrounding matter by a burst of psychic energy accompanying a wizard's sudden death.

Harry had run into some stupid teachers during his abortive forays into standard Muggle education - his father had been a lot pickier when it came to selecting grad students as tutors, of course - but History class was the first time he'd encountered a teacher who literally wasn't sentient.

And it showed, too. Harry had given up after five minutes and started reading a textbook. When it became clear that "Professor Binns" wasn't going to object, Harry had also reached into his pouch and gotten earplugs.

Did ghosts not require a salary? Was that it? Or was it literally impossible to fire anyone in Hogwarts *even if they died*?

Now it seemed that Professor Snape was going about being absolutely awful to everyone who wasn't a Slytherin and it hadn't even *occurred* to anyone to terminate his contract.

And the Headmaster had set fire to a chicken.

"Excuse me," came a worried voice from behind him.

"I swear," Harry said without turning around, "this place is almost eight and a half percent as bad as what Dad says about Oxford."



Harry stamped down the stone corridors, looking affronted, annoyed, and infuriated all at once.

"Dungeons!" Harry hissed. " *Dungeons!* These are not dungeons! This is a basement! A *basement!* "

Some of the Ravenclaw girls gave him odd looks. The boys were all used to him by now.

It seemed that the level in which the Potions classroom was located was called the "dungeons" for no better reason than that it was below ground and slightly colder than the main castle.

In *Hogwarts!* In *Hogwarts!* Harry had been waiting his whole life and now he was *still* waiting and if there was anywhere *on the face of the Earth* that had decent dungeons it ought to be Hogwarts! Was Harry going to have to build his own castle if he wanted to see one little bottomless abyss?

A short time later they got to the actual Potions classroom and Harry cheered up considerably.

The Potions classroom had strange preserved creatures floating in huge jars on shelves that covered every centimeter of wall space between the closets. Harry had gotten far enough along in his reading now that he could actually identify some of the creatures, like the Zabriskan Fontema. Albeit the fifty-centimeter spider *looked* like an Acromantula but it was too small to *be* one. He'd tried asking Hermione, but she hadn't seemed very interested in looking anywhere near where he was pointing.

Harry was looking at a large dust ball with eyes and feet when the assassin swept into the room.

That was the first thought that crossed Harry's mind when he saw Professor Severus Snape. There was something quiet and deadly about the way the man stalked between the children's desks. His robes were unkempt, his hair spotted and greasy. There was something about him that seemed reminiscent of Lucius, although the two of them looked nothing remotely alike, and you got the impression that where Lucius would kill you with flawless elegance, this man would simply kill you.

"Sit down," said Professor Severus Snape. "Now."

Harry and a few other children who had been standing around talking to each other scrambled for desks. Harry had planned on ending up next to Hermione but somehow he found himself sitting down in the nearest empty desk next to Justin Finch-Fletchley (it was a Doubles session, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff) which put him two desks to the left of Hermione.

Severus seated himself behind the teacher's desk, and without the slightest transition or introduction, said, "Hannah Abbott."

"Here," said Hannah in a somewhat trembling voice.

"Susan Bones."

"Present."

And so it went, no one daring to say a word in edgewise, until:

"Ah, yes. Harry Potter. Our new... *celebrity*."

"The celebrity is present, *sir*."

Half the class flinched, and some of the smarter ones suddenly looked like they wanted to run out the door while the classroom was still there.

Severus smiled in an anticipatory sort of way and called the next name on his list.

Harry gave a mental sigh. That had happened way too fast for him to do anything about it. Oh well. Clearly this man already didn't like him, for whatever reason. And when Harry thought about it, better by far that this Potions professor should pick on *him* rather than, say, Neville or Hermione. Harry was a lot better able to defend himself. Yep, probably all for the best.

When full attendance had been taken, Severus swept his gaze over the full class. His eyes were as empty as a night sky without stars.

"You are here," Severus said in a quiet voice which the students at back strained to hear, "to learn the subtle science and exact art of potionmaking. As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins," this in a rather caressing,



gloating tone, "bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses," this was just getting creepier and creepier. "I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death - if you aren't as great a pack of fools as I usually have to teach."

Severus somehow seemed to notice the look of skepticism on Harry's face, or at least his eyes suddenly jumped to where Harry was sitting.

"Potter!" snapped the Potions professor. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Harry blinked. "Was that in *Magical Drafts and Potions*?" he said. "I just finished reading it, and I don't remember anything which used wormwood -"

Hermione's hand went up and Harry shot her a glare which caused her to raise her hand even higher.

"Tut, tut," Severus said silkily. "Fame clearly isn't everything."

"Really?" Harry said. "But you just told us you'd teach us how to bottle fame. Say, how *does* that work, exactly? You drink it and turn into a celebrity?"

Three-quarters of the class flinched.

Hermione's hand was dropping slowly back down. Well, that wasn't surprising. She might be his rival, but she wasn't the sort of girl who would play along after it became clear that the professor was deliberately trying to humiliate him.

Harry was trying hard to keep control of his temper. The first rejoinder that had crossed his mind was 'Abracadabra'.

"Let's try again," said Severus. "Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

"That's not in the textbook either," Harry said, "but in one Muggle book I read that a trichinobezoar is a mass of solidified hair found in a human stomach, and Muggles used to believe it would cure any poison -"

"Wrong," Severus said. "A bezoar is found in the stomach of a goat, it is not made of hair, and it will cure most poisons but not all."

"I didn't *say* it would, I said that was what I read in one Muggle book -"

"No one here is interested in your *pathetic* Muggle books. Final try. What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

That did it.

"You know," Harry said icily, "in one of my quite *fascinating* Muggle books, they describe a study in which people managed to make themselves look very smart by asking questions about random facts that only they knew. Apparently the onlookers only noticed that the askers knew and the answerers didn't, and failed to adjust for the unfairness of the underlying game. So, Professor, can you tell me how many electrons are in the outermost orbital of a carbon atom?"

Severus's smile widened. "Four," he said. "It is a useless fact which no one should bother writing down, however. And for your information, Potter, asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping potion so powerful it is known as the Draught of Living Death. As for monkshood and wolfsbane, they are the same plant, which also goes by the name of aconite, as you would know if you had read *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*. Thought you didn't need to open the book before coming, eh, Potter? All the rest of you should be copying that down so that you will not be as ignorant as him." Severus paused, looking quite pleased with himself. "And that will be... five points? No, let us make it an even ten points from Ravenclaw for backchat."

Hermione gasped, along with a number of others.

"Professor Severus Snape," Harry bit out. "I know of nothing which I have done to earn your enmity. If there is some problem you have with me which I do not know about, I suggest we -"

"Shut up, Potter. Ten more points from Ravenclaw. The rest of you, open your books to page 3."

There was only a slight, only a very faint burning sensation in the back of Harry's throat, and no moisture at all in his eyes. If crying was not an effective strategy for destroying this Potions professor then there was no point in crying.

Slowly, Harry sat up very straight. All his blood seemed to have been drained away and replaced with liquid nitrogen. He knew he'd been trying to keep his temper but he couldn't seem to remember why.

"Harry," whispered Hermione frantically from two desks over, "stop, please, it's all right, we won't count it."

"Talking in class, Granger? Three -"

"So," said a voice colder than zero Kelvin, "how does one go about filing a formal complaint against an abusive professor? Does one talk to the Deputy Headmistress, write a letter to the Board of Governors... would you care to explain how it works?"

The class was utterly frozen.

"Detention for one month, Potter," Severus said, smiling even more broadly.

"I decline to recognize your authority as a teacher and I will not serve any detention you give."

People stopped breathing.

Severus's smile vanished. "Then you will be -" his voice stopped short.

"Expelled, were you about to say?" Harry, on the other hand, was now smiling thinly. "But then you seemed to doubt your ability to carry out the threat, or fear the consequences if you did. I, on the other hand, neither doubt nor fear the prospect of finding a school with less abusive professors. Or perhaps I should hire private tutors, as is my accustomed practice, and be taught at my full learning speed. I have enough money in my vault. Something about bounties on a Dark Lord I defeated. But there *are* teachers at Hogwarts who I rather like, so I think it will be easier if I find some way to get rid of you instead."

"Get rid of me?" Severus said, now also smiling thinly. "What an amusing conceit. How do you suppose you will do that, Potter?"

"I understand there have been a number of complaints about you from students and their parents," a guess but a safe one, "which leaves only the question of why you're not already gone. Is Hogwarts too financially strapped to afford a real Potions professor? I could chip in, if so. I'm sure they could find a better class of teacher if they offered double your current salary."

Two poles of ice radiated freezing winter across the classroom.

"You will find," Severus said softly, "that the Board of Governors is not the slightest bit sympathetic to your offer."

"Lucius..." Harry said. " *That's* why you're still here. Perhaps I should chat with Lucius about that. I believe he desires to meet with me. I wonder if I have anything he wants?"

Hermione frantically shook her head. Harry noticed out of the corner of his eye, but his attention was all on Severus.

"You are a very foolish boy," Severus said. He wasn't smiling at all, now. "You have nothing that Lucius values more than my friendship. And if you did, I have other allies." His voice grew hard. "And I find it increasingly unlikely that you were not Sorted into Slytherin. How was it that you managed to stay out of my House? Ah, yes, because the Sorting Hat claimed it was *joking*. For the first time in recorded history. What were you really *chatting* about with the Sorting Hat, Potter? Did you have something that it wanted?"

Harry stared into Severus's cold gaze and remembered that the Sorting Hat had warned him not to meet anyone's eyes while thinking about - Harry dropped his gaze to Severus's desk.

"You seem oddly reluctant to look me in the eyes, Potter!"

A shock of sudden understanding - "So it was *you* the Sorting Hat was warning me about!"

"What?" said Severus's voice, sounding genuinely surprised, though of course Harry didn't look at his face.

Harry got up out of his desk.

## CHAPTER 18

"Sit down, Potter," said an angry voice from somewhere he wasn't looking.

Harry ignored it, and looked around the classroom. "I have no intention of letting one unprofessional teacher ruin my time at Hogwarts," Harry said with deadly calm. "I think I'll take my leave of this class, and either hire a tutor to teach me Potions while I'm here, or if the Board is really that locked up, learn over the summer. If any of you decide that you don't care to be bullied by this man, my sessions will be open to you."

" *Sit down, Potter!* "

Harry strode across the room and grasped the doorknob.

It didn't turn.

Harry slowly turned around, and caught a glimpse of Severus smiling nastily before he remembered to look away.

"Open this door."

"No," said Severus.

"You are making me feel threatened," said a voice so icy it didn't sound like Harry's at all, "and that is a mistake."

Severus's voice laughed. "What do you intend to do about it, little boy?"

Harry took six long strides forward away from the door, until he was standing near the back row of desks.

Then Harry drew himself upright and raised his right hand in one terrible motion, fingers poised to snap.

Neville screamed and dived under his desk. Other children shrank back or instinctively raised their arms to shield themselves.

" *Harry don't!* " shrieked Hermione. "Whatever you were going to do to him, don't do it!"

"Have you all gone *mad*?" barked Severus's voice.

Slowly, Harry lowered his hand. "I wasn't going to hurt him, Hermione," Harry said, his voice a little lower. "I was just going to blow up the door."

Though now that Harry remembered it, you weren't supposed to Transfigure things that were to be burned, which meant that going back in time afterward and getting Fred or George to Transfigure some carefully measured amount of explosives might not actually have been such a good idea...

" *Silencio*, " said Severus's voice.

Harry tried to say "What?" and found that no sound was coming out.

"This has become ridiculous. I think you've been allowed to get yourself in enough trouble for one day, Potter. You are the most disruptive and unruly student I have ever seen, and I don't recall how many points Ravenclaw has right now, but I'm sure I can manage to wipe them all out. Ten points from Ravenclaw. Ten points from Ravenclaw. Ten points from Ravenclaw! Fifty points from Ravenclaw! Now sit down and watch the rest of the class take their lesson!"

Harry put his hand into his pouch and tried to say 'marker' but of course no words came out. For one brief moment that stopped him; and then it occurred to Harry to spell out M-A-R-K-E-R using finger motions, which worked. P-A-D and he had a pad of paper. Harry strode over to an empty desk, not the one he'd originally sat down in, and scrawled a brief message. He tore off that sheet of paper, put away the marker and pad in a pocket of his robes for quicker access, and held up his message, not to Snape, but to the rest of the class.

I'M LEAVING  
DOES ANYONE ELSE  
NEED TO GET OUT?

"You're insane, Potter," Severus said with cold contempt.

Aside from that, no one spoke.

Harry swept an ironic bow to the teacher's desk, walked over to the wall, and with one smooth motion yanked open a closet door, stepped in, and slammed the door shut behind him.

There was the muffled sound of someone snapping his fingers, and then nothing.

In the classroom, students looked at each other in puzzlement and fear.

The Potions Master's face was now completely enraged. He crossed the room in terrible strides and yanked open the closet door.

The closet was empty.



One hour earlier, Harry listened from inside the closed closet. There was no sound from outside, and no point in taking risks either.

C-L-O-A-K, his fingers spelled out.

Once he was invisible, he very carefully and slowly cracked open the closet door and peeked out. No one seemed to be in the classroom.

The door wasn't locked.

It was when Harry was outside the dangerous place and inside the hallway, safely invisible, that some of the anger drained away and he realized what he'd just done.

What he'd just done.

Harry's invisible face was frozen in absolute horror.

He'd antagonized a teacher three orders of magnitude beyond anything he'd ever managed before. He'd threatened to walk out of Hogwarts and might have to follow through on it. He'd lost all the points Ravenclaw had and then he'd used the Time-Turner...

His imagination showed him his parents yelling at him after he was expelled, Professor McGonagall disappointed in him, and it was just too painful and he couldn't bear it and he *couldn't think of any way to save himself* -

The thought that Harry allowed himself to think was that if getting angry had gotten him into all this trouble, then maybe when he was angry he'd think of a way out, things seemed clearer somehow when he was angry.

And the thought that Harry didn't let himself think was that he just couldn't face this future if he wasn't angry.

So he cast his thoughts back and remembered the burning humiliation -

*Tut, tut. Fame clearly isn't everything.*

*Ten points from Ravenclaw for backchat.*

The calming cold washed back through his veins like a wave reflected and returning from some breaker, and Harry let out his breath.

Okay. Back to being sane now.

He was actually feeling a bit disappointed in his non-angry self for collapsing like that and wanting only to get out of trouble. Professor Severus Snape was *everyone's* problem. Normal-Harry had forgotten that and wished for a way to protect *himself*. And let all the other victims go hang? The question wasn't how to protect himself, the question was how to destroy this Potions professor.

*So this is my dark side, is it? Bit of a prejudiced term that, my light side seems more selfish and cowardly, not to mention confused and panicky.*

And now that he was thinking clearly, it was equally clear what to do next. He'd already given himself an extra hour to prepare, and could get up to five hours more if required...

## CHAPTER 18



Minerva McGonagall waited in the Headmaster's office.

Dumbledore sat in his padded throne behind his desk, dressed in four layers of formal lavender robes. Minerva sat in a chair before him, opposite Severus in another chair. Facing the three of them was an empty wooden stool.

They were waiting for Harry Potter.

*Harry*, Minerva thought despairingly, *you promised you wouldn't bite any teachers!*

And in her mind she could see very clearly the reply, Harry's angry face and his outraged response: *I said I wouldn't bite anyone who didn't bite me first!*

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" Dumbledore called.

The door swept open, and Harry Potter entered. Minerva almost gasped out loud. The boy looked cool, collected, and utterly in control of himself.

"Good mor-" Harry's voice suddenly cut off. His jaw dropped.

Minerva tracked Harry's gaze, and she saw that Harry was staring at Fawkes where the phoenix sat on its golden perch. Fawkes fluttered his bright red-golden wings like the flickering of a flame, and dipped his head in a measured nod to the boy.

Harry turned to stare at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore winked at him.

Minerva felt she was missing something.

Sudden uncertainty crossed Harry's face. His coolness wavered. Fear showed in his eyes, then anger, and then the boy was calm again.

A chill went down Minerva's spine. Something was not right here.

"Please sit down," said Dumbledore. His face was now serious once more.

Harry sat.

"So, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I've heard one report of this day from Professor Snape. Would you care to tell me what happened in your own words?"

Harry's gaze flicked dismissively to Severus. "It's not complicated," said the boy, smiling thinly. "He tried bullying me the way he's been bullying every non-Slytherin in the school since the day Lucius foisted him off on you. As for the other details, I request a private conversation with you concerning them. A student who is reporting abusive behavior from a professor can hardly be expected to speak frankly in front of that same professor, after all."

This time Minerva couldn't stop herself from gasping out loud.

Severus simply laughed.

And the Headmaster's face grew grave. "Mr. Potter," the Headmaster said, "one does not speak of a Hogwarts professor in such terms. I fear that you labor under a terrible misapprehension. Professor Severus Snape has my fullest confidence, and serves Hogwarts at my own behest, not Lucius Malfoy's."

There was silence for a few moments.

When the boy spoke again his voice was icy. "Am I missing something here?"

"Quite a number of things, Mr. Potter," said the Headmaster. "You should understand, to start with, that the purpose of this meeting is to discuss how to discipline you for the events of this morning."

"This man has terrorized your school for years. I spoke to students and collected stories to make sure there would be enough for a newspaper campaign to rally the parents against him. Some of the younger students

cried while they told me. I almost cried when I heard them! *You allowed this abuser to run free? You did this to your students? Why?* "

Minerva swallowed a lump in her throat. She'd - thought that, sometimes, but somehow she'd never quite -

"Mr. Potter," said the Headmaster, his voice now stern, "this meeting is not about Professor Snape. It is about you and your disregard for school discipline. Professor Snape has suggested, and I have agreed, that three full months of detention will be appropriate -"

"Declined," Harry said icily.

Minerva was speechless.

"This is not a request, Mr. Potter," the Headmaster said. The full, entire force of the wizard's gaze was turned on the boy. "This is your punishment."

"You will explain to me why you allowed this man to hurt the children placed in your care, and if your explanation is not sufficient then I will begin my newspaper campaign with *you* as the target."

Minerva's body swayed with the force of that blow, with the sheer raw *lese majeste* .

Even Severus looked shocked.

"That, Harry, would be most extremely unwise," Dumbledore said slowly. "I am the primary piece opposing Lucius on the gameboard. For you to do such a thing would strengthen him greatly, and I did not think that was your chosen side."

The boy was still for a long moment.

"This conversation grows private," Harry said. His hand flicked in Severus's direction. "Send him away."

Dumbledore shook his head. "Harry, did I not tell you that Severus Snape has my fullest confidence?"

The boy's face showed the shock of it. "This man's bullying makes you vulnerable! I am not the only one who could start a newspaper campaign against you! This is insane! Why are you doing this?"

Dumbledore sighed. "I'm sorry, Harry. It has to do with things that you are not, at this time, ready to hear."

The boy stared at Dumbledore. Then he turned to look at Severus. Then back to Dumbledore again.

"It *is* insanity," the boy said slowly. "You haven't reined him in because you think he's *part of the pattern* . That Hogwarts needs an evil Potions Master to be a proper magical school, just as it needs a ghost to teach History."

"That does sound like the sort of thing I would do, doesn't it?" said Dumbledore, smiling.

"Unacceptable," Harry said flatly. His gaze was now cold and dark. "I will not tolerate bullying or abuse. I had considered many possible ways of dealing with this problem, but I will make it simple. Either this man goes, or I do."

Minerva gasped again. Something strange flickered in Severus's eyes.

Now Dumbledore's gaze was also growing cold. "Expulsion, Mr. Potter, is the final threat which may be used against a student. It is not customarily used as a threat by students against the Headmaster. This is the best magical school in the entire world, and an education here is not an opportunity given to everyone. Are you under the impression that Hogwarts cannot get along without you?"

And Harry sat there, smiling thinly.

Sudden horror dawned on Minerva. Surely Harry wouldn't -

"You forget," Harry said, "that you're not the only one who can see patterns. *This grows private. Now send him* -" Harry flicked a hand at Severus again, and then stopped in mid-sentence and mid-gesture.

Minerva could see it on Harry's face, the moment when he remembered.

She'd told him, after all.

"Mr. Potter," said the Headmaster, "once again, Severus Snape has my fullest confidence."

"You told him," whispered the boy. "You utter fool."

Dumbledore didn't react to the insult. "Told him what?"

"That the Dark Lord is alive."

"*What in Merlin's name are you on about, Potter?* " cried Severus in tones of sheer astonishment and outrage.

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Harry glanced briefly at him, smiling grimly. "Oh, so we *are* a Slytherin, then," Harry said. "I was starting to wonder."

And then there was silence.

Finally Dumbledore spoke. His voice was mild. "Harry, what *are* you talking about?"

"I'm sorry, Albus," Minerva whispered.

Severus and Dumbledore turned to look at her.

"Professor McGonagall didn't tell me," said Harry's voice, swiftly and less calm than it had been. "I guessed. I told you, I can see the patterns too. I guessed, and she controlled her reaction just as Severus did. But her control fell a shade short of perfection, and I could tell it was control, not genuine."

"And I told him," said Minerva, her voice trembling a little, "that you, and I, and Severus were the only ones who knew."

"Which she did as a concession to prevent me from simply going around asking questions, as I threatened to do if she didn't talk," Harry said. The boy chuckled briefly. "I really should have gotten one of you alone and told you that she told me everything, to see if you let anything slip. Probably wouldn't have worked, but would have been worth a shot." The boy smiled again. "Threat's still on the table and I do expect to be briefed *fully* at some point."

Severus was giving her a look of utter contempt. Minerva raised her chin and bore it. She knew it was deserved.

Dumbledore leaned back in his padded throne. His eyes were as cold as anything Minerva had seen from him since the day his brother died. "And you threaten to abandon us to Voldemort if we do not comply with your wishes."

Harry's voice was razor-sharp. "I regret to inform you that you are not the center of the universe. I'm not threatening to walk out on magical Britain. I'm threatening to walk out on *you*. I am not a meek little Frodo. This is *my* quest and if you want in you will play by *my* rules."

Dumbledore's face was still cold. "I am beginning to doubt your suitability as the hero, Mr. Potter."

Harry's return gaze was equally icy. "I am beginning to doubt your suitability as my Gandalf, *Mr. Dumbledore*. Boromir was at least a plausible mistake. What is this *Nazgul* doing in my Fellowship?"

Minerva was completely lost. She looked at Severus, to see if he was following this, and she saw that Severus had turned his face away from Harry's field of vision and was smiling.

"I suppose," Dumbledore said slowly, "that from your perspective it is a reasonable question. So, Mr. Potter, if Professor Snape is to leave you alone henceforth, will that be the last time this issue arises, or will I find you here every week with a new demand?"

"Leave *me* alone?" Harry's voice was outraged. "I am not his only victim and certainly not the most vulnerable! *Have you forgotten how defenseless children are? How much they hurt?* Henceforth Severus will treat *every* student of Hogwarts with appropriate and professional courtesy, or you will find another Potions Master, or you will find another hero!"

Dumbledore started laughing. Full-throated, warm, humorous laughter, as if Harry had just performed a comic dance in front of him.

Minerva didn't dare move. Her eyes flickered and she saw that Severus was equally motionless.

Harry's visage grew even colder. "You mistake me, Headmaster, if you think that this is a joke. This is not a request. This is your punishment."

"Mr. Potter -" Minerva said. She didn't even know what she was going to say. She simply couldn't let that go by.

Harry made a shushing gesture at her and continued to speak to Dumbledore. "And if that seems impolite to you," Harry said, his voice now a little less hard, "it seemed no less impolite when you said it to me. You would

not say such a thing to anyone who you considered a real human being instead of a subordinate child, and I will treat you with just the same courtesy as you treat me -"

"Oh, indeed, in very deed, this is my punishment if ever there was one! Of *course* you're in here blackmailing me to save your fellow students, not to save yourself! I can't imagine why I would have thought otherwise!" Dumbledore was now laughing even harder. He pounded his fist on the desk three times.

Harry's gaze grew uncertain. His face turned toward her, addressing her for the first time. "Excuse me," Harry said. His voice seemed to be wavering. "Does he need to take his medication or something?"

"Ah..." Minerva had no idea what she could possibly say.

"Well," said Dumbledore. He wiped away tears that had formed in his eyes. "Pardon me. I'm sorry for the interruption. Please continue with the blackmail."

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it again. He now seemed a little unsteady. "Ah... he's also to stop reading students' minds."

"Minerva," Severus said, his voice deadly, "you -"

"Sorting Hat warned me," said Harry.

"*What?*"

"Can't say anything else. Anyway I think that's it. I'm done."

Silence.

"Now what?" Minerva said, when it became apparent that no one else was going to say anything.

"Now what?" Dumbledore echoed. "Why, now the hero wins, of course."

"*What?*" said Severus, Minerva, and Harry.

"Well, he certainly seems to have backed us into a corner," Dumbledore said, smiling happily. "But Hogwarts *does* need an evil Potions Master, or it just wouldn't be a proper magical school, now would it? So how about if Professor Snape is only awful toward students in their fifth year and higher?"

"*What?*" said all three of them again.

"If it's the most vulnerable victims about whom you're concerned. Maybe you're right, Harry. Maybe I *have* forgotten over the decades what it's like to be a child. So let's compromise. Severus will continue to unfairly award points to Slytherin and impose lax discipline on his House, and he will be awful to non-Slytherin students in their fifth year and higher. To others he will be scary, but not abusive. He will promise to only read minds when the safety of a student requires it. Hogwarts will have its evil Potions Master, and the most vulnerable victims, as you put it, will be safe."

Minerva McGonagall was as shocked as she'd ever been in her life. She glanced uncertainly at Severus, whose face had been left completely neutral, as though he couldn't decide what sort of expression he ought to be wearing.

"I suppose that is acceptable," Harry said. His voice sounded a bit odd.

"You can't be serious," Severus said, his voice as expressionless as his face.

"I am very much in favor of this," Minerva said slowly. She was so much in favor that her heart was pounding wildly beneath her robes. "But what could we possibly tell the students? They might not have questioned this while Severus was... being awful to everyone, but -"

"Harry can tell the other students that he discovered a terrible secret of Severus's and did a bit of blackmail," said Dumbledore. "It's true, after all; he discovered that Severus was reading minds, and he certainly did blackmail us."

"This is insanity!" exploded Severus.

"Bwah ha ha!" said Dumbledore.

"Ah..." said Harry uncertainly. "And if anyone asks me why fifth years and above got shafted? I wouldn't blame them for being irate, and that part wasn't exactly my idea -"



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"Tell them," said Dumbledore, "that it wasn't you who suggested the compromise, that it was all you could get. And then refuse to say anything more. That, too, is true. There's an art to it, you'll pick it up with practice."

Harry nodded slowly. "And the points he took from Ravenclaw?"

"They must not be given back."

It was Minerva who said it.

Harry looked at her.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Potter," she said. She *was* sorry, but it had to be done. "There *must* be some consequences for your misbehavior or this school will fall to pieces."

Harry shrugged. "Acceptable," he said flatly. "But in the future Severus will not strike at my House connections by taking points from me, nor will he waste my valuable time with detentions. Should he feel that my behavior requires correction, he may communicate his concerns to Professor McGonagall."

"Harry," Minerva said, "will you continue to submit to school discipline, or are you to be above the law now, as Severus was?"

Harry looked at her. Something warm touched his gaze, briefly before it was quashed. "I will continue to be an ordinary student to every member of the staff who is not insane or evil, provided that they do not come under pressure from others who are." Harry glanced briefly at Severus, then turned back to Dumbledore. "Leave Minerva alone, and I'll be a regular Hogwarts student in her presence. No special privileges or immunities."

"Beautiful," Dumbledore said sincerely. "Spoken like a true hero."

"And," she said, "Mr. Potter must publicly apologize for his actions of today."

Harry gave her another look. This one was a bit skeptical.

"The discipline of the school has been gravely injured by your actions, Mr. Potter," Minerva said. "It must be restored."

"I think, Professor McGonagall, that you considerably overestimate the importance of what you call school discipline, as compared to having History taught by a live teacher or not torturing your students. Maintaining the current status hierarchy and enforcing its rules seems ever so much more wise and moral and important when you are on the top and doing the enforcing than when you are on the bottom, and I can cite studies to this effect if required. I could go on for several hours about this point, but I will leave it at that."

Minerva shook her head. "Mr. Potter, you underestimate the importance of discipline because you are not in need of it yourself -" She paused. That hadn't come out right, and Severus, Dumbledore, and even Harry were giving her strange looks. "To learn, I mean. Not every child can learn in the absence of authority. And it is the other children who will be hurt, Mr. Potter, if they see your example as one to be followed."

Harry's lips curved into a twisted smile. "The first and last resort is the truth. The truth is that I shouldn't have gotten angry, I shouldn't have disrupted the class, I shouldn't have done what I did, and I set a bad example for everyone. The truth is also that Severus Snape behaved in a fashion unbecoming a Hogwarts professor, and that from now on he will be more mindful of the injured feelings of students in their fourth year and under. The two of us could both get up and speak the truth. I could live with that."

"In your dreams, Potter!" spat Severus.

"After all," said Harry, smiling grimly, "if the students see that rules are for *everyone*... for professors too, not just for poor helpless students who get nothing but suffering out of the system... why, the positive effects on school discipline should be *tremendous*."

There was a brief pause, and then Dumbledore chuckled. "Minerva is thinking that you're righter than you have any right to be."

Harry's gaze jerked away from Dumbledore, down to the floor. "Are *you* reading *her* mind?"

"Common sense is often mistaken for Legilimency," said Dumbledore. "I shall talk over this matter with Severus, and no apology will be required from you unless he apologizes as well. And now I declare this matter

concluded, at least until lunchtime." He paused. "Although, Harry, I'm afraid that Minerva wished to speak with you about an additional matter. And that is not the result of any pressure on my part. Minerva, if you would?"

Minerva rose from her chair and almost fell. There was too much adrenaline in her blood, her heart was beating too fast.

"Fawkes," said Dumbledore, "accompany her, please."

"I don't -" she started to say.

Dumbledore shot her a look, and she fell silent.

The phoenix soared across the room like a smooth tongue of flame leaping out, and landed on her shoulder. She felt the warmth through her robes, all through her body.

"Please follow me, Mr. Potter," she said, firmly now, and they left through the door.



They stood on the rotating stairs, descending in silence.

Minerva didn't know what to say. She didn't know this person who stood beside her.

And Fawkes began to croon.

It was tender, and soft, like a fireplace would sound if it had melody, and it washed over Minerva's mind, easing, soothing, gentling what it touched...

"*What is that?*" Harry whispered beside her. His voice was unstable, wobbling, changing pitch.

"The song of the phoenix," said Minerva, not really aware of what she was saying, her attention was all on that strange quiet music. "It, too, heals."

Harry turned his face from her, but she caught a glimpse of something agonized.

The descent seemed to take a very long time, or maybe it was only that the music seemed to take a very long time, and when they stepped out through the gap where a gargoyle had been, she was holding Harry's hand firmly in hers.

As the gargoyle stepped back into place, Fawkes left her shoulder, and swooped to hover in front of Harry.

Harry stared at Fawkes like someone hypnotized by the ever-changing light of a fire.

"What am I to do, Fawkes?" whispered Harry. "I couldn't have protected them if I hadn't been angry."

The phoenix's wings continued flapping, it continued hovering in place. There was no sound but the beating of the wings. Then there was a flash like a fire flaring up and going out, and Fawkes was gone.

Both of them blinked, like waking up from a dream, or maybe like falling asleep again.

Minerva looked down.

Harry Potter's bright young face looked up at her.

"Are phoenixes people?" said Harry. "I mean, are they smart enough to count as people? Could I talk with Fawkes if I knew how?"

Minerva blinked hard. Then she blinked again. "No," Minerva said, her voice wavering. "Phoenixes are creatures of powerful magic. That magic gives their existence a weight of meaning which no simple animal could possess. They are fire, light, healing, rebirth. But in the end, no."

"Where can I get one?"

Minerva leaned down and hugged him. She hadn't meant to, but she didn't seem to have much choice in the matter.

When she stood up she found it hard to speak. But she had to ask. "What happened today, Harry?"

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"I don't know the answers to any of the important questions either. Aside from that I'd really rather not think about it for a while."

Minerva took his hand in hers again, and they walked the rest of the way in silence.

It was only a short trip, since naturally the office of the Deputy was close to the office of the Headmaster.

Minerva sat behind her desk.

Harry sat in front of her desk.

"So," Minerva whispered. She would have given almost anything not to do this, or not to be the one who had to do it, or for it to be any time but right now. "There is a matter of school discipline. From which you are not exempt."

"Namely?" said Harry.

He didn't know. He hadn't figured it out yet. She felt her throat tighten. But there was work to be done and she would not shirk it.

"Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall, "I need to see your Time-Turner, please."

All the peace of the phoenix vanished from his face in an instant and Minerva felt like she had just stabbed him.

"*No!*" Harry said. His voice was panicked. "I need it, I won't be able to attend Hogwarts, I won't be able to sleep!"

"You'll be able to sleep," she said. "The Ministry has delivered the protective shell for your Time-Turner. I will enchant it to open only between the hours of 9PM and midnight."

Harry's face twisted. "But - but I -"

"Mr. Potter, how many times have you used the Time-Turner since Monday? How many hours?"

"I..." Harry said. "Hold on, let me add it up -" He glanced down at his watch.

Minerva felt a rush of sadness. She'd thought so. "It wasn't just two per day, then. I suspect that if I asked your dormmates, I would find that you were struggling to stay up long enough to go to sleep at a reasonable time, and waking up earlier and earlier every morning. Correct?"

Harry's face said everything she needed to know.

"Mr. Potter," she said gently, "there are students who cannot be entrusted with Time-Turners, because they become addicted to them. We give them a potion which lengthens their sleep cycle by the necessary amount, but they end up using the Time-Turner for more than just attending their classes. And so we must take them back. Mr. Potter, you have taken to using the Time-Turner as your solution to everything, often very foolishly so. You used it to get back a Remembrall. You vanished from a closet in a fashion apparent to other students, instead of going back after you were out and getting me or someone else to come and open the door."

From the look on Harry's face he hadn't thought of that.

"And more importantly," she said, "you should have simply sat in Professor Snape's class. And watched. And left at the end of class. As you would have done if you had not possessed a Time-Turner. There are some students who cannot be entrusted with Time-Turners, Mr. Potter. You are one of them. I am sorry."

"But I *need* it!" Harry blurted. "What if there are Slytherins threatening me and I have to escape? It keeps me *safe* -"

"Every other student in this castle runs the same risk, and I assure you that they survive. No student has died in this castle for fifty years. Mr. Potter, you will hand over your Time-Turner and do so now."

Harry's face twisted in agony, but he drew out the Time-Turner from under his robes and gave it to her.

From her desk, Minerva drew out one of the protective shells that had been sent to Hogwarts. She snapped the cover into place around the Time-Turner's turning hourglass, and then she laid her wand on the cover to complete the enchantment.

"*This isn't fair!*" Harry shrieked. "I saved half of Hogwarts from Professor Snape today, is it right that I be punished for it? I saw the look on your face, you *hated* what he was doing!"

Minerva didn't speak for a few moments. She was enchanting.

When she finished and looked up, she knew that her face was stern. Maybe it was the wrong thing to do. And then again maybe it was the right thing to do. There was an obstinate child in front of her, and that *didn't* mean the universe was broken.

"Fair, Mr. Potter?" she snapped. "I have had to file *two reports* with the Ministry on public use of a Time-Turner in *two successive days*! Be *extremely* grateful you were allowed to retain the Time-Turner even in restricted form! The Headmaster made a Floo call to plead with them personally and if you were not the Boy-Who-Lived even that would not have sufficed!"

Harry gaped at her.

She knew that he was seeing the angry face of Professor McGonagall.

Harry's eyes filled up with tears.

"I'm, sorry," he whispered, voice now choked and broken. "I'm sorry, to have, disappointed you..."

"I'm sorry too, Mr. Potter," she said sternly, and handed him the newly restricted Time-Turner. "You may go."

Harry turned and fled from her office, sobbing. She heard his feet pattering away down the hall, and then the sound cut off as the door swung closed.

"I'm sorry too, Harry," she whispered to the quiet room. "I'm sorry too."



Fifteen minutes into lunch hour.

No one was speaking to Harry. Some of the Ravenclaws were shooting him looks of anger, others of sympathy, a few of the youngest students even had looks of admiration, but no one was talking to him. Even Hermione hadn't tried to come over.

Fred and George had gingerly stepped near. They hadn't said anything. The offer was clear, and its optionality. Harry had told them that he would come over when dessert started, no earlier. They had nodded and quickly walked away.

It was probably the utterly expressionless look on Harry's face that was doing it.

The others probably thought he was controlling anger, or dismay. They knew, because they'd seen Flitwick come and get him, that he'd been called to the Headmaster's office.

Harry was trying not to smile, because if he smiled, he would start laughing, and if he started laughing, he wouldn't stop until the nice people in white jackets came to haul him away.

It was too much. It was just all too much. Harry had almost gone over to the Dark Side, his dark side had done things that seemed in retrospect insane, his dark side had won an impossible victory that might have been real and might have been a pure whim of a crazy Headmaster, his dark side had protected his friends. He just couldn't handle it any more. He needed Fawkes to sing to him again. He needed to use the Time-Turner to go off and take a quiet hour to recover but that wasn't an option any more and the loss was like a hole in his existence but he couldn't think about that because then he might start laughing.

Twenty minutes. All the students who were going to eat lunch had arrived, almost none had departed.

The tapping of a spoon rang through the Great Hall.

"If I may have your attention please," Dumbledore said. "Harry Potter has something he would like to share with us."

Harry took a deep breath and got up. He walked over to the Head Table, with every eye staring at him.

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Harry turned and looked out at the four tables.

It was becoming harder and harder not to smile, but Harry kept his face expressionless as he spoke his brief and memorized speech.

"The truth is sacred," Harry said tonelessly. "One of my most treasured possessions is a button which reads 'Speak the truth, even if your voice trembles'. This, then, is the truth. Remember that. I am not saying it because I am being forced to say it, I am saying it because it is true. What I did in Professor Snape's class was foolish, stupid, childish, and an inexcusable violation of the rules of Hogwarts. I disrupted the classroom and deprived my fellow students of their irreplaceable learning time. All because I failed to control my temper. I hope that not a single one of you will ever follow my example. I certainly intend to try never to follow it again."

Many of the students gazing at Harry now had solemn, unhappy looks upon their faces, such as one might see at a ceremony marking the loss of a fallen champion. At the younger parts of the Gryffindor table the look was almost universal.

Until Harry raised his hand.

He did not raise it high. That might have appeared preemptory. He certainly did not raise it toward Severus. Harry simply raised his hand to chest level, and softly snapped his fingers, a gesture that was seen more than heard. It was possible that most of the Head Table wouldn't see it at all.

This seeming gesture of defiance won sudden smiles from the younger students and Gryffindors, and coldly superior sneers from Slytherin, and frowns and worried looks from all others.

Harry kept his face expressionless. "Thank you," he said. "That's all."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," said the Headmaster. "And now Professor Snape has something to share with us as well."

Severus smoothly stood up from his place at the Head Table. "It has been brought to my attention," he said, "that my own actions played a part in provoking the admittedly inexcusable anger of Mr. Potter, and in the ensuing discussion I realized that I had forgotten how easily injured are the feelings of the young and immature."

There was the sound of many people emitting muffled chokes at the same time.

Severus continued as if he had not heard. "The Potions classroom is a dangerous place, and I still feel that strict discipline is necessary, but henceforth I will be more aware of the... emotional fragility... of students in their fourth year and younger. My deduction of points from Ravenclaw still stands, but I will revoke Mr. Potter's detention. Thank you."

There was a single clap from the direction of Gryffindor and faster than lightning Severus's wand was in his hand and "*Quietus!*" silenced the offender.

"I will still demand discipline and respect in *all* my classes," Severus said coldly, "and anyone who trifles with me will regret it."

He sat down.

"Thank you too!" Headmaster Dumbledore said cheerfully. "Carry on!"

And Harry, still expressionless, began to walk back to his seat in Ravenclaw.

There was an explosion of conversation. Two words were clearly identifiable in the beginning. The first was an initial "What -" beginning many different sentences such as "What just happened -" and "What the hell -" The second was "*Scourgify!*" as students cleaned up the dropped food and spit-out drinks from themselves, the tablecloth, and each other.

Some students were weeping openly. So was Professor Sprout.

At the Gryffindor table, where a cake waited with fifty-one unlit candles, Fred whispered, "I think we may be out of our league here, George."

And from that day onward, no matter what Hermione tried to tell anyone, it would be an accepted legend of Hogwarts that Harry Potter could make absolutely anything happen by snapping his fingers.

# CHAPTER 19

## DELAYED GRATIFICATION

Blood for the blood god! Skulls for J. K. Rowling!



Draco had a stern expression on his face, and his green-trimmed robes somehow looked far more formal, serious, and well-turned-out than the same exact robes as worn by the two boys behind him.

"Talk," said Draco.

"Yeah! Talk!"

"You heard da boss! Talk!"

"You two, on the other hand, *shut up*. "

The last session of classes on Friday was about to start, in that vast auditorium where all four Houses learned Defense, er, Battle Magic.

The last session of classes on Friday.

Harry was hoping that this class would be non-stressful, and that the brilliant Professor Quirrell would realize this was perhaps not the best time to single out Harry for anything. Harry had recovered a little, but...

...but just in case, it was probably best to get in a bit of stress relief first.

Harry leaned back in his chair and bestowed a look of great solemnity upon Draco and his minions.

"You ask, what is our aim?" Harry declaimed. "I can answer in one word. It is victory. Victory at all costs - Victory in spite of all terrors - Victory, however long and hard the road may be, for without victory there is no -"

" *Talk about Snape*, " Draco hissed. " *What did you do?* "

Harry wiped away the fake solemnity and gave Draco a more serious look.

"You saw it," Harry said. "Everyone saw it. I snapped my fingers."

" *Harry! Stop teasing me!* "

So he'd been promoted to *Harry* now. Interesting. And in fact Harry was fairly sure that he was meant to notice that, and feel bad if he didn't respond somehow...

Harry tapped his ears and gave a significant glance at the minions.

"They won't talk," said Draco.

"Draco," Harry said, "I'm going to be one hundred percent honest here and say that yesterday I was not particularly impressed with Mr. Goyle's cunning."

Mr. Goyle winced.

"Me neither," said Draco. "I explained to him that I ended up owing you a favor because of it." (Mr. Goyle winced again.) "But there *is* a big difference between that sort of mistake and being indiscreet. That really is something they've been trained from childhood to understand."

"All right then," Harry said. He lowered his voice, even though the background noises had gone to blurs in Draco's presence. "I deduced one of Severus's secrets and did a bit of blackmail."

Draco's expression hardened. "Good, now tell me something you didn't tell in strict confidence to the idiots in Gryffindor, meaning that was the story you *wanted* to get all over the school."

Harry grinned involuntarily and he knew that Draco had caught it.

"What is Severus saying?" Harry said.

"That he hadn't realized how sensitive the feelings of young children were," Draco said. "Even in Slytherin! Even to *me*!"

"Are you sure," Harry said, "that you want to know something your Head of House would rather you not know?"

"Yes," Draco said without hesitation.

*Interesting.* "Then you really are going to send your minions away first, because I'm not sure I can believe everything you believe about them."

Draco nodded. "Okay."

Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle looked *very* unhappy. "Boss -" said Mr. Crabbe.

"You've given Mr. Potter no reason to trust you," Draco said. "Go!"

They left.

"In particular," Harry said, lowering his voice even further, "I'm not *entirely* sure that they wouldn't just report what I said to Lucius."

"Father wouldn't *do* that!" Draco said, looking genuinely aghast. "They're *mine*!"

"I'm sorry, Draco," Harry said. "I'm just not sure I can believe everything you believe about your father. Imagine it was your secret and me telling you my father wouldn't do that."

Draco nodded slowly. "You're right. *I'm* sorry, Harry. It was wrong of me to ask it of you."

*How did I get this promoted? Shouldn't he hate me now?* Harry had the feeling he was looking at something exploitable... he just wished his brain wasn't so exhausted. Ordinarily he would have loved to try his hand at some complicated plotting.

"Anyway," Harry said. "Trade. I tell you a fact that isn't on the grapevine, and does not *go* on the grapevine, and in *particular* does not go to your father, and in return you tell me what you and Slytherin think about the whole business."

"Deal!"

Now to make this as vague as possible... something that wouldn't hurt much even if it did get out... "What I said was true. I did discover one of Severus's secrets, and I did do some blackmail. But Severus wasn't the only person involved."

"*I knew it!*" Draco said exultantly.

Harry's stomach sank. He had apparently said something very significant and he did not know why. This was not a good sign.

"All right," Draco said. He was grinning widely now. "So here's what the reaction was like in Slytherin. First, all the idiots were like, 'We hate Harry Potter! Let's go beat him up!'"

Harry choked. "What is *wrong* with the Sorting Hat? That's not Slytherin, it's *Gryffindor* -"

"Not all children are prodigies," Draco said, though he was smiling in a sort of nasty-conspiratorial way, as though to suggest that he privately agreed with Harry's opinion. "And it took around fifteen seconds for someone to explain to them why this might not be such a favor to Snape, so you're fine. Anyway, after that was the second wave of idiots, the ones who were saying, 'Looks like Harry Potter was just another do-gooder after all.'"

"And then?" Harry said, smiling even though he had no idea why *that* was stupid.

"And then the actual smart people started talking. It's obvious that you found a way to put a *lot* of pressure on Snape. And while that could be more than one thing... the obvious *next* thought is that it has something to do with Snape's unknown hold over Dumbledore. Am I right?"

"No comment," Harry said. At least his brain was processing this part correctly. House Slytherin *had* wondered why Severus wasn't getting fired. And they'd concluded that Severus was blackmailing Dumbledore. Could that actually be true...? But Dumbledore hadn't seemed to act like it...

Draco went on talking. "And the *next* thing the smart people pointed out was that if you could put enough pressure on Snape to make him leave half of Hogwarts alone, that meant you probably had enough power to get rid of him entirely, if you wanted. What you did to him was a humiliation, just the same way he tried to humiliate you - but you left us our Head of House."

Harry made his smile wider.

"And then the *really* smart people," Draco said, his face now serious, "went off and had a little discussion by themselves, and someone pointed out that it would be a very stupid thing to leave an enemy around like that. If you could break his hold over Dumbledore, the obvious thing would be to just do it. Dumbledore would kick Snape out of Hogwarts and maybe even have him killed, he'd be *very* grateful to you, and you wouldn't have to worry about Snape sneaking into your dorm room at night with interesting potions."

Harry's face was now neutral. He had not thought of that and he really, really should have. "And from this you concluded...?"

"Snape's hold was some secret of Dumbledore's and *you've got the secret!*" Draco was looking exultant. "It can't be powerful enough to destroy Dumbledore entirely, or Snape would have used it by now. Snape refuses to use his hold for anything except staying king of Slytherin House in Hogwarts, and he doesn't always get what he wants even then, so it must have limits. But it's *got* to be really good! Father's been trying to get Snape to tell him for *years!*"

"And," Harry said, "now Lucius thinks maybe *I* can tell him. Did you already get an owl -"

"I will tonight," Draco said, and laughed. "It will say," his voice took on a different, more formal cadence, "*My beloved son: I've already told you of Harry Potter's potential importance. As you have already realized, his importance has now become greater and more urgent. If you see any possible avenue of friendship or point of pressure with him, you must pursue it, and the full resources of Malfoy are at your disposal if needed.*"

Gosh. "Well," Harry said, "not commenting on whether or not your whole complicated edifice of theory is true, let me just say that we are not quite such good friends as yet."

"I know," Draco said. Then his face turned *very* serious, and his voice grew quiet even within the blur. "Harry, has it occurred to you that if you know something Dumbledore doesn't want known, Dumbledore might simply have you killed? And it would turn the Boy-Who-Lived from a potential competing leader into a valuable martyr, too."

"No comment," Harry said yet again. He hadn't thought of that last part, either. Didn't *seem* to be Dumbledore's style... but...

"Harry," Draco said, "you've obviously got *incredible* talent, but you've got no training and no mentors and you do stupid things sometimes and *you really need an advisor who knows how to do this or you're going to get hurt!*" Draco's face was fierce.

"Ah," Harry said. "An advisor like Lucius?"

"Like *me!*" said Draco. "I'll promise to keep your secrets from Father, from *everyone*, I'll just help you figure out whatever you want to do!"

Wow.

Harry saw that zombie-Quirrell was staggering in through the doors.

"Class is about to start," said Harry. "I'll think about what you said, there's lots of times I *do* wish I had all your training, it's just I don't know how I can trust you so quickly -"



"You shouldn't," Draco said, "it's too soon. See? I'll give you good advice even if it hurts me. But we should maybe *hurry up* and become closer friends."

"I'm open to that," said Harry, who was already trying to figure out how to exploit it.

"Another bit of advice," Draco said hurriedly as Quirrell slouched toward his desk, "right now everyone in Slytherin's wondering about you, so if you're courting us, which I think you are, you should do something that signals friendship to Slytherin. *Soon*, like today or tomorrow."

"Letting Severus go on awarding extra House points to Slytherin wasn't enough?" No reason Harry couldn't take credit for it.

Draco's eyes flickered with realization, then he said rapidly, "It's not the same, trust me, it's got to be something obvious. Push your mudblood rival Granger into a wall or something, everyone in Slytherin will know what that means -"

"That is *not* how it works in Ravenclaw, Draco! If you have to push someone into a wall it means your brain is too *weak* to beat them the right way and everyone in Ravenclaw *knows that* -"

The screen on Harry's desk flickered on, provoking a sudden wash of nostalgia for television and computers.

"Ahem," said Professor Quirrell's voice, seeming to speak personally to Harry out of the screen. "Please take your seats."



And the children were all seated and staring at the repeater screens on their desks, or looking down directly at the great white marble stage where Professor Quirrell stood, leaning on his desk atop the small dais of darker marble.

"Today," said Professor Quirrell, "I had planned to teach you your first defensive spell, a small shield that was the ancestor of today's *Protego*. But on second thought I have changed today's lesson plan in the light of recent events."

Professor Quirrell's gaze searched the rows of seats. Harry winced from where he was sitting, in the back row. He had a feeling he knew who was about to be called on.

"Draco, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy," said Professor Quirrell.

Whew.

"Yes, Professor?" said Draco. His voice was amplified, seeming to come from the repeater screen on Harry's desk, which showed Draco's face as he spoke. Then the screen shifted back to Professor Quirrell, who said:

"Is it your ambition to become the next Dark Lord?"

"That's an odd question, Professor," said Draco. "I mean, who'd be dumb enough to admit it?"

A few students laughed, but not many.

"Indeed," said Professor Quirrell. "So while there's no point in asking any of you, it would not surprise me in the slightest if there were a student or two in my classes who harbored ambitions of being the next Dark Lord. After all, *I* wanted to be the next Dark Lord when *I* was a young Slytherin."

This time the laughter was much more widespread.

"Well, it *is* the House of the ambitious, after all," Professor Quirrell said, smiling. "I didn't realize until later that what I really enjoyed was Battle Magic, and that my true ambition was to become a great fighting wizard and someday teach at Hogwarts. In any case, when I was thirteen years old, I read through the historical sections of the Hogwarts library, scrutinizing the lives and fates of past Dark Lords, and I made a list of all the mistakes that *I* would never make when *I* was a Dark Lord -"

Harry giggled before he could stop himself.

"Yes, Mr. Potter, very amusing. So, Mr. Potter, can you guess what was the very first item on that list?"

*Great.* "Um... never use a complicated way of dealing with an enemy when you can just Abracadabra them?"

"The *term*, Mr. Potter, is *Avada Kedavra*," Professor Quirrell's voice sounded a bit sharp for some reason, "and no, that was *not* on the list I made at age thirteen. Would you care to guess again?"

"Ah... never brag to anyone about your evil master plan?"

Professor Quirrell laughed. "Ah, now *that* was number two. My, Mr. Potter, have we been reading the same books?"

There was more laughter, with an undertone of nervousness. Harry clenched his jaw tightly shut and said nothing. A denial would accomplish nothing.

"But no. The *first* item was, 'I will not go around provoking strong, vicious enemies.' The history of the world would be very different if Mornelithe Falconsbane or Hitler had grasped that elementary point. Now *if*, Mr. Potter - just *if* by some chance you harbor an ambition similar to the one I held as a young Slytherin - even so, I hope it is not your ambition to become a *stupid* Dark Lord."

"Professor Quirrell," Harry said, gritting his teeth, "I am a *Ravenclaw* and it is not my ambition to be stupid, period. I know that what I did today was dumb. But it wasn't *Dark*! I was *not* the one who threw the first punch in that fight!"

"You, Mr. Potter, are an idiot. But then so was I at your age. Thus I anticipated your answer and altered today's lesson plan accordingly. Mr. Gregory Goyle, if you would come forward, please?"

There was a surprised pause in the classroom. Harry hadn't been expecting that.

Neither, from the looks of it, had Mr. Goyle, who looked rather uncertain and worried as he mounted the marble stage and approached the dais.

Professor Quirrell straightened from where he was leaning on the desk. He looked suddenly stronger, and his hands formed fists and he drew himself up into a clearly recognizable martial arts stance.

Harry's eyes widened at the sight, and he realized why Mr. Goyle had been called up.

"Most wizards," Professor Quirrell said, "do not bother much with what a Muggle would term martial arts. Is not a wand stronger than a fist? This attitude is stupid. Wands are held in fists. If you want to be a great fighting wizard you *must* learn martial arts to a level which would impress even a Muggle. I will now demonstrate a certain vitally important technique, which I learned in a *dojo*, a Muggle school of martial arts, of which I shall speak more shortly. For now..." Professor Quirrell took several steps forward, still in stance, advancing on where Mr. Goyle stood. "Mr. Goyle, I will ask you to attack me."

"Professor Quirrell," said Mr. Goyle, his voice now amplified as the professor's was, "can I ask what level -"

"Sixth *dan*. You will not be hurt and neither will I. And if you see an opening, please take it."

Mr. Goyle nodded, looking much relieved.

"Note," Professor Quirrell said, "that Mr. Goyle was afraid to attack someone who did not know martial arts to an acceptable level, for fear that I, or he, would be hurt. Mr. Goyle's attitude is exactly correct and he has earned three Quirrell points for it. Now, fight!"

The young boy blurred forward, fists flying, and the Professor blocked every blow, dancing backward, Quirrell kicked and Goyle blocked and spun and tried to trip Quirrell with a sweeping leg and Quirrell hopped over it and it was all happening too fast for Harry to make sense of what was going on and then Goyle was on his back with his legs pushing and Quirrell was actually *flying through the air* and then he hit the ground shoulder first and rolled.

"Stop!" cried Professor Quirrell from the ground, sounding a little panicked. "You win!"

Mr. Goyle pulled up so sharply he staggered, almost tripping and falling from the aborted momentum of his headlong charge toward Professor Quirrell. His face showed utter shock.

## CHAPTER 19

Professor Quirrell arched his back and bounced to his feet using a peculiar springing motion that made no use of his hands.

There was a silence in the classroom, a silence born of total confusion.

"Mr. Goyle," said Professor Quirrell, "what vitally important technique did I demonstrate?"

"How to fall correctly when someone throws you," said Mr. Goyle. "It's one of the very first lessons you learn -"

"That too," said Professor Quirrell.

There was a pause.

"The vitally important technique which I demonstrated," said Professor Quirrell, "was how to lose. You may go, Mr. Goyle, thank you."

Mr. Goyle walked off the platform, looking rather bewildered. Harry felt the same way.

Professor Quirrell walked back to his desk and resumed leaning on it. "Sometimes we forget the most basic things, since it has been too long since we learned them. I realized I had done the same with my own lesson plan. You do not teach students to throw until you have taught them to fall. And I must not teach you to fight if you do not understand how to lose."

Professor Quirrell's face hardened, and Harry thought he saw a hint of pain, a touch of sorrow, in those eyes. "I learned how to lose in a *dojo* in Asia, which, as any Muggle knows, is where all the good martial artists live. This *dojo* taught a style which had a reputation among fighting wizards as adapting well to magical dueling. The Master of that *dojo* - an old man by Muggle standards - was that style's greatest living teacher. He had no idea that magic existed, of course. I applied to study there, and was one of the few students accepted that year, from among many contenders. There might have been a tiny bit of special influence involved."

There was some laughter in the classroom. Harry didn't share it. That hadn't been right at all.

"In any case. During one of my first fights, after I had been beaten in a particularly humiliating fashion, I lost control and attacked my sparring partner -"

*Yikes.*

"- thankfully with my fists, rather than my magic. The Master, surprisingly, did not expel me on the spot. But he told me that there was a flaw in my temperament. He explained it to me, and I knew that he was right. And then he said that I would learn how to lose."

Professor Quirrell's face was expressionless.

"Upon his strict orders, all of the students of the *dojo* lined up. One by one, they approached me. I was *not* to defend myself. I was only to beg for mercy. One by one, they slapped me, or punched me, and pushed me to the ground. Some of them spat on me. They called me awful names in their language. And to each one, I had to say, 'I lose!' and similar such things, such as 'I beg you to stop!' and 'I admit you're better than me!'"

Harry was trying to imagine this and simply failing. There was no way something like that could have happened to the dignified Professor Quirrell.

"I was a prodigy of Battle Magic even then. With wandless magic alone I could have killed everyone in that *dojo*. I did not do so. I learned to lose. To this day I remember it as one of the most unpleasant hours of my life. And when I left that *dojo* eight months later - which was not nearly enough time, but was all I could afford to spend - the Master told me that he hoped I understood why that had been necessary. And I told him that it was one of the most valuable lessons I had ever learned. Which was, and is, true."

Professor Quirrell's face turned bitter. "You are wondering where this marvelous *dojo* is, and whether you can study there. You cannot. For not long afterward, another would-be student came to that hidden place, to that remote mountain. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

There was the sound of many breaths being drawn in simultaneously. Harry felt sick to his stomach. He knew what was coming.

"The Dark Lord came to that school openly, without disguise, glowing red eyes and all. The students tried to bar his way and he simply Apparated through. There was terror there, but discipline, and the Master came forth. And the Dark Lord demanded - not asked, but demanded - to be taught."

Professor Quirrell's face was very hard. "Perhaps the Master had read too many books telling the lie that a true martial artist could defeat even demons. For whatever reason, the Master refused. The Dark Lord asked why he could not be a student. The Master told him he had no patience, and that was when the Dark Lord ripped his tongue out."

There was a collective gasp.

"You can guess what happened next. The students tried to rush the Dark Lord and fell over, stunned where they stood. And then..."

Professor Quirrell's voice faltered for a moment, then resumed.

"There is an Unforgiveable Curse, the Cruciatus Curse, which produces unbearable pain. If the Cruciatus is extended for longer than a few minutes it produces permanent insanity. One by one, the Dark Lord Crucioed the Master's students into insanity, and then finished them off with the Killing Curse, while the Master was forced to watch. When all his students had died in this way, the Master followed. I learned this from the single surviving student, whom the Dark Lord had left alive to tell the tale, and who had been a friend of mine..."

Professor Quirrell turned away, and when he turned back a moment later, he once again seemed calm and composed.

"Dark Wizards cannot keep their tempers," Professor Quirrell said quietly. "It is a nearly universal flaw of the species, and anyone who makes a habit of fighting them soon learns to rely on it. Understand that the Dark Lord did *not* win that day. His goal was to learn martial arts, and yet he left without a single lesson. The Dark Lord was foolish to wish that story retold. It did not show his strength, but rather an exploitable weakness."

Professor Quirrell's gaze focused on a single child in the classroom.

"Harry Potter," Professor Quirrell said.

"Yes," Harry said, his voice hoarse.

"What *precisely* did you do wrong today, Mr. Potter?"

Harry felt like he was going to throw up. "I lost my temper."

"That is *not* precise," said Professor Quirrell. "I will describe it more exactly. There are many animals which have what are called dominance contests. They rush at each other with horns - trying to knock each other down, not gore each other. They fight with their paws - with claws sheathed. But why with their claws sheathed? Surely, if they used their claws, they would stand a better chance of winning? But then their enemy might unsheathe their claws as well, and instead of resolving the dominance contest with a winner and a loser, both of them might be severely hurt."

Professor Quirrell's gaze seemed to come straight out at Harry from the repeater screen. "What you demonstrated today, Mr. Potter, is that - unlike those animals who keep their claws sheathed and accept the results - you do not know how to lose a dominance contest. When a *Hogwarts professor* challenged you, you did not back down. When it looked like you might lose, you unsheathed your claws, heedless of the danger. You *escalated*, and then you escalated *again*. It started with a slap at you from Professor Snape, who was obviously dominant over you. Instead of losing, you slapped back and lost ten points from Ravenclaw. Soon you were talking about leaving Hogwarts. The fact that you escalated even further in some unknown direction, and somehow won at the end, does not change the fact that you are an idiot."

"I understand," Harry said. His throat was dry. That *had* been precise. *Frighteningly* precise. Now that Professor Quirrell had said it, Harry could see in hindsight that it was an *exactly* accurate description of what had happened. When someone's model of you was that good, you had to wonder whether they were right about other things too, like your intent to kill.

"The *next* time, Mr. Potter, that you choose to escalate a contest rather than lose, you may lose *all* the stakes you place on the table. I cannot guess what they were today. I can guess that they were far, far too high for the loss of ten House points."

Like the fate of magical Britain. That was what he'd done.

"You will protest that you were trying to help all of Hogwarts, a much more important goal worthy of great risks. That is a *lie*. If you had been -"

"I would have taken the slap, waited, and picked the best possible time to make my move," Harry said, his voice hoarse. "But that would have meant *losing*. Letting him be dominant over me. It was what the Dark Lord couldn't do with the Master he wanted to learn from."

Professor Quirrell nodded. "I see that you have understood perfectly. And so, Mr. Potter, today you are going to learn how to lose."

"I -"

"I will not hear any objections, Mr. Potter. It is evident both that you need this and that you are strong enough to take it. I assure you that your experience will not be so harsh as what I went through, though you may well remember it as the worst fifteen minutes of your young life."

Harry swallowed. "Professor Quirrell," he said in a small voice, "can we do this some other time?"

"No," Professor Quirrell said simply. "You are five days into your Hogwarts education and already this has happened. Today is Friday. Our *next* defense class is on Wednesday. Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday... No, we do *not* have time to wait."

There were a few laughs at this, but very few.

"Please consider it an order from your professor, Mr. Potter. What I would like to say is that otherwise I will not teach you any offensive spells, because I would then hear that you had severely hurt or even killed someone. Unfortunately I am told that your fingers are already powerful weapons. Do not snap them at any time during this lesson."

More scattered laughter, sounding rather nervous.

Harry felt like he might cry. "Professor Quirrell, if you do anything like what you talked about, it's going to make me angry, and I really would rather not get angry again today -"

"The point is *not* to avoid getting angry," Professor Quirrell said, his face looking grave. "Anger is natural. You need to learn how to lose even when you are angry. Or at least *pretend* to lose so that you can *plan* your vengeance. As I did with Mr. Goyle today, unless of course any of you think he really *is* better -"

"I'm not!" shouted Mr. Goyle from his desk, sounding a little frantic. "I know you didn't really lose! Please don't plan any vengeance!"

Harry felt sick to his stomach. Professor Quirrell didn't know about his mysterious dark side. "Professor, we really need to talk about this after class -"

"We will," Professor Quirrell said in the tones of a promise. "After you learn how to lose." His face was serious. "It should go without saying that I will exclude anything which could injure you or even cause you significant pain. The pain will come from the difficulty of losing, instead of fighting back and escalating the battle until you win."

Harry's breath was coming in short, panicky pants. He was more frightened than he'd been after leaving the Potions classroom. "Professor Quirrell," he managed to say, "I don't want you to get fired over this -"

"I will not be," Professor Quirrell said, "if *you* tell them afterward that it was necessary. And this I trust you to do." For a moment Professor Quirrell's voice turned very dry. "Believe me, they have tolerated worse in their hallways. This case will be exceptional only in that it happens within a classroom."

"Professor Quirrell," Harry whispered, but he thought his voice was still being repeated everywhere, "do you really believe that if I don't do this, I might hurt someone?"

"Yes," Professor Quirrell said simply.

"Then," Harry felt nauseous, "I'll do it."

Professor Quirrell turned to regard the Slytherins. "So... with the full approval of your teacher, and in such a fashion that Snape cannot be blamed for your actions... do any of you wish to show your dominance over the Boy-Who-Lived? Shove him around, push him to the ground, hear him beg for your mercy?"

Five hands went up.

"Everyone with your hand raised, you are an absolute idiot. What part of *pretending* to lose did you not understand? If Harry Potter does become the next Dark Lord he will hunt you down and kill you after he graduates."

The five hands dropped abruptly back to their desks.

"I won't," Harry said, his voice coming out rather weakly. "I swear never to take vengeance upon those who help me learn to lose. Professor Quirrell... would you *please* ... *stop* that?"

Professor Quirrell sighed. "I *am* sorry, Mr. Potter. I realize that you must find this equally annoying whether you intend to become a Dark Lord or not. But those children *also* had an important life lesson to learn. Would it be acceptable if I awarded you a Quirrell point in apology?"

"Make it two," Harry said.

There was a current of surprised laughter, defusing some of the tension.

"Done," Professor Quirrell said.

"And after I graduate I'm going to hunt you down and *tickle* you."

There was more laughter, although Professor Quirrell didn't smile.

Harry felt like he was wrestling an anaconda, trying to force the conversation through the narrow course that would make people realize he wasn't a Dark Lord after all... *why* was Professor Quirrell so suspicious of him?

"Professor," said Draco's unamplified voice. "It is also not my own ambition to become a stupid Dark Lord."

There was a shocked silence in the classroom.

*You don't have to do this!* Harry almost blurted out loud, but checked himself in time; Draco might not wish it known that he was doing this out of friendship for Harry... or out of the desire to appear friendly...

Calling *that* a *desire to appear friendly* made Harry feel small, and mean. If Draco had intended to impress him, it was working perfectly.

Professor Quirrell was regarding Draco gravely. "You worry that you cannot pretend to lose, Mr. Malfoy? That this flaw which describes Mr. Potter also describes you? *Surely* your father taught you better."

"When it comes to talking, maybe," said Draco, now on the repeater screen. "Not when it comes to being shoved around and pushed to the ground. I want to be fully as strong as you, Professor Quirrell."

Professor Quirrell's eyebrows went up and stayed up. "I am afraid, Mr. Malfoy," he said after a time, "that the arrangements I made for Mr. Potter, involving some older Slytherins who will be told *afterward* how stupid they were, would not carry over onto you. But it is my professional opinion that you are already very strong. Should I hear that you have failed, as Mr. Potter failed today, I will make the appropriate arrangements and apologize to you and whomever you have hurt. I do not think this will be necessary, however."

"I understand, professor," said Draco.

Professor Quirrell looked over the class. "Does anyone else wish to become strong?"

Some students glanced around nervously. Some, Harry thought from his back row, looked like they were opening their mouths but not saying anything. In the end, no one spoke.

"Draco Malfoy will be one of the generals of your year's armies," said Professor Quirrell, "should he deign to engage in that after-school activity. And now, Mr. Potter, please come forward."



Yes, Professor Quirrell had said, *it must be in front of everyone, in front of your friends, because that is where Snape confronted you and that is where you must learn to lose.*

So now the first year watched. In magically enforced silence, and with requests from both Harry and the professor not to intervene. Hermione had her face turned away, but she hadn't spoken out or even given him any sort of significant look, maybe because she'd been there in Potions too.

Harry stood on a soft blue mat, such as might be found in a Muggle dojo, which Professor Quirrell had laid out upon the floor for when Harry was pushed down.

Harry was frightened of what he might do. If Professor Quirrell was right about his intent to kill...

Harry's wand lay on Professor Quirrell's desk, not because Harry knew any spells that could defend him, but because otherwise (Harry thought) he might have tried to jam it through someone's eye socket. His pouch lay there, now containing his protected but still potentially fragile Time-Turner.

Harry had pleaded with Professor Quirrell to Transfigure him some boxing gloves and lock them on his hands. Professor Quirrell had given him a look of silent understanding, and refused.

*I will not go for their eyes, I will not go for their eyes, I will not go for their eyes, it would be the end of my life in Hogwarts, I'll be arrested,* Harry chanted to himself, trying to hammer the thought into his brain, hoping it would stay there if his intent to kill took over.

Professor Quirrell returned, escorting thirteen older Slytherins of different years. Harry recognized one of them as the one he'd hit with a pie. Two others from that confrontation were also present. The one who'd said to stop, that they really shouldn't do this, was missing.

"I repeat," Professor Quirrell said, sounding very stern, "Potter is *not* to be really hurt. Any and all *accidents* will be treated as deliberate. Do you understand?"

The older Slytherins nodded, grinning.

"Then please feel free to take the Boy-Who-Lived down a few pegs," Professor Quirrell said, with a twisted smile that only the first-years understood.

By some form of mutual consent, the pie-target was at the front of the group.

"Potter," said Professor Quirrell, "meet Mr. Peregrine Derrick. He is better than you and he is about to show you that."

Derrick strode forward and Harry's brain screamed discordantly, he must not run away, he must not fight back -

Derrick stopped an arm's length away from Harry.

Harry wasn't angry yet, just frightened. And that meant he beheld a teenage boy fully half a meter taller than himself, with clearly defined muscles, facial hair, and a grin of terrible anticipation.

"Ask him not to hurt you," Professor Quirrell said. "Perhaps if he sees that you're pathetic enough, he'll decide that you're boring, and go away."

There was laughter from the watching older Slytherins.

"Please," Harry said, his voice faltering, "don't, hurt, me..."

"That didn't sound very sincere," said Professor Quirrell.

Derrick's smile widened. The clumsy imbecile was looking very superior and...

...Harry's blood temperature was dropping...

"Please don't hurt me," Harry tried again.

Professor Quirrell shook his head. "How in Merlin's name did you manage to make that sound like an insult, Potter? There is only one response you can possibly expect from Mr. Derrick."

Derrick stepped forward deliberately, and bumped into Harry.

Harry staggered back a few feet and, before he could stop himself, straightened up icily.

"Wrong," said Professor Quirrell, "wrong, wrong, wrong."

"You bumped into me, Potter," Derrick said. "Apologize."

"I'm sorry!"

"You don't *sound* sorry," said Derrick.

Harry's eyes widened in indignation, he *had* managed to make that sound pleading -

Derrick pushed him, hard, and Harry fell to the mat on his hands and knees.

The blue fabric seemed to waver in Harry's vision, not far away.

He was beginning to doubt Professor Quirrell's real motives in teaching this so-called *lesson*.

A foot rested on Harry's buttocks and a moment later Harry was pushed hard to the side, sending him sprawling on his back.

Derrick laughed. "This is *fun*," he said.

All he had to do was say it was over. And report the whole thing to the Headmaster's office. That would be the end of this *Defense Professor* and his ill-fated stay at Hogwarts and... Professor McGonagall would be angry about that, but...

(An image of Professor McGonagall's face flashed before his eyes, she didn't look angry, just sad -)

"Now tell him that he's better than you, Potter," said Professor Quirrell's voice.

"You're, better, than, me."

Harry started to raise himself and Derrick put a foot on his chest and shoved him back down to the mat.

The world was becoming transparent as crystal. Lines of action and their consequences stretched out before him in utter clarity. The fool wouldn't be expecting him to strike back, a quick hit in the groin would stun him long enough for -

"Try again," said Professor Quirrell and with a sudden sharp motion Harry rolled and sprang to his feet and whirled on where stood his real enemy, the Defense Professor -

Professor Quirrell said, "You have no patience."

Harry faltered. His mind, well-honed in pessimism, drew a picture of a wizened old man with blood pouring from his mouth after Harry had ripped his tongue out -

A moment later, Derrick pushed Harry to the mat again and then sat down on him, sending Harry's breath whooshing out.

"Stop!" Harry screamed. "Please stop!"

"Better," said Professor Quirrell. "That even sounded sincere."

It *had* been. That was the horrible thing, the sickening thing, it *had* been sincere. Harry was panting rapidly, fear and cold anger both flushing through him -

"Lose," said Professor Quirrell.

"I, lose," Harry forced out.

"I like it," Derrick said from on top of him. "Lose some more."



Hands shoved Harry, sending him stumbling across the circle of older Slytherins to another set of hands that shoved him again. Harry had long since passed the point of trying not to cry, and was now just trying not to fall down.

"What are you, Potter?" said Derrick.

"A, l-loser, I lose, I give up, you win, you're b-better, than me, please stop -"

Harry tripped over a foot and went crashing to the ground, hands not quite able to catch himself. He was dazed for a moment, then began struggling to his feet again -



" *Enough!* " said Professor Quirrell's voice, sounding sharp enough to cut iron. "Step away from Mr. Potter!"

Harry saw the surprised looks on their faces. The chill in his blood, which had been flowing and ebbing, smiled in cold satisfaction.

Then Harry collapsed to the mat.

Professor Quirrell talked. There were gasps from the older Slytherins.

"And I believe the scion of Malfoy has something he wants to explain to you as well," finished Professor Quirrell.

Draco's voice started talking. His voice sounded almost as sharp as professor Quirrell's, it had acquired the same cadence Draco had used to imitate his father, and it was saying things like *could have put Slytherin House in jeopardy* and *who knows how many allies in this school alone* and *total lack of awareness, never mind cunning and dull thugs, useful for nothing but lackeys* and something in Harry's hindbrain, despite everything he knew, was designating Draco as an ally.

Harry ached all over, was probably bruised, his body felt cold, his mind utterly exhausted. He tried to think of Fawkes's song, but without the phoenix present he couldn't remember the melody and when he tried to imagine it he couldn't seem to think of anything except a bird chirping.

Then Draco stopped talking and Professor Quirrell told the older Slytherins they were dismissed, and Harry opened his eyes and struggled to sit up, "Wait," Harry said, forcing the words out, "there's something, I want, to say, to them -"

"Wait on Mr. Potter," Professor Quirrell said coldly to the departing Slytherins.

Harry swayed to his feet. He was careful not to look in the direction of his classmates. He didn't want to see how they were looking at him now. He didn't want to see their pity.

So instead Harry looked at the older Slytherins, who still seemed to be in a state of shock. They stared back at him. Dread was on their faces.

His dark side, when it was in control, had held to the imagination of this moment, and went on pretending to lose.

Harry said, "No one will -"

"Stop," said Professor Quirrell. "If that's what I think it is, please wait until after they're gone. They'll hear about it later. We all have our lessons to learn, Mr. Potter."

"All right," Harry said.

"You. Go."

The older Slytherins fled and the door closed behind them.

"No one's to take any revenge on them," Harry said hoarsely. "That's a request to anyone who considers themselves my friend. I had my lesson to learn, they helped me learn it, they had their lesson to learn too, it's over. If you tell this story, make sure you tell that part too."

Harry turned to look at Professor Quirrell.

"You lost," said Professor Quirrell, his voice gentle for the first time. It sounded strange coming from the professor, like his voice shouldn't even be able to do that.

Harry *had* lost. There had been moments when the cold anger had faded entirely, replaced by fear, and during those moments he'd begged the older Slytherins and he'd meant it...

"And are you yet alive?" said Professor Quirrell, still with that strange gentleness.

Harry managed to nod.

"Not all losing is like this," said Professor Quirrell. "There are compromises and negotiated surrenders. There are other ways to placate bullies. There is a whole art form to manipulating others by letting them be dominant over you. But first, losing must be *thinkable*. Will you remember how you lost?"

"Yes."

"Will you be able to lose?"

"I... think so..."

"I think so too." Professor Quirrell bowed so low that his thin hair almost touched the floor. "Congratulations, Harry Potter, you win."

There was no single source, no first mover, the applause started all at once like a massive thunderclap.

Harry's couldn't keep the shock from his face. He risked a glance at his classmates, and he saw their faces showing not pity but awe. The applause was coming from Ravenclaw and Gryffindor and Hufflepuff and even Slytherin, probably because Draco Malfoy was applauding too. Some students were standing up from their chairs and half of Gryffindor was standing on their desks.

So Harry stood there, swaying, letting their respect wash over him, feeling stronger, and maybe even a little healed.

Professor Quirrell waited for the applause to die away. It took quite a while.

"Surprised, Mr. Potter?" Professor Quirrell said. His voice sounded amused. "You have just found out that the real world does not *always* work like your worst nightmares. Yes, if you had been some poor anonymous boy being abused, then they would probably have respected you less afterward, pitied you even as they comforted you from their loftier perches. That *is* human nature, I'm afraid. But *you* they already know for a figure of power. And they saw you confront your fear and keep confronting it, even though you could have walked away at any time. Did you think less of *me* when I told you that I had deliberately endured being spat upon?"

Harry felt a burning sensation in his throat and frantically clamped down. He didn't trust this miraculous respect enough to start crying again in front of it.

"Your *extraordinary* achievement in my class deserves an extraordinary reward, Harry Potter. Please accept it with my compliments on behalf of my House, and remember from this day forward that not all Slytherins are alike. There are Slytherins, and then there are Slytherins." Professor Quirrell was smiling quite broadly as he said this. "Fifty-one points to Ravenclaw."

There was a shocked pause and then pandemonium broke out among the Ravenclaw students, howling and whistling and cheering.

(And in the same moment Harry felt something *wrong* about that, Professor McGonagall had been right, there *should* have been consequences, there should have been a cost and a price to be paid, you couldn't just put everything back the way it was like that -)

But Harry saw the elated faces in Ravenclaw and knew he couldn't possibly say no.

His brain made a suggestion. It was a good suggestion. Harry could not even believe his brain was still keeping him upright, let alone producing good suggestions.

"Professor Quirrell," Harry said, as clearly as he could through his burning throat. "You are everything a member of your House should be, and I think you must be just what Salazar Slytherin had in mind when he helped found Hogwarts. I thank you and your House," Draco was very slightly nodding and subtly turning his finger, *keep going*, "and I think this calls for three cheers for Slytherin. With me, everyone?" Harry paused. "*Huzzah!*" Only a few people managed to join in on the first try. "*Huzzah!*" This time most of Ravenclaw was in on it. "*Huzzah!*" That was almost all of Ravenclaw, a scattering of Hufflepuffs and around a quarter of Gryffindor.

Draco's hand moved into a small, quick, thumbs-up gesture.

Most of the Slytherins had expressions of sheer shock. A few were staring at Professor Quirrell in wonder. Blaise Zabini was looking at Harry with a calculating, intrigued expression.

Professor Quirrell bowed. "Thank *you*, Harry Potter," he said, still with that broad smile. He turned to the class. "Now, believe it or not, we still have half an hour left in this session, and that is enough to introduce the Simple Shield. Mr. Potter, of course, is going off and taking a well-earned rest."

"I can -"

## CHAPTER 19

"Idiot," Professor Quirrell said fondly. The class was already laughing. "Your classmates can teach you afterward, or I'll tutor you privately if that's what it takes. But *right now*, you're going through the third door from the left in the back of the stage, where you will find a bed, an assortment of exceptionally tasty snacks, and some extremely light reading from the Hogwarts library. You may not take anything else with you, particularly not your textbooks. Now go."

Harry went.