

HARRY POTTER

AND THE METHODS OF RATIONALITY



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BOOK 6: HARRY POTTER AND THE MIRROR'S STONE

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CHAPTER ONE

PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES, PART I

MAY 13TH, 1992.

Argus Filch's face appeared twisted in the light of the oil lamp he held, shadows dancing over his face. Behind them the doors of Hogwarts quickly receded, and the dark grounds moved closer. The track they now walked was muddy and indistinct.

The trees, branches formerly bare with winter, were not yet fully clad with spring; their branches stretched up toward the sky like lean fingers, skeletons visible amid the thin foliage. The moon was bright, but clouds scudding across it often threw them into darkness, lit only by the dim flames of Filch's lamp.

Draco kept a firm grip on his wand.

"Where are you taking us?" said Tracey Davis. She'd been caught along with Draco by Filch, on their way to an attempted meeting of the Silvery Slytherins after curfew hours, and likewise given a detention.

"You just follow me," said Argus Filch.

Draco was feeling rather annoyed with the whole affair. The Silvery Slytherins ought to be recognized school business. There was no reason why a secret conspiracy shouldn't have permission to meet after curfew, if it was for the greater good of Hogwarts. If this happened one more time he'd talk to Daphne Greengrass and Daphne would talk to her father and then Filch would learn the wisdom of looking the other way where Malfoys were concerned.

The lights of the Hogwarts castle had diminished in the distance when Filch spoke again. "I bet you'll think twice about breaking a school rule again, won't you, eh?" Filch turned his head, away from the lamp, so that he could leer at the four students following him. "Oh yes... hard work and pain are the best teachers if you ask me... It's just a pity they let the old punishments die out... hang you by your wrists from the ceiling for a few days, I've got the chains still in my office, keep 'em well oiled in case they're ever needed..."

"Hey!" Tracey said, a touch of indignation entering her voice. "I'm too young to hear about that—that sort of—you know! Especially if the chains are well-oiled!"

Draco wasn't paying attention. Filch simply wasn't in Amycus Carrow's league.

Behind them, one of the two older Slytherins following them snickered, though she didn't say anything. Beside her was the other, a tall boy with an Slavic cast to his face, and who still spoke with an accent. They'd been caught for some unrelated offense, having to do with the type of thing Tracey went on about, and looked to be in their third or fourth year. "Pfeh," said the taller boy. "In Durmstrang they hang you upside-down by your toes. By one toe, if you are insolent. Hogwarts was soft even in the old days."

Argus Filch was silent for around half a minute, as though trying to think of a proper rejoinder, and then gave a chuckle. "We'll see what you say about that... when you learn what you'll be doing tonight! Ha!"

"I *said*, I'm too young for that sort of thing!" said Tracey Davis. "It has to wait until I'm older!"

Ahead of them was a cottage with lighted windows, though the proportions seemed wrong.

Filch whistled, a high sharp sound, and a dog began barking.

From the cottage stepped forth a figure, making the trees seem too short around it. The figure was followed by a dog that seemed like a puppy by comparison, until you looked at it apart from the taller silhouette and realized the dog was huge, more like a wolf.

Draco's eyes narrowed, before he caught himself. As a Silvery Slytherin he wasn't supposed to be Prejudiced against any sentient

being, especially not where other people might see him.

"What's this?" said the figure, in the loud gruff voice of the half-giant. His umbrella lit up with a white glow, brighter than Filch's dim lamp. In his other hand he held a crossbow; a quiver of short bolts was strapped to his upper arm.

"Students serving detention," Filch said, loudly. "They're to help you search the Forest for... whatever's been eating 'em."

"The *Forest*?" gasped Tracey. "We can't go in there at night!"

"That's right," said Filch, turning from Hagrid to glare at them. "It's into the Forest you're going, and I'm much mistaken if you'll all come out in one piece."

"But—" said Tracey. "There's werewolves, I've heard, *and* vampires, and everyone knows what happens when there's a girl and a werewolf and a vampire all at the same time!"

The huge half-giant was frowning. "Argus, I 'ad in mind you an' maybe a few seventh-years. 'Ere's not much point in bringing along help if I'm to watch over 'em the whole time."

Argus's face lit with cruel satisfaction. "That's their lookout, isn't it? Should've thought of them werewolves before they got in trouble, shouldn't they? Send them out alone. I shouldn't be too friendly to them, Hagrid. They're here to be punished, after all."

The half-giant gave a massive sigh (it sounded like a normal man having all the air driven out of his lungs by a Bludgeoning Hex). "Yeh've done yer bit. I'll take over from here."

"I'll be back at dawn," said Filch, "for what's left of them," he added nastily, and he turned and started back toward the castle, his lamp bobbing away in the darkness.

"Right then," said Hagrid, "now, listen carefully, 'cause it's dangerous what we're gonna do tonight an' I don' want no one takin' risks. Follow me over here a moment."

He led them to the very edge of the Forest. Holding his lamp up high he pointed down a narrow, winding earth track that disappeared into the thick black trees. A light breeze blew over Draco's head as he looked into the Forest.

"There's summat in there that's bin eatin' unicorns," the huge man said.

Draco nodded; he distantly remembered hearing something along those lines a couple of weeks ago, toward the end of April.

"Did you call us to track down a trail of silvery blood to a wounded unicorn?" Tracey said excitedly.

"No," said Draco, though he managed to stop the reflexive sneer. "Filch gave us the detention note at lunch today, at noon. Mr. Hagrid wouldn't wait that long to find a wounded unicorn, and if we were looking for something like that, we'd look in the day when it's bright. So," Draco held up a finger, like he'd seen Inspector León do in plays, "I infer that we're looking for something that only comes out at night."

"Aye," said the half-giant, sounding thoughtful. "Yer not what I expected, Draco Malfoy. Not what I expected at all. An' you'd be Tracey Davis, then. I've heard of yeh. One of poor Miss Granger's lot." Rubeus Hagrid looked over at the two older Slytherins, peering at them in the light of his glowing umbrella. "An' who'd yeh be, again? Don't remember seeing much of yeh, boy."

"Cornelia Walt," said the witch, "and this is Yuri Yuliy," indicating the Slavic-looking boy who'd spoken of Durmstrang. "His family is visiting from the Ukrainian lands, so he's in Hogwarts just for the year." The older boy nodded, a faintly contemptuous cast on his face.

"This is Fang," Hagrid said, indicating the dog.

The five of them set off into the woods.

"What could be killing unicorns?" Draco said after they'd walked for a few minutes. Draco knew a bit about Dark creatures, but he couldn't remember anything that was said to prey on unicorns. "What sort of creature does that, does anyone know?"

"Werewolves!" said Tracey.

"Miss Davis?" Draco said, and when she looked at him, he silently pointed a finger up at the moon. It was waxing gibbous, but not yet full.

"Oh, right," said Tracey.

"No weres in the Forest," said Hagrid. "They're plain wizards most o' the time, 'member. Couldn't be wolves either, they're not near fast

enough ter catch a unicorn. Powerful magical creatures, unicorns are, I never knew one ter be hurt before.”

Draco listened to this, thinking about the puzzle almost despite himself. “Then what is fast enough to catch a unicorn?”

“Wouldn’t ’ave been a matter of speed,” Hagrid said, giving Draco an indecipherable glance. “Ere’s no end ter the ways that creatures hunt. Poison, darkness, traps. Imps as can’t be seen or heard or remembered, even while they’re eatin’ yer face. Always summat new an’ wonderful to learn.”

A cloud passed over the moon, casting the forest into shadow lit only by the glow of Hagrid’s umbrella.

“Meself,” Hagrid continued, “I think we might ’ave a Parisian hydra on our ’ands. They’re no threat to a wizard, yeh’ve just got to keep holdin’ ’em off long enough, and there’s no way yeh can lose. I mean literally no way yeh can lose so long’s yeh keep fightin’. Trouble is, against a Parisian hydra, most creatures give up long before. Takes a while to cut down all the heads, yeh see.”

“Bah,” said the foreign boy. “In Durmstrang we learn to fight Buchholz hydra. Unimaginably more tedious to fight! I mean literally, cannot imagine. First-years not believe us when we tell them winning is possible! Instructor must give second order, iterate until they comprehend.”

They walked for nearly half an hour, deeper and deeper into the Forest, until the path became almost impossible to follow because the trees were so thick.

Then Draco saw it, thick splashes on the roots of trees, gleaming a brighter color beneath the moonlight. “Is that—”

“Unicorn’s blood,” Hagrid said. The huge man’s voice was sad.

In a clearing ahead, visible through the tangled branches of a great oak, they saw the fallen creature, splayed beautiful and sad upon the ground, the dirt around her shining moon-silver with pooled blood. The unicorn was not white, but pale blue, or appearing so beneath the moon and night sky. Her slender legs stuck out at odd angles, obviously broken, and her mane spread across the dark leaves, green-black but with a sheen like pearls. On her flank was a small white shape like a starburst, a center surrounded by eight straight rays. Half her side had been ripped

away, the edges ragged like the marks of teeth, bones and inner organs exposed.

A strange choking sensation rose in Draco's throat.

"That's 'er," Hagrid said, his sad whisper as loud as a normal man's voice. "Just where I found 'er this mornin', dead as a dead doorknob. She is—was—the first unicorn I e'er met in these woods. I called 'er Alicorn, not that it matters ter 'er any more, I s'pose."

"You named a unicorn Alicorn," said the older girl. Her voice was a bit dry.

"But she doesn't have wings," Tracey said.

"An alicorn's a unicorn's horn," Hagrid said, now louder. "Don't know where yeh all started thinking it meant a unicorn with wings, 'ere's no such thing I ever heard. It's just like naming a dog Fang," indicating the huge wolf-like dog that barely came to his knees. "What'd you have called 'er? Hannah, or some such? I gave 'er a name as would've meant summat ter 'er. Common courtesy, I call it."

Nobody said anything to this, and after a further moment, the huge man gave a sharp nod. "We'll start our search from 'ere, the last place it struck. We're gonna split inter two parties an' follow the trail in different directions. Yeh two, Walt and Yuliy—yeh'll go that way, and take Fang. There's nothin' that lives in the Forest that'll hurt yeh if yer with Fang. Send up green sparks if yeh find summat interestin', an' send up red sparks if anyone gets in trouble. Davis, Malfoy, with me."

The Forest was black and silent. Rubeus Hagrid had dimmed the light of his umbrella after they'd set out, so that Draco and Tracey had to steer themselves by the light of the moon, not without occasional trips and falls. They walked past a mossy tree-stump, the sound of running water speaking of a stream somewhere close by. Now and then a ray of moonlight through the branches above lit a spot of silver blue blood on the fallen leaves; they were following the trail of blood, toward where the creature must have first struck the unicorn.

"There's rumors about yeh," Hagrid said in a low voice after they'd walked for a while.

"Well, they're all true," Tracey said. "All of them."

“Not yeh,” Hagrid said. “Did yeh really testify under Veritaserum that yeh tried to help Miss Granger, three times it was?”

Draco weighed his words for a while, and finally said, “Yes.” It wouldn’t have done to appear too eager to claim credit.

The huge man shook his head, his great feet still stomping silently through the woods. “I’m surprised, teh be honest. And yeh too, Davis, tryin’ to put the halls in order. Are yeh sure the Sorting Hat put yeh in the right place? There’s not a single witch or wizard who went bad who wasn’t in Slytherin, so it’s always been said.”

“That’s not true,” Tracey said. “What about Xiaonan Tong the Black Raven, Spencer of the Hill, and Mister Kayvon?”

“Who?” said Hagrid.

“Just some of the best Dark Wizards from the last two centuries,” Tracey said. “They’re probably *the* best from Hogwarts who weren’t from Slytherin.” Her voice fell, lost its enthusiasm. “Miss Granger always told me I should read up on anything I—”

“Anyway,” Draco said quickly, “that’s not really relevant, Mr. Hagrid. Even if—” Draco worked it around in his head, trying to translate the difference between *probability of Slytherin given Dark* and *probability of Dark given Slytherin* into nonscientific language. “Even if most Dark Wizards are from Slytherin, very few Slytherins are Dark Wizards. There aren’t all that many Dark Wizards, so not all Slytherins can be one.” Or as Father had said, while any Malfoy should certainly know much of the secret lore, the more... *costly* rituals were better left to useful fools like Amycus Carrow.

“So yeh’re saying,” Hagrid said, “that most Dark Wizards are Slytherins... but...”

“But most Slytherins are not Dark Wizards,” Draco said. He had a weary feeling they’d be at this a while, but like fighting a hydra, the important thing was to not give up.

“I never thought of it that way,” the huge man said, sounding awestruck. “But, well, if yeh’re not all a house of snakes, then why—*get behind that tree!*”

Hagrid seized Draco and Tracey and hoisted them off the path behind a towering oak. He pulled out a bolt and fitted it into his crossbow, raising

it, ready to fire. The three of them listened. Something was slithering over dead leaves nearby: it sounded like a cloak trailing along the ground. Hagrid was squinting up the dark path, but after a few seconds, the sound faded away.

"I knew it," Hagrid murmured. "There's summat in here that shouldn' be."

They went after where the rustling sound had come from, with Hagrid in the lead and Tracey and Draco both gripping their wands at the ready, but they found nothing, despite searching in a widening circle with their ears straining for the faintest sound.

They walked on through the dense, dark trees. Draco kept looking over his shoulder, a feeling nagging at him that they were being watched. They had just passed a bend in the path when Tracey yelled and pointed.

In the distance, a shower of red sparks lit the air.

"You two wait here!" Hagrid shouted. "Stay where yeh are, I'll come back for yeh!"

Before Draco could say a word, Hagrid spun and crashed away through the undergrowth.

Draco and Tracey stood looking at each other, until they heard nothing but the rustling of leaves around them. Tracey looked scared, but trying to hide it. Draco was feeling more annoyed than anything else. Apparently Rubeus Hagrid, when he had formed his plans for tonight, had not spent even five seconds visualizing the consequences if something actually went wrong.

"Now what?" said Tracey, her voice a little high.

"We wait for Mr. Hagrid to come back."

The minutes dragged by. Draco's ears seemed sharper than usual, picking up every sigh of the wind, every cracking twig. Tracey kept looking up at the moon, as though to reassure herself that it wasn't full yet.

"I'm—" Tracey whispered. "I'm getting a little nervous, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco thought about it a bit. To be honest, there *was* something... well, it wasn't that he was a coward, or even that he was scared. But there had been a murder at Hogwarts and if he'd been watching himself in a play, having just been abandoned in the Forbidden Forest by a half-giant, he would currently feel like yelling at the boy on stage that he should...

Draco reached into his robes, and took out a mirror. Tapping the surface showed a man in red robes, who frowned almost immediately.

"Auror Captain Eneasz Brodski," the man said clearly, causing Tracey to start with the loudness in the quiet forest. "What is it, Draco Malfoy?"

"Put me on ten-minute check-in," Draco said. He'd decided not to complain directly about his detention. He did *not* want to look like a spoiled brat. "If I don't respond, come get me. I'm in the Forbidden Forest."

Inside the mirror, the Auror's brows rose. "What are you doing in the Forbidden Forest, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Looking for the unicorn-eater with Mr. Hagrid," Draco said, and tapped the mirror off, putting it back in his robes before the Auror could ask anything about detentions or say anything about serving it out without complaining.

Tracey's head turned toward him, though it was a little too dim to read her expression. "Um, thanks," she whispered.

The few leaves which had emerged on their branches rustled as another, colder breeze blew through the forest.

Tracey's voice was a little louder when she spoke again. "You didn't have to—" she said, now sounding a little shy.

"Don't mention it, Miss Davis."

The dark silhouette of Tracey put her hand to her cheek, as though to conceal a blush that wasn't visible anyway. "I mean, not for *me*—"

"No, really," Draco said. "Don't mention it. At all." He would have threatened to take out the mirror and order Captain Brodski not to rescue *her*, but he was afraid she would consider that flirting.

Tracey's silhouetted head turned from him, looked away. Finally she said, in a smaller voice, "It's too soon, isn't it—"

A high scream echoed through the woods, a not-quite-human sound, the scream of something like a horse; and Tracey shrieked and ran.

"No, *you numbskull!*" yelled Draco, plunging after her. The sound had been so eerie that Draco wasn't certain where it came from—but he thought that Tracey Davis might, in fact, be running straight toward the source of that eerie scream.

Brambles whipped at Draco's eyes, he had to keep one hand in front of his face to shield them, trying not to lose track of Tracey because it seemed obvious that, if this was a play, and they got separated, *one* of them was going to die. Draco thought of the mirror secured within his robes but he somehow knew that if he tried to take it out one-handed while running, the mirror would inevitably fall and be lost—

Ahead of them, Tracey had stopped, and Draco felt relieved for an instant, before he saw.

Another unicorn lay on the ground, surrounded by a slowly widening pool of silver blood, the edge of the blood creeping across the ground like spilled mercury. Her coat was purple, like the color of the night sky, her horn exactly the same twilight color as her skin, her visible flank marked by a pink star-blotch surrounded by white patches. The sight tore at Draco's heart, even more than the other unicorn because this one's eyes were staring glassily right at him, and because there was a—

—blurring, twisting form—

—feeding on an open wound on the unicorn's side, like it was drinking from it—

—Draco couldn't understand, somehow couldn't recognize what he was seeing—

—*it was looking at them.*

The blurring, seething, unrecognizable darkness seemed to turn to regard them. A hiss came from it, like the hiss of the deadliest snake which ever had existed, something more dangerous by far than any Blue Krait.

Then it bent back over the wound in the unicorn, and continued to drink.

The mirror was in Draco's hand, and it remained lifeless as his finger mechanically tapped at the surface, over and over.

Tracey was holding her wand now, saying things like "Prismatis" and "Stupefy" but nothing was happening.

Then the seething outline rose up, like a man rising to his feet only not so; and it seemed to scuttle forward, moving with a strange half-jump across the dying unicorn's legs, approaching the two of them.

Tracey tugged at his sleeve and then turned to run, run from something that could hunt down unicorns. Before she could take three steps

there came another terrible hiss, burning his ears, and Tracey fell to the ground and did not move.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Draco knew that he was about to die. Even if the Auror checked his mirror this very instant, there was no way anyone could get here fast enough. There was no *time*.

Running hadn't worked.

Magic hadn't worked.

The seething outline came closer, while Draco tried, in his last moments, to solve the riddle.

Then a blazing silver ball of light plunged out of the night sky and hung there, illuminating the forest as bright as daylight, and the seething outline leapt backwards, as though in horror of the light.

Four broomsticks plunged out of the sky, three Aurors with bright multicolored shields and Harry Potter holding his wand aloft, seated behind Professor McGonagall within a larger shield.

"Get out of here!" roared Professor McGonagall—

—an instant before the seething thing gave forth another terrible hiss, and all the shielding spells winked out. The three Aurors and Professor McGonagall fell off their broomsticks and dropped heavily to the forest floor, lying motionless.

Draco couldn't breathe, the most intense fear he'd ever felt in his life gripping all through his chest, sending tendrils around his heart.

Harry Potter, who had remained untouched, silently guided his broomstick toward the ground—

—and then leapt off to stand between Draco and the seething outline, interposing himself like a living shield.

"Run!" said Harry Potter, turning his head half-back to look at Draco. The silver moonlight gleamed on his face. "Run, Draco! I'll hold it off!"

"You can't fight that thing alone!" Draco cried aloud. A nausea was in his stomach, a churning sensation that, looking back in memory, seemed both like and unlike a sense of guilt, as though it had the sensations but not quite all of the emotion.

"I must," Harry Potter said grimly. "Go!"

"Harry, I—I'm sorry, for everything—I" Though later, looking back, Draco couldn't quite remember what he'd meant to apologize for, maybe it'd been that he was planning to overthrow Harry's conspiracy, all that time ago.

The seething figure, now seeming blacker and more terrible, rose up into the air, hovering off the ground.

"GO!" shouted Harry.

Draco turned and fled headlong into the woods, with the branches whipping at his face. Behind him, Draco heard another terrible hiss, and Harry's voice rising, crying something that Draco couldn't make out from the distance; Draco turned his head for only an instant to look back, and in that moment ran into something, hitting his head HARD, and blacked out.

*
*

Harry held a tight grip on his wand, a Prismatic Sphere glowing around him. He stared levelly at the seething, blurring form in front of him, and said, "What on Earth are you doing?"

The seething blurs resolved, reformed, relaxed back into a hooded form. Whatever concealment had been at work—a device rather than a Charm, Harry guessed, since the magic had been able to affect him—had prevented his mind from recognizing the shape or even that the shape was human. But it hadn't prevented Harry from recognizing the sharp sense of doom.

Professor Quirrell stood straight with silver blood all down the front of his enshrouding black cloak, and gave a sigh, looking at the fallen forms of three Aurors, Tracey Davis, Draco Malfoy, and Professor McGonagall. "I had honestly thought," Professor Quirrell murmured, "that I jammed that mirror without alarm. What were two first-year Slytherins doing alone in the Forbidden Forest? Mr. Malfoy has more sense than this... What a fiasco."

Harry didn't answer. The sense of doom was as strong as Harry could ever remember feeling it, a feeling of power in the air so great that it was almost tangible. Some part of him was still viscerally shocked at how fast the shields surrounding the Aurors had been torn apart. He almost hadn't been able to *see* the successive lashes of color which had torn away the shields like tissue paper. It made the duel Professor Quirrell had fought against the Auror in Azkaban look like a mockery, a child's game—though

Professor Quirrell had claimed, then, that if he'd fought for real the Auror would have been dead in seconds; and Harry knew now that this was also true.

Just how high did the power ladder go?

"I take it," Harry said, managing to keep his voice steady, "that your eating unicorns has something to do with why you'll get fired from the Defense Professor position. I don't suppose you'd care to explain in considerable detail?"

Professor Quirrell looked at him. The almost tangible sense of power in the air seemed to diminish, drawing back into the Defense Professor. "I shall indeed explain myself," the Defense Professor said. "I need to cast a few Memory Charms first, and then we may go off and discuss it, for it would not be wise for me to stay. You will return to this time later, as I know."

Harry willed himself to be able to see through the Cloak he had mastered; and knew that another Harry stood beside him, hidden by his own Deathly Hallow. Harry then told his Cloak to hide himself from himself once more, and it did; being able to perceive your future self meant having to match the memory later.

Harry's own voice said, then, sounding strange in present-Harry's ears, "He has a surprisingly good explanation."

Present-Harry remembered the words as best he could. Nothing more was said between them.

Professor Quirrell walked to Draco's form, and chanted the spell of the False Memory Charm. The Defense Professor stood there for perhaps a minute, seemingly lost to the world.

Harry had been studying Obliviations, these last couple of weeks—though he couldn't have helped cast the spells, unless he was willing to exhaust himself almost completely, and for some reason they wanted an Auror to lose every single life memory involving the color blue. But Harry had some idea, now, of the concentration which the far more difficult False Memory Charm entailed. You had to try to live the other person's entire life inside your own head, at least if you wanted to create the False Memories with less than a sixteen-to-one slowdown as you separately crafted sixteen major tracks of memory. It might have been quiet, there

might have been no outward sign; but Harry knew something of the difficulties now, and he knew to be impressed.

Professor Quirrell finished, and moved on to Tracey Davis, then the three Aurors, and finally Professor McGonagall. Harry waited, but future-Harry made no protest. It was possible that even Professor McGonagall, if she'd been awake, wouldn't have protested. It was not yet the Ides of May, and apparently there would be a surprisingly good explanation.

With a gesture, Draco's stunned body was lifted, and sent a short distance into the woods, before being carefully deposited on the ground. Then a final gesture from Professor Quirrell ripped a huge chunk out of the unicorn's side, leaving behind ragged edges; the raw meat hovered in the air, then wavered in Vanishment and was gone.

"Done," Professor Quirrell said. "I must depart this place now, Mr. Potter. Come with me, and remain here."

Professor Quirrell strode away, and Harry followed and remained behind.

They walked through the woods in silence for a time, before Harry heard faint voices in the distance. The next set of Aurors, presumably, after the first set had fallen out of contact. What his future self was saying, Harry didn't know.

"They won't detect us, nor hear our speech," said Professor Quirrell. The sense of power and doom around the Defense Professor was still strong. The man seated himself on a tree stump, one where the light of the almost-full moon fell full on him. "I should first say that when you speak to the Aurors, in the future, you should tell them that you frightened away the seething dark, the same as you did that Dementor. It is what Mr. Malfoy will remember seeing." Professor Quirrell gave a small sigh. "It may cause some alarm, if they conclude that some horror kin to Dementors, and strong enough to break the Aurors' shields, is loose in the Forbidden Forest. But I could not think of what else to do. If the forest is better-guarded after this—but with any luck I have already consumed what I need. Would you mind telling me how you arrived so quickly? How did you know Mr. Malfoy was in trouble?"

After Captain Brodski had learned that Draco Malfoy was in the Forbidden Forest, seemingly in the company of Rubeus Hagrid, Brodski had

begun inquiring to find out who had authorized this, and had still been unable to find out when Draco Malfoy had missed check-in. Despite Harry's protests, the Auror Captain, who was authorized to know about Time-Turners, had refused to allow deployment to before the time of the missed check-in; there were standard procedures involving Time. But Brodski had given Harry written orders allowing him to go back and deploy an Auror trio to arrive one second after the missed check-in time. There had been a Patronus Charm to locate Draco, which Harry had successfully willed to take the form of a ball of pure silver light, and the flight of Aurors had arrived on time to the second.

"I'm afraid I couldn't say," Harry replied evenly. Professor Quirrell was still a major suspect, and it was good for him not to know the details. "Now why are you eating unicorns?"

"Ah," Professor Quirrell said. "As to that..." The man hesitated. "I was drinking the blood of unicorns, not eating them. The missing flesh, the ragged marks upon the body—those were to obscure the case, to make it seem like some other predator. The use of unicorn's blood is too well-known."

"I don't know it," Harry said.

"I know you do not," the Defense Professor said sharply. "Or you would not be pestering me about it. The power of unicorn's blood is to preserve your life for a time, even if you are on the very verge of death."

There was a stretch of time when Harry's brain claimed to be refusing to process the words, which was of course a lie, because you couldn't know the meaning you weren't allowed to process, without having already processed it.

A strange sense of blankness overtook Harry, an absence of reaction, maybe this was what other people felt like when someone went off-script, and they couldn't say or think of anything to do.

Of course Professor Quirrell was dying, not just occasionally ill.

Professor Quirrell had known he was dying. He'd volunteered to take the Defense Professor position at Hogwarts, after all.

Of course he'd been getting worse the whole school year. Of course illnesses which kept getting worse had a predictable destination at their end.

Harry's brain had surely known already, somewhere in the safe back of his mind where he could refuse to process things he'd already processed.

Of course that was why Professor Quirrell wouldn't be able to teach Battle Magic next year. Professor McGonagall wouldn't even have to fire him. He would just be—

—dead.

"No," Harry said, his voice a little shaky. "There has to be a way—"

"I am not stupid nor particularly eager to die. I have already looked. I had to go this far simply to last out my lesson plans, having less time than I had thought, and—" The head of the dark moonlit figure turned away. "I think I do not want to hear about it, Mr. Potter."

Harry's breath hitched. Too many emotions were bubbling up in him at once. After denial came anger, according to a ritual someone had just made up. And yet it seemed surprisingly appropriate.

"And why—" Harry's breath hitched again. "Why isn't unicorn's blood standard in healer's kits, then? To keep someone alive, even if they're on the very verge of dying from their legs being eaten?"

"Because there are permanent side effects," Professor Quirrell said quietly.

"Side effects? *Side effects*? What kind of side effect is medically worse than *DEATH*?" Harry's voice rose on the last word until he was shouting.

"Not everyone thinks the same way we do, Mr. Potter. Though, to be fair, the blood must come from a live unicorn and the unicorn must die in the drinking. Would I be here otherwise?"

Harry turned, stared at the surrounding trees. "Have a herd of unicorns at St. Mungos. Floo the patients there, or use portkeys."

"Yes, that would work."

Harry's face tightened, the only outward sign behind his trembling hands of everything that was welling up inside him. He needed to scream, needed some outlet, needed *something* he couldn't name and finally Harry leveled his wand at a tree and shouted "*Diffindo!*"

There was a sharp tearing sound, and a cut appeared across the wood. "*Diffindo!*"

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PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES I

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Another cut. Harry had learned the Charm only ten days previously, after he'd started getting serious about self-defense. It was theoretically a second-year Charm, but the anger pouring through him seemed to know no bounds, he knew enough now not to exhaust himself and he still had power yet.

"Diffindo!" Harry had aimed at a branch this time, and it plummeted to the ground with a sound of twigs and leaves.

There didn't seem to be any tears inside him, only pressure with no outlet.

"I shall leave you to it," Professor Quirrell said quietly. The Defense Professor rose from his tree stump, the unicorn's blood still moonlit on the black cloak he wore, and drew his hood back over his head.

CHAPTER TWO

PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES, PART II

HARRY stood, panting, in the midst of a brief wasted circle amid the forest, more destruction than a first-year should have been able to reach, by himself. The Severing Charm wouldn't bring down a tree, so he'd started partially Transfiguring cross-sections through the wood. It hadn't let out what was inside him, bringing down a small circle of trees hadn't made him feel any better, all the emotions were still there but while he was destroying trees he at least wasn't thinking about how the feelings couldn't be let out.

After Harry had run out of available magic he'd started tearing off branches with his bare hands and snapping them. His hands were bleeding, though nothing that Madam Pomfrey couldn't fix in the morning. Only Dark magic left permanent scars on wizards.

There came a sound of something moving in the woods, like the hoofbeats of a horse, and Harry whirled, his wand rising once more; some part of his magic had returned while he was working with his hands. It occurred to him for the first time that he was out in the Forbidden Forest alone, and making noise.

What emerged into the moonlight was not the unicorn Harry had expected, but a creature with a lower body like that of a horse, gleaming white-brown beneath the moonlight, and the bare upper chest of a male human with long white hair. The moonlight caught the centaur's face, and Harry saw that the eyes were almost as blue as Dumbledore's, halfway to sapphire.

In one hand the centaur held a long wooden spear, with an overlarge metal blade whose edge did not gleam beneath the moonlight; a gleaming edge, Harry had once read, was the sign of a dull blade.

"So," the centaur said. His voice was low, powerful and male. "Here you are, surrounded by destruction. I can smell the unicorn's blood in the air, the blood of something innocent, slain to save oneself."

A jolt of sudden fear brought Harry into the now, and he said quickly, "It's not what it looks like."

"I know. The stars themselves proclaim your innocence, ironically enough." The centaur took a step toward Harry within the small clearing, still holding his spear upright. "A strange word, *innocence*. It means lack of knowledge, like the innocence of a child, and also means lack of guilt. Only those entirely ignorant can lack all responsibility for the consequences of their actions. He knows not what he does, and therefore can be without harmful intent; so says that word." The deep voice did not echo in the woods.

Harry's eyes flickered to the spear-tip, and he realized that he should have grabbed his Time-Turner the moment he saw the centaur. Now, if Harry tried to reach beneath his robes, the spear could strike him before then, if the centaur was fast enough. "I read once," Harry said, his voice a bit unsteady as he tried to match deep-sounding words to deep-sounding words, "that it's wrong to think of little children as innocent, because not knowing isn't the same as not choosing. That children do little harms to each other with schoolyard fights, because they don't have the power to do great harm. And some adults do great harm. But the adults who don't, aren't they more innocent than children, not less?"

"The wisdom of wizards," the centaur said.

"Muggle wisdom, actually."

"Of the magicless I know little. Mars has been dim of late, but it grows brighter." The centaur took another step forwards, bringing him almost within striking distance of Harry.

Harry didn't dare look up to the sky. "That means Mars is coming closer to the Earth, as both planets go around the Sun. Mars is reflecting the same amount of sunlight as always, it's just getting nearer to us. What do you mean, the stars proclaim my innocence?"

"The night sky speaks to centaurs. It is how we know what we know. Or do they not even tell wizards that much, these days?" A look of contempt crossed the centaur's face.

"I... tried to look up centaurs, when I was checking out Divination. Most of the authors just ridiculed centaur Divination without explaining why, wizards don't understand argumentative norms, to them ridiculing an idea or a person feels like casting that idea down just as much as bringing evidence against it... I thought the part about centaurs using astrology was just more ridicule..."

"Why?" the centaur intoned. His head cocked curiously.

"Because the course of the planets is predictable for thousands of years in advance. If I talked to the right Muggles, I could show you a diagram of exactly what the planets will look like from this spot ten years later. Would you be able to make predictions from that?"

The centaur shook his head. "From a diagram? No. The light of the planets, the comets, the subtle shifts in the stars themselves, those I would not see."

"Cometary orbits are also set thousands of years in advance so they shouldn't correlate much to current events. And the light of the stars takes years to travel from the stars to Earth, and the stars don't move much at all, not visibly. So the obvious hypothesis is that centaurs have a native magical talent for Divination which you just, well, *project* onto the night sky."

"Perhaps," the centaur said thoughtfully. His head lowered. "The others would strike you for saying such a thing, but I have ever sought to know what I do not know. Why the night sky can foretell the future—that I surely do not know. It is hard enough to grasp the skill itself. All I can say, son of Lily, is that even if what you are saying is true, it does not seem useful."

Harry allowed himself to relax a little; being addressed as 'son of Lily' implied that the centaur thought of him as more than a random intruder in the forest. Besides, attacking a Hogwarts student would probably bring some kind of huge reprisal upon the non-wizard centaur tribe in the forests, and the centaur probably knew that... "What Muggles have learned is that there is a power in the truth, in all the pieces of the truth

which interact with each other, which you can only find by discovering as many truths as possible. To do that you can't defend false beliefs in any way, not even by saying the false belief is useful. It might not seem to matter whether your predictions are really based on the stars or if it's an innate talent being projected. But if you wanted to really understand Divination, or for that matter the stars, the real truth about centaur predictions would be a fact that matters to other truths."

Slowly the centaur nodded. "So the wandless have become wiser than the wizards. What a joke! Tell me, son of Lily, do the Muggles in their wisdom say that soon the skies will be empty?"

"Empty?" Harry said. "Er... no?"

"The other centaurs in this forest have stayed from your presence, for we are sworn not to set ourselves against the heavens' course. Because, in becoming entangled in your fate, we might become less innocent in what is to come. I alone have dared approach you."

"I... don't understand."

"No. You are innocent, as the stars say. And to slay something innocent to save oneself, that is a terrible deed. One would live only a cursed life, a half-life, from that day. For any centaur would surely be cast out, if he slew a foal."

The spear made a lightning motion, too fast for Harry's eyes to follow, and smashed his wand out of his hand.

Another powerful blow smashed into Harry's solar plexus, and he went gasping and retching to the forest floor.

Harry's hand reached up toward his robes, for his Time-Turner, and the spear-butt knocked his hand away, almost hard enough to break fingers, he reached with his other hand and that was knocked away too—

"I am sorry, Harry Potter," the centaur said, and then looked up with widened eyes. The spear spun about and came up, intercepting a red spell-bolt. Then the centaur dropped the spear and leaped away desperately, a green flash of light went past him and another green flash of light followed in its wake, then a third green flash hit the centaur straight-on.

The centaur fell and did not move again.

It took a long time for Harry to catch his breath, to stagger to his feet, to pick up his wand, to croak, "What?"

By that time the sense of doom, of power almost tangible in the air, had approached once more.

"P-Professor Quirrell? What are you doing here?"

"Well," the man in the black cloak said thoughtfully, "*you* needed to fly into a rage and have a loud tantrum in the Forbidden Forest in the middle of the night, and *I* needed to go just outside your ability to detect me and keep watch. One does not leave a student alone in the Forbidden Forest. That should be obvious in retrospect."

Harry stared at the fallen centaur.

The horse-form wasn't breathing.

"You—you *killed* him, that was Avada Kedavra—"

"I do not always understand how other people imagine morality to work, Mr. Potter. But even I know that on conventional morality, it is acceptable to kill nonhuman creatures which are about to slay a wizard child. Perhaps you do not care about the nonhuman part, but he was about to *kill* you. He was hardly innocent—"

The Defense Professor stopped, looking at Harry, who had raised one trembling hand to his mouth.

"Well," the Defense Professor said then, "I have made my point, and you may think on it. Centaur spears can block many spells, but no one tries to block if they see that the spell is a certain shade of green. For this purpose it is useful to know some green stunning hexes. Really, Mr. Potter, you should understand by now how I operate."

The Defense Professor came nearer the centaur's body, and Harry took an involuntary step back, then another, at the terrible rising sense of *STOP, DON'T*—

The Defense Professor kneeled and pressed his wand to the centaur's head.

The wand stayed there for a time.

And the centaur rose, eyes blank, breathing once more.

"Remember nothing of this time," the Defense Professor commanded. "Wander away and forget everything about this night."

The centaur walked away, the four horse-legs moving in strange synchrony.

"Happy now?" the Defense Professor said, sounding rather sardonic about it.

Harry's brain still felt broken. "He was trying to *kill* me."

"Oh, for Merlin's sake—yes, he was trying to kill you. Get used to it. Only boring people never have that experience."

Harry's voice emerged, hoarse. "Why—why did he want to—"

"Any number of reasons. I would be lying if I said I'd never considered killing you myself."

Harry stared at where the centaur had wandered into the trees.

His brain still felt half-broken, like an engine misfiring, but Harry did not see how this could possibly be a good sign.

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The news of Draco Malfoy nearly being eaten by a horror had been sufficient to summon back Dumbledore from wherever he'd gone, to wake Lord Malfoy and the Lady Greengrass's handsome husband, to bring forth Amelia Bones. The supposed presence of the horror had provoked skepticism even from Dumbledore, and the possibility of False Memory Charms had been raised. Harry had said (after some internal debate about the consequences of people believing a demon was on the loose) that he didn't actually remember making the same effort he'd put forth to frighten the Dementor, the dark thing had just left; which was what you would expect someone to create as a False Memory, if they hadn't actually known how Harry had done it. The names of Bellatrix Black, Severus Snape, and Quirinus Quirrell had been mentioned in connection with wizards strong enough to subdue everyone present and cast False Memory Charms, and Harry had known that Lucius was thinking of Dumbledore. There had been Aurors testifying, and discussions going in circles, and glares of accusation, and cutting remarks at 2AM in the morning. There had been motions, and votes, and consequences.

"Do you believe," Headmaster Dumbledore said quietly to Harry, when all of it was done, and the two of them alone, "that the Hogwarts you have wrought is an improvement?"

Harry sat with his elbows on his knees, his face resting on his palms, in the conference room from which all the others had now departed. Professor McGonagall, who did not use a Time-Turner as routinely as the two of them, had departed swiftly for her bed.

"Yes," Harry answered after too long a hesitation. "From my perspective, Headmaster, things in Hogwarts are finally, finally normal. This is how things should be, when four children get sent into the Forbidden Forest at night. There should be a huge fuss, constables showing up, and the responsible party getting sacked."

"You believe it is good," Dumbledore said quietly, "that the man who you call responsible was, as you put it, sacked."

"Yes, in fact, I do."

"Argus Filch has served this institution for decades."

"And when given Veritaserum," Harry said tiredly, "Argus Filch revealed that he had sent an eleven-year-old boy into the Forbidden Forest, hoping something awful would happen to him, because he thought the boy's father had been responsible for the death of his cat. The three other students in Draco's company don't seem to have fazed him. I would have argued for jail time, but your concept of jail in this country is Azkaban. I'll also note that Filch was remarkably unpleasant to the children in Hogwarts and I expect the school's hedonic index to be improved by his departure, not that it matters to you, I suppose."

The Headmaster's eyes were impenetrable behind the half-moon glasses. "Argus Filch is a Squib. His work at Hogwarts is all he has. Had, rather."

"The purpose of a school is not to provide work for its employees. I know you probably spent more time around Filch than around any individual student, but that shouldn't make Filch's inner experiences loom larger in your thoughts. Students have inner lives too."

"You don't care at all, do you Harry?" Dumbledore's voice was quiet. "About those you hurt."

"I care about the innocent," Harry said. "Like Mr. Hagrid, who you'll note I argued should not be considered malicious, just oblivious. I was fine with Mr. Hagrid working here so long as he didn't take anyone into the Forbidden Forest again."

"I had thought that with Rubeus vindicated, he might teach Care of Magical Creatures after Silvanus departs the position. But much of that teaching is done in the Forbidden Forest. So that too shall not be, in the wake of your passage."

Harry said slowly, "But—you told us that Mr. Hagrid has a blind spot when it comes to magical creatures threatening wizards. That Mr. Hagrid had a cognitive deficit and couldn't really imagine Draco and Tracey getting hurt, which was why Mr. Hagrid didn't see anything wrong with leaving them alone in the Forbidden Forest at night. Was that not true?"

"It is true."

"Then wouldn't Mr. Hagrid be the worst possible teacher for Magical Creatures?"

The old wizard gazed down at Harry through the half-moon glasses. His voice was thick when he spoke. "Mr. Malfoy himself saw nothing awry. It was not so implausible a trick which Argus played, Harry Potter. And Rubeus might have grown into his position. It would have been—all Rubeus wished, his one greatest desire—"

"Your mistake," Harry said, looking down at his knees, feeling at least ten percent as exhausted as he'd ever been, "is a cognitive bias we would call, in the trade, scope insensitivity. Failure to multiply. You're thinking about how happy Mr. Hagrid would be when he heard the news. Consider the next ten years and a thousand students taking Magical Creatures and ten percent of them being scalded by Ashwipers. No one student would be hurt as much as Mr. Hagrid would be happy, but there'd be a hundred students being hurt and only one happy teacher."

"Perhaps," the old wizard said. "And your own error, Harry, is that you do not feel the pain of those you hurt, once you have done your multiplication."

"Maybe." Harry went on staring at his knees. "Or maybe it's worse than that. Headmaster, what does it mean if a centaur doesn't like me?" *What does it mean when a member of a race of magical creatures known for Divination gives you a lecture on people who are ignorant of consequences, apologizes, and then tries to stab you with a spear?*

"A centaur?" the Headmaster said. "When did you—ah, the Time-Turner. You are the reason why I could not travel back to before the event,

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PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES II

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on pain of paradox.”

“Am I? I guess I am.” Harry shook his head distantly. “Sorry.”

“With very few exceptions,” Dumbledore said, “centaurs do not like wizards, at all.”

“This was a bit more specific than that.”

“What did the centaur say to you?”

Harry didn’t reply.

“Ah.” The Headmaster hesitated. “Centaurs have been wrong many times, and if there is anyone in the world who could confuse the stars themselves, it is you.”

Harry looked up, and saw the blue eyes once more gentle behind the half-circle glasses.

“Do not fret too much about it,” said Albus Dumbledore.

CHAPTER THREE

CARING

JUNE 3RD, 1992.

Professor Quirrell was very sick.

He'd seemed better for a while, after drinking his unicorn's blood in May, but the air of intense power which had surrounded him afterward hadn't lasted even a day. By the Ides of May, Professor Quirrell's hands had been trembling again, though subtly. The Defense Professor's medical regimen had been interrupted too early, it seemed.

Six days ago Professor Quirrell had collapsed at dinnertime.

Madam Pomfrey had tried to forbid Professor Quirrell from teaching classes, and Professor Quirrell had shouted at her in front of everyone. The Defense Professor had shouted that he was dying regardless, and would use his remaining time as he chose.

So Madam Pomfrey, blinking hard, had forbidden the Defense Professor from doing anything *except* teaching his classes. She'd asked for a volunteer to help her take Professor Quirrell to a room in the Hogwarts infirmary. More than a hundred students had risen to their feet, only half wearing green.

The Defense Professor no longer sat at the Head Table during mealtimes. He didn't cast spells during lessons. The oldest students who had the most Quirrell points helped him to teach, the seventh-years who had already sat their Defense N.E.W.T.s in May. They took turns floating him from his room in the infirmary to his classes, and brought him food at mealtimes. Professor Quirrell proctored his Battle Magic classes from a chair, sitting.

Watching Hermione die had hurt more than this, but that had ended much more quickly.

This is the true Enemy.

Harry had already thought that, after Hermione had died. Being forced to watch Professor Quirrell die, day by day, week by week, had not done much to change his mind.

This is the true Enemy I have to face, Harry thought in Wednesday's Defense class, watching Professor Quirrell leaning far to one side of his chair before that day's seventh-year assistant caught him. *Everything else is just shadows and distraction.*

Harry had been turning over Trelawney's prophecy in his mind, wondering if maybe the true Dark Lord had nothing to do with Lord Voldemort at all. *Born to those who have thrice defied him* seemed to strongly invoke the Peverell brothers and the three Deathly Hallows—though Harry didn't exactly see how Death could have marked him as an equal, which seemed to imply some sort of deliberate action on Death's part.

This alone is the true Enemy, Harry thought. *After this will come Professor McGonagall, Mum and Dad, even Neville in his time, unless the wound in the world can be healed before then.*

There was nothing Harry could do. Madam Pomfrey was already doing for Professor Quirrell what magic could do, and magic seemed strictly superior to Muggle techniques when it came to healing.

There was nothing Harry could do.

Nothing he could do.

Nothing.

Nothing at all.

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Harry raised his hand, and knocked upon the door, in case the person there could no longer detect him.

"What is it?" came a strained voice from the infirmary room.

"It's me."

There was a long pause. "Come in," said that voice.

Harry slipped inside and closed the door behind him, and cast the Quieting Charm. He stood as far away from Professor Quirrell as he could, just in case his own magic was making the Professor feel uncomfortable.

Though the sense of doom was fading, fading with each passing day.

Professor Quirrell was lying back in his infirmary bed, only his head propped up by a pillow. A coverlet of cottony material, red with black stitching, covered him to his chest. A book hovered before his eyes, outlined in a pale glow which also surrounded a black cube lying by the bed. Not the Defense Professor's own magic, then, but a device of some kind.

The book was *Thinking Physics* by Epstein, the same book Harry had lent to Draco a few months back. Harry had stopped fretting about its possible misuse several weeks earlier.

"This—" Professor Quirrell said, and coughed, it didn't sound quite right. "This is a fascinating book... if I'd ever realized..." A laugh, mixed with another cough. "Why did I assume the Muggle arts... must not be mine? That they would be... of no use to me? Why did I never bother trying... to test it experimentally... as you would say? In case... my assumption... was wrong? It seems sheerly foolish of me... in retrospect..."

Harry was having more trouble speaking than Professor Quirrell was. Wordlessly, Harry reached into his pocket, and laid a kerchief on the floor; which he unfolded to reveal a small white pebble, smooth and round.

"What's that?" said the Defense Professor.

"It's a, it's a, Transfigured, unicorn."

Harry had checked the books, had learned that since he was too young to have sexual thoughts he would be able to approach a unicorn without fear. The same books had said nothing about unicorns being smart. Harry had already noticed that every intelligent magical species was at least partially humanoid, from merfolk to centaurs to giants, from elves to goblins to veela. All had essentially humanlike emotions, many were known to interbreed with humans. Harry had already reasoned out that magic didn't create new intelligence but just changed the shape of genetically human beings. Unicorns were equinoid, were not even partially humanoid, didn't talk, used no tools, they were almost certainly just magical horses. If it was right to eat a cow to feed yourself for a day, then it *had* to

be right to drink a unicorn's blood in order to stave off death for weeks. You couldn't have it both ways.

So Harry had gone into the Forbidden Forest wearing his Cloak. He had searched the Grove of Unicorns until he saw her, a proud creature with a pure white coat and violet hair, with three blue blotches on her flank. Harry had gone over, and the sapphire eyes had stared at him inquisitively. Harry had tapped out the sequence 1-2-3 on the ground several times with his shoes. The unicorn had shown no sign of responding in kind. Harry had reached over, taken her hoof in his hand, and tapped the same sequence with the unicorn's hoof. The unicorn had only looked at him curiously.

And something about feeding the unicorn the sleeping-potion-laced sugar cubes had still felt like murder.

That magic gives their existence a weight of meaning which no mere animal could possess... to slay something innocent to save oneself, that is a very grave sin. Those two phrases, from Professor McGonagall, from the centaur, had both run through Harry's mind, over and over as the white unicorn had yawned, laid down on the ground, and closed its eyes for what would be the last time. The Transfiguration had lasted an hour, and Harry's eyes had watered repeatedly as he worked. The unicorn's death might not have come then, but it would come soon enough, and it was foreign to Harry's nature to try to refuse responsibility of any kind. Harry would just have to hope that, if you didn't kill the unicorn to save yourself, if you did it to help a friend, it would be acceptable in the end.

Professor Quirrell's eyebrows had climbed toward his hairline. His voice was less soft, had something of his normal sharpness, as he said, "I forbid you from doing that again."

"I wondered if you'd say that," Harry said. He swallowed again. "But this unicorn is already, already doomed, so you might as well take it, Professor..."

"Why have you done this?"

If the Defense Professor really didn't understand that, he was slower on the uptake than anyone Harry had ever met. "I kept thinking there was nothing I could do," Harry said. "I got tired of thinking it."

Professor Quirrell closed his eyes. His head leaned back into the pillow. "You were lucky," the Defense Professor said in a soft voice, "that a unicorn in Transfigured form... did not set off the Hogwarts wards, as a strange creature... I shall have to... take this outside the grounds, to make use of it... but that can be managed. I shall tell them that I wish to look upon the lake... I will ask you to sustain the Transfiguration before you go, and it should last long enough, after that... and with my last strength, dispel whatever death-alarms were placed to watch over the herd... which, the unicorn being not yet dead, but only Transfigured, will not yet have triggered... you were very lucky, Mr. Potter."

Harry nodded. He started to speak, then stopped again. Words seemed to stick in his throat once more.

You already calculated the expected utilities, if it works, if it goes wrong. You assigned probabilities, you multiplied, and then you threw out the answer and went with your new gut feeling, which was the same. So say it.

"Do you know," Harry said unsteadily, "of any way at all, by which your life might be saved?"

The Defense Professor's eyes opened. "Why... do you ask me that, boy?"

"There's... a spell I heard of, a ritual—"

"Be silent," said the Defense Professor.

An instant later a snake lay in the bed.

Even the snake's eyes were dull.

It did not rise.

"*Speak on*," hissed that snake, its flickering tongue its only motion.

"There is... *there iss a ritual, I heard of from the sschoolmasster, by which he thinkss the Dark Lord might have lived on. It iss called—*" and Harry stopped, as he realized that he did know how to say the word in Parseltongue. "*Horcrux. It requiress a death, I have heard. But if you are dying in any casse, you might try to adapt the ritual, even at great rissk for the new sspell, sso that it can be done with a different ssacrifice. It would change the whole world, if you ssucceed—though I don't know anything about the sspell—the sschoolmasster thought it tore off a piece of ssoul, though I don't ssee how that could be true—*"

The snake was hissing laughter, strange sharp laughter, almost hysterical. "You tell me of that sspell? Me? You musst learn more caution in the future,

boy. But it matters not. I learned of the horcrux spell since long ago. It is meaningless.”

“Meaningless?” Harry said aloud in surprise.

“Would be pointless spell from beginning, if soul existed. Tear piece of soul? That is lie. Misdirection to hide true secret. Only one who does not believe in common lies will reason further, see beneath obscurity, realize how to cast spell. Required murder is not sacrificial ritual at all. Sudden death sometimes makes ghost, if magic bursts and imprints on nearby thing. Horcrux spell channels death-burst through caster, creates your own ghost instead of victim's, imprints ghost in special device. Second victim picks up horcrux device, device imprints your memories into them. But only memories from time horcrux device was made. You see flaw?”

The burning sensation was back in Harry's throat. “No continuity of—” there wasn't a snake word for consciousness “—self, you would go on thinking after making the horcrux, then self with new memories dies and is not restored—”

“Yes, you do see. Also Merlin's Interdict prevents powerful spells from passing through such a device, since it is not truly alive. Dark Wizards who think to return thus are weaker, easily dispatched. None have persisted long by such means. Personalities change, mix with victim's. Death is not truly gain said. Real self is lost, as you say. Not to my present taste. Admit I considered it, long ago.”

A man was lying in the infirmary bed once more. The Defense Professor breathed, then made a wretched coughing sound.

“Can you give me a full recipe for the spell?” Harry said, after a moment's deliberation. “There might be some way to improve on the flaws, with enough research. Some way to do it ethically and have it work.” Like doing the transfer into a clone body with a blank brain, instead of an innocent victim, which might also improve the fidelity of the personality transfer... though that still left the other problems.

Professor Quirrell made a short sound, under his breath, that might have been laughter. “You know, boy,” Professor Quirrell whispered, “I had thought... to teach you everything... the seeds of all the secrets I knew... from one living mind to another... so that later, when you found the right books, you would be able to understand... I would have passed on my

knowledge to you, my heir... we would have begun as soon as you asked me... but you never asked."

Even the grief surrounding by Harry like thick water gave way to that, to the sheer magnitude of the missed opportunity. "I was supposed to—? I didn't know I was supposed to—!"

Another coughing chuckle. "Ah yes... the unknowing Muggleborn... in heritage if not in blood... that is you. But I thought... better of it... that you should not walk my path... it was not a good path, in the end."

"It's not too late, Professor!" Harry said. A part of Harry yelled that he was being selfish, and then another part shouted that down; there would be other people to help.

"Yes, it is too late... and you shall not... persuade me otherwise... I have... thought better of it... as I said... I am too full... of secrets better left unknown... *look at me.*"

Harry looked, almost despite himself.

He saw a still-unwrinkled face, looking old and pained, beneath a head rapidly losing its hair, even the sides looking wispy now; Harry saw a face he'd always thought was sharp, now revealed as *thin*, muscle and fat fading away from the face, as from the arms beneath it, like the skeletal form of Bellatrix Black he'd seen in Azkaban—

Harry's head wrenched aside, unthinkingly.

"You see," whispered the Professor. "I dislike to sound clichéd... Mr. Potter... but the truth is... the Arts called Dark... really are not good for a person... in the end."

Professor Quirrell breathed in, breathed out. There was quiet for a time in the infirmary, the two of them watched only by the elaborately ornamented stone of the walls.

"Is there anything left... unsaid between us?" said Professor Quirrell. "I am not dying today... mind you... not right now... but I do not know how long... I shall be able to converse."

"There's," Harry said, swallowed again. "There's a lot of things, way too many things, but... it might be the wrong thing to ask, but I don't want—this one question unanswered—snake?"

A snake lay on the bed.

"I learned how the Killing Curse workss. Requiness true hate to casst, not much hate, but musst want target dead, they ssay. In prisson with life-eaterss, you casst Killing Cursse at guard—ssaid you did not want him dead—wass that lie? Here, now, at thiss disstance—you may sspeak truth—even if you fear it reflectss poorly on you—it sshould not matter now, teacher. I wissh to know. Musst know. Will not abandon you, either way."

A man lay on the bed.

"Listen carefully," Professor Quirrell whispered. "I will tell you a co-nundrum... a riddle of a dangerous spell... when you know the answer to that puzzle... you will also know... the answer to your question... are you listening?"

Harry nodded.

"There is a limitation... to the Killing Curse. To cast it once... in a fight... you must hate enough... to want the other dead. To cast Avada... Kedavra twice... you must hate enough... to kill twice... to cut their throat with your own hands... to watch them die... then do it again. Very few... can hate enough... to kill someone... five times... they would... get bored." The Defense Professor breathed several times, before continuing. "But if you look at history... you will find some Dark Wizards... who could cast the Killing Curse... over and over. A nineteenth-century witch... who called herself Dark Evangel... the Aurors called her A. K. McDowell. She could cast the Killing Curse... a dozen times... in one fight. Ask yourself... as I asked myself... what is the secret... that she knew? What is deadlier than hate... and flows without limit?"

A second level to the Avada Kedavra spell, just like with the Patronus Charm...

"I don't really care," Harry answered.

The Defense Professor chuckled wetly. "Good. You are... learning. So you see..." A pause of transformation. *"I did not wissh guard dead, after all. Casst Killing Cursse, but not with hate."* And then a man.

Harry swallowed hard. It was both better, and worse, than what Harry had suspected; and characteristic enough of Professor Quirrell. A cracked soul, for certain; but Professor Quirrell had never claimed to be whole.

"Any else... to say?" said the man in the bed.

"Are you absolutely sure," Harry said, "that there is nothing you've ever heard of that might save you, Professor? In all your lore? Finding and uniting all three Deathly Hallows, an ancient artifact that Merlin sealed behind a riddle nobody's ever figured out? You've seen some of what I can do. That I'm good at solving riddles. You know I can figure things out, sometimes, that other wizards can't. I—" Harry's voice broke. "I have a strong preference for your life, over your death, Professor Quirrell."

There was a long pause.

"One thing," whispered Professor Quirrell. "One thing... that might do it... or it might not... but to obtain it... is beyond your power, or mine..."

Oh, it was just the setup for a subquest, said Harry's Inner Critic.

All the other parts screamed for that part to shut up. Life didn't work like that. Ancient artifacts could be found, but not in a month, not when you couldn't leave Hogwarts and were still in your first year.

Professor Quirrell took in a deep breath. Exhaled. "I'm sorry... that came out... too dramatic. Do not... get your hopes up... Mr. Potter. You asked... for anything... no matter how unlikely. There is... a certain object... called..."

A snake lay on the bed.

"The Philosopher's Stone," hissed the snake.

If there'd been a mass-manufacturable means of safe immortality this entire time and nobody had bothered, Harry was going to snap and kill everyone.

"I read of it in a book," Harry hissed. *"Concluded it was obvious myth. No reason why same device would provide immortality and endless gold. Not unless someone was just inventing happy stories. Not to mention, every sane person should have been researching ways to make more Stone, or kidnapping maker to produce. Thought of you specifically, teacher."*

A hissing of cold laughter. *"Reasoning is wise, but not wise enough. Like with horcrux spell, absurdity hides true secret. True Stone is not what that legend says. True power is not what stories claim. Stone's supposed maker was not one who made it. One who holds it now, was not born to name now used. Yet Stone is powerful healing device in truth. Have you heard it spoken of?"*

"Just in the book."

"One who holdss Sstone iss repository of much lore. Taught sschoolmasster many ssecretss. Sschoolmasster hass ssaidd nothing of Sstone'ss holder, nothing of Sstone? No hintss?"

"Not that I can eassily recall," Harry replied honestly.

"Ah," hissed the snake. *"Ah, well."*

"Could assk sschoolmasster—"

"No! Do not assk him, boy. He would not take qestion well."

"But if the Sstone only healss—"

"Sschoolmasster doess not believe that, would not believe that. Too many have ssought Sstone, or ssought holder's lore. Do not assk. Musst not assk. Do not try to obtain Sstone yourssself. I forbid."

A man lay on the bed once more. "I am at... my limit..." said Professor Quirrell. "I must regain... my strength... before I go... to the forest... with your gift. Leave now... but sustain the Transfiguration... before you go."

Harry reached out, touched the white pebble lying within the kerchief, renewing the Transfiguration on it. "It should last for one hour and fifty-three minutes after this," Harry said.

"Your studies... do well."

It was far longer than Harry's Transfigurations had lasted at the start of the school year. Second-year spells came to him easily now, without strain; which wasn't surprising, since he would be twelve in less than two months. Harry could even have cast a Memory Charm, if it had been good for someone to forget every memory involving their left arm. He was climbing the power ladder, slowly, from very far down.

The thought came with a potential for sadness, a thought of one door opening as another closed; which Harry also rejected.

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The door to the infirmary closed behind Harry, as the Boy-Who-Lived walked swiftly and with purpose, shrugging on his Invisibility Cloak as he moved. Soon, presumably, Professor Quirrell would call for assistance; and an older student trio would guide the Defense Professor into some quiet place, maybe the forest, with an excuse of viewing the lake or some

such. Someplace the Defense Professor could eat a unicorn undetected, after Harry's Transfiguration wore off.

And then Professor Quirrell would be healthier, for a time. His power would return to him as strong as he'd ever been, for a much shorter time.

It wouldn't last.

Harry's fists clenched as he strode, the tension radiating up his arm muscles. If the Defense Professor's treatment regimen hadn't been interrupted, by Harry and the Aurors that *he* had brought to Hogwarts...

It was stupid to blame himself, Harry knew it was stupid and somehow his brain was doing it anyway. Like his brain was searching, carefully finding and selecting some way for this to be his fault, no matter how far it had to stretch.

As if having things be his fault were the only way that his brain knew how to grieve.

A trio of seventh-year Slytherins passed Harry's invisible form in the hallway, heading for the healer's offices where the Professor waited, looking deeply serious and concerned. Was that how other people grieved?

Or did they, on some level, not really *care*, as Professor Quirrell thought?

There is a second level to the Killing Curse.

Harry's brain had solved the riddle instantly, in the moment of first hearing it; as though the knowledge had always been inside him, waiting to make itself known.

Harry had read once, somewhere, that the opposite of happiness wasn't sadness, but boredom; and the author had gone on to say that to find happiness in life you asked yourself not what would make you happy, but what would excite you. And by the same reasoning, hatred wasn't the true opposite of love. Even hatred was a kind of respect that you could give to someone's existence. If you cared about someone enough to prefer their dying to their living, it meant you were thinking about them.

It had come up much earlier, before the Trial, in conversation with Hermione; when she'd said something about magical Britain being Prejudiced, with considerable and recent justification. And Harry had

thought—but not said—that at least she'd been let into Hogwarts to be spat upon.

Not like certain people living in certain countries, who were, it was *said*, as human as anyone else; who were *said* to be sapient beings, worth more than any mere unicorn. But who nonetheless wouldn't be allowed to live in Muggle Britain. On that score, at least, no Muggle had the right to look a wizard in the eye. Magical Britain might discriminate against Muggleborns, but at least it allowed them inside so they could be spat upon in person.

What is deadlier than hate, and flows without limit?

"Indifference," Harry whispered aloud, the secret of a spell he would never be able to cast; and kept striding toward the library to read anything he could find, anything at all, about the Philosopher's Stone.

CHAPTER FOUR

TESTS

JUNE 4TH, 1992.

Daphne Greengrass was in the Slytherin common room, writing a letter to her Lady Mother (who was surprisingly intransigent about power-sharing, despite not even *being* in Hogwarts to exercise control) when she saw Draco Malfoy stagger in through the portrait door carrying what must have been a dozen books, Vincent and Gregory behind him each carrying a dozen more. The Auror who'd accompanied Malfoy stuck his head in briefly, then withdrew to who-knew-where.

Draco looked around, then seemed to be struck by a bright idea as he staggered toward her, Vincent and Gregory following after.

"Can you help me read these?" said Draco, sounding slightly out of breath as he approached.

"What." Lessons were over, only the exams were left now, and since when did *Malfoys* ask *Greengrasses* for help with their homework?

"These," Draco Malfoy said importantly, "are all the library books Miss Granger borrowed between April 1st and April 16th. I thought I'd go through them in case there are any Clues there, only then I thought, maybe *you* should help because you knew Miss Granger better."

Daphne stared at the books. "The General read all that in *two weeks*?" A twinge of pain went through her heart, but she suppressed it.

"Well, I don't know if Miss Granger finished them all," Draco said. He held up a cautioning finger. "In fact, we don't know if she read any of them, or if she really borrowed them, I mean, all we've *observed* is that the library ledger says she checked them out—"

Daphne suppressed a groan. Malfoy had been talking like this for weeks. There were some people who clearly were not meant to be involved with mysterious murders because it did *strange things to their minds*. “Mr. Malfoy, I couldn’t read all these if I spent my whole summer doing nothing else.”

“Then just skim through them, please?” Draco said. “Especially if there’s, you know, mysterious words scribbled in her handwriting, or a bookmark left inside, or—”

“I’ve seen those plays too, Mr. Malfoy.” Daphne rolled her eyes. “Don’t we have *Aurors* now for—”

“*We’re doomed!*” shrieked Millicent Bulstrode, as she burst up from the lower chambers into the Slytherin common room.

People paused to look at her.

“*It’s Professor Quirrell!*”

A sudden air of attentiveness, as of long-standing disputes about to be settled. “Well, finally,” someone said, as Millicent tried to catch her breath. “He’s only got, what, ten days left to go bad?”

“Eleven days,” said the seventh-year who was running the betting pool.

“*He’s gotten a little better suddenly and he’s going to summon the first-years for our Defense final! By surprise! In fifty minutes!*”

“A Defense final?” Pansy said blankly. “But Professor Quirrell doesn’t give exams.”

“The *Ministry* Defense final!” shrieked Millicent.

“But Professor Quirrell doesn’t teach anything from the Ministry curriculum,” objected Pansy.

Daphne was already fleeing to her room, racing for the first-year Defense textbook that she hadn’t touched since September and screaming curses inside her mind.

One desk back of her, someone was crying, their soft sobs providing a background chant of despair for the classroom. Daphne looked back, expecting to see a Hufflepuff and hoping it wasn't Hannah, and was surprised at first (though not on further reflection) to see it was a Ravenclaw.

Before them were set the exam parchments, turned over, waiting for the bell.

Fifty minutes hadn't been nearly enough preparation time, but it was something, and Daphne was now feeling ashamed that she hadn't thought to send messengers to warn the Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor Houses. They'd started giving House Points again just three days ago, at the beginning of June, but the Auxiliary Protective Special Committee still ought to promote House unity.

Another Ravenclaw, sitting four desks to her left, also started to cry. That was Katherine Tung of Dragon Army, if she recalled correctly, whom she'd once seen take on three Sunshine Soldiers simultaneously without a flinch.

Daphne had calmed down after the first couple of minutes of frantic reading. It was just a test, not a *murder* or anything; and if almost all the first-year students turned in mostly blank parchments then it stood to reason that nobody would be shamed. But Daphne could understand, if not exactly sympathize, that Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs might not see it that way.

"He's evil," another Ravenclaw witch said in a shaking voice. "One hundred percent pure Dark Wizard to the bone. The Dark Lord Grindelwald wouldn't do this, not to children, he's worse than You-Know-Who."

Daphne looked reflexively at where Professor Quirrell was sitting, slumped to one side but his eyes alert; and she thought she saw the Defense Professor smile for one tiny instant. No, that had to be her imagination, there was no way the Defense Professor could have heard that.

The bell rang.

Daphne flipped the parchment over.

The top was stamped with the seals for the Ministry, the Hogwarts Board of Governors, and the Department of Magical Education, and runes to detect cheating. Below that was a line for her to write her name,

and a list of exam rules with a picture of Lindsay Gagnon, the Director of the Department of Magical Education, shaking an admonishing finger at everyone.

Halfway down the page was the first exam question.

It was, *Why is it important for children to stay away from strange creatures?*

There was a stunned pause.

One student began laughing, she thought it was from the Gryffindor section of the class. Professor Quirrell made no motion to censor it, and the laughter spread.

Nobody spoke aloud, but the students looked around at each other, exchanging glances as the laughter died down, and then as if by some unspoken agreement they all looked at Professor Quirrell, who was smiling down at them benevolently.

Daphne bent over her exam, wearing a defiant evil smile that would have done proud to either Godric Gryffindor or Grindelwald; and she wrote down, *Because my Stunning Hex, my Most Ancient Blade, and my Patronus Charm won't work against everything.*

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Harry Potter turned over the last page of his Defense exam.

Even Harry had needed to quash a small bit of nervousness, some tiny remnant of his childhood, upon reading the first real question ('How can you make a Shrieking Eel be silent?'). Professor Quirrell's lessons had spent roughly zero time on the surprising yet useless trivia that some idiot had imagined a 'Defense class' should look like. In principle, Harry could have used his Time-Turner to read through the first-year Defense book after being notified of the surprise exam; but that might have unfairly skewed the grading curve for others. After staring at the question for a couple of seconds, Harry had written down 'Quieting Charm', and included the casting directions in case the Ministry grader didn't believe that Harry knew it.

Once Harry had decided to just answer all the questions *correctly*, the exam had gone by very quickly. The most realistic answer to more than

half the questions was ‘Stunning Hex’, and many of the other questions had optimal solutions along the lines of ‘Turn around and walk in the opposite direction’ or ‘Throw away the cheese and buy a new pair of shoes.’

The last question on the test was “What would you do if you suspected there might be a Bogeysnake underneath your bed?” The Ministry-approved answer, Harry could in fact recall from his read-through of the textbook at the start of the year, was *Tell your parents*. The problem with this had occurred to Harry right away, which was why Harry had remembered it.

After some pondering, Harry wrote down:

Dear Ministry grader: I'm afraid the real answer to that is a secret, but rest assured that a Bogeysnake would present no more trouble to me than a mountain troll, a Dementor, or You-Know-Who. Please inform your superiors that I find your standard answer prejudicial to Muggleborns, and that I expect this failing will be corrected at once without any need for my direct intervention.

Sincerely, the Boy-Who-Lived.

Harry signed the last parchment with a broad flourish, turned it over into his stack, put down his quill, and sat up.

Looking around, Harry saw that Professor Quirrell seemed to be looking in his rough direction, though the Defense Professor’s head had nodded to one side. The other students were still writing. Some of them were silently crying, but they were still writing. *Continuing to fight* was also a lesson Professor Quirrell had taught.

Interminably later, the official exam time was up. A seventh-year student went from desk to desk, collecting the exams in Professor Quirrell’s place.

The last exam parchment was collected, and Professor Quirrell sat up straight.

“My young students,” he said softly. The seventh-year student had her wand trained on the Defense Professor’s mouth, so that they all heard his voice seeming to come from right beside them. “I know... that probably seemed very fearsome to some of you... it is a different kind of fear from facing the enemy’s wand... you must conquer it separately. So I... shall tell you this now. It is the custom of Hogwarts... that grades are given in the second week of June. But for my case... they can make an ex-

ception, I think.” The Defense Professor smiled his familiar dry smile, tinged now as though by a suppressed grimace. “I know you are worried... that you were not prepared for this exam... that my lessons have not covered this material... and I quite forgot to mention... that it was approaching... though you should have known... it would come in time. But I have just now magically checked... the answers you have given on that... terribly, terribly important final exam... though of course only the Ministry grade is official... and assigned your full-year grades taking the results into account... and magically written your full grades down on these parchments,” Professor Quirrell tapped a stack of parchments on the side of his desk, “which will now be handed out... an incredible spell... is it not?”

A few students on the Ravenclaw side were looking indignant, but for the most part the students just looked relieved, and some Slytherins were chuckling. Harry would have laughed too, if not for the pain of watching Professor Quirrell gasp out the words.

The seventh-year student standing beside Professor Quirrell pointed her wand and spoke an incantation in magical pseudo-Latin. The parchments rose up and started to drift through the air, separating in mid-flow to drift toward each student.

Harry waited until his parchment had arrived on his desk, and then unfolded it.

The parchment said EE+, which stood for Exceeds Expectations. It was the second-highest grade letter, the highest being Outstanding.

In another world, a distant vanished world, a little boy named Harry would have shouted with indignation about receiving only the second-highest grade. This Harry sat quietly and thought. Professor Quirrell was making some point, and it wasn't as though the exact grade letter mattered in any other way. Was Professor Quirrell saying that Harry had done relatively well, but not lived up to his full potential? Or was the grade meant to be read literally, that Harry had in fact exceeded the Defense Professor's expectations?

“All of you... pass,” Professor Quirrell said, as the students all looked at their final grades, as sighs of relief rose from desks and Lavender Brown raised her parchment in a clenched fist held high with triumph. “Every student in first-year Battle Magic has passed... except for one.”

A number of students looked up in sudden terror.

Harry sat there silently. He had seen the point immediately, and even if it was a wrong point, he knew Professor Quirrell would never, ever be talked out of making it.

"All of you in this room... have received grades of at least Acceptable. Neville Longbottom... who took this test in the Longbottom home... received a grade of Outstanding. But the other student who is not here... has had a Dreadful grade entered on her record... for failing the only important test... that was given her this year. I would have marked her even lower... but that would have been in poor taste."

The room was very quiet, though a number of students were staring angrily at the Professor.

"You may think that a grade of Dreadful... is not fair. That Miss Granger was faced with a test... for which her lessons... had not prepared her. That she was not told... that the exam was coming on that day."

The Defense Professor drew in a shaking breath.

"Such is realism," said Professor Quirrell. "The only important test... may come at any time... be better prepared for it... than she was. As for the rest of you... those who have received Exceeds Expectations or above... have received my letters of recommendation... to certain organizations beyond Britain's shores... where your training might be completed. They will contact you... when you are old enough... if you still appear worthy... and if you have not failed an important test. And remember... from this day... you must train yourselves... you cannot rely... on future Defense professors. Your first year of Battle Magic is over... you are dismissed."

Professor Quirrell sat back with his eyes closed, seeming to ignore the excited babble that broke out around him.

In time most of the students had departed, and one remained, staying a prescribed distance from the Defense Professor.

The Defense Professor opened his eyes.

Harry raised the parchment with its *EE+*, still silent.

The Defense Professor smiled, and it went all the way to those tired eyes.

"It is the same grade... that I received in my own first year."

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CHAPTER 4

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“Th, th, th,” Harry couldn’t make the words *thank you* come out, they were stuck in his suddenly closed throat, the Defense Professor tilting his head and giving him an inquiring stare, so Harry just bowed jerkily and then left the room.

Nine days yet remained.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE TRUTH, PART I: RIDDLES AND ANSWERS

JUNE 13TH, 1992.

It was the last week of school in Hogwarts, and Professor Quirrell was still alive, barely. The Defense Professor himself would be in a healer's bed, this day, as he'd been for almost the last week.

Hogwarts tradition said that exams were given in the first week of June, that exam results were released the second week, and that in the third week, there would be the Leave-Taking Feast on Sunday and the Hogwarts Express transporting you to London on Monday.

Harry had wondered, a long time ago when he'd first read about that schedule, just what exactly the students did during the *rest* of the second week of June, since 'waiting for exam results' didn't sound like much; and the answer had surprised him when he'd found out.

But now the second week of June was done as well, and it was Saturday; there was nothing left of the year but the Leave-Taking Feast on the 14th and the Hogwarts Express ride on the 15th.

And nothing had been answered.

Nothing had been resolved.

Hermione's killer hadn't been found.

Somehow Harry had been thinking that, surely, all the truth would come out by the end of the school year; like that was the end of a mystery novel and the mystery's answer had been promised him. Certainly it had to be known by the time the Defense Professor... died, it couldn't be allowed for Professor Quirrell to *die* without knowing the answer, without

everything being neatly resolved. Not exam grades, certainly not death, it was only truth that finished a story...

But unless you bought Draco Malfoy's latest theory that Professor Sprout had been assigning and grading less homework around the time of Hermione being framed for attempted murder, thereby proving that Professor Sprout had been spending her time setting it up, the truth remained unfound.

And instead, like the world had priorities that were more like other people's way of thinking, the year was going to end with a climactic Quidditch match.

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In the air above the stadium, distant figures on broomsticks swooped and pirouetted and spun around each other. The red-purplish truncated tetrahedron that was the Quaffle was caught, tossed, blocked, and occasionally thrown through floating hoops, accompanied by stadium-rocking cries of triumph or dismay. Blue and green and yellow and red-trimmed robes shouted with the enthusiasm that people felt so easily when no action would be required from them personally.

It was the first Quidditch match Harry had attended at Hogwarts, and he'd already decided that it would be the last.

"Davies has the Quaffle!" shouted the amplified voice of Lee Jordan. "That's another ten points for Ravenclaw in seven... six... five... holy smokes, he's done it already! Smack through the center of the central hoop! I've never seen such a winning streak—I'm calling it right now for Davies becoming Captain next year after Bortan steps down—"

Lee's voice cut out abruptly and Professor McGonagall's own amplified voice said, "That's the Ravenclaw team's own business, Mr. Jordan. Confine yourself to the match, please."

"And the Slytherins take possession—Flint hands off the Quaffle to the lovely—"

"Mr. Jordan!"

"To the merely acceptable Sharon Vizcaino, whose hair trails behind her like a comet as she blazes toward the Ravenclaw defense—now with two Bludgers in close pursuit! Pucey's on Sharon's tail—what are you doing, Inglebee?—and she swerves in midair to avoid—IS THAT THE SNITCH? GO, CHO CHANG, GO, HIGGS IS ALREADY—WHAT ARE YOU TWO DOING?"

"Calm down, Mr. Jordan!"

"HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO CALM DOWN? THAT WAS THE WORST MISSED PLAY I'VE EVER SEEN! And the Snitch is gone—maybe gone for good, after being missed that badly—Pucey's heading off towards the goal posts, Inglebee's nowhere near him—"

In a distant era of history, maybe in another world entirely, Professor Quirrell had undertaken that the House Cup would be awarded to either Slytherin or Ravenclaw. Or possibly, somehow, both; for he had promised that three wishes would be granted. So far it was looking good on two out of three.

If you just went by the current score, Hufflepuff was leading the race for the House Cup by something like five hundred points, thanks to Hufflepuff's students doing their homework and *staying out of trouble*. It appeared that Professor Snape had been strategically taking quite a lot of points from Hufflepuffs for, er, the last seven years or so. Slytherin House, reigning champion for the last seven years, still had to its advantage a certain *generosity* of its Head of House in handing out points; and this was sufficient to put it neck-and-neck with Ravenclaw House, home of the academic achievers. Gryffindor was far behind in the last place, as befit the House of nonconformists; Gryffindor had Slytherin's profile when it came to academics and mischief, only without the advantage of Professor Snape. Even Fred and George had barely broken even on the year.

Ravenclaw House and Slytherin House both needed a lot of points from *somewhere* if either wanted to catch up with Hufflepuff in the next two days.

And so far as anyone knew, Professor Quirrell hadn't done a single thing leading to the obvious result. It was happening all by itself, now that one lone Professor in Hogwarts had taught a class with creative problem-

solving.

The final Quidditch match of the year was between Ravenclaw and Slytherin. Earlier in the year, Gryffindor's initial Quidditch lead had vanished after their new Seeker, Emmett Shear, fell off a possibly malfunctioning broomstick during his second game. This had also required some hasty rescheduling of the remaining games.

This, the final game of the year, wouldn't end until the Snitch was caught.

Quidditch scores added directly onto the House points total.

And what did you know, today it seemed that both the Slytherin and Ravenclaw Seekers just could... not... catch... the... Snitch.

"THE SNITCH WAS PRACTICALLY ON TOP OF YOU, YOU DIM-EYED DIMWIT!"

"Language, Mr. Jordan, or I'll remove you from this game! Though it *was* a terrible play, I admit."

Harry had to admit that Lee Jordan and Professor McGonagall had a wonderful comedic routine, with Jordan as the banana-man and Professor McGonagall as the straight-woman; Harry now felt a little sorry to have missed it at the earlier Quidditch matches. It was a side of Professor McGonagall he hadn't seen before.

A few seats down from where Harry sat in the Hufflepuff section of the Quidditch bleachers, there lurked the hulking form of Cedric Diggory. The Super Hufflepuff had observed the most recent near-air-collision between Cho Chang and Terence Higgs with the keen eye of a wizard who was a Seeker and a Quidditch Captain in his own right.

"The Ravenclaw Seeker is new," Cedric said. "But Higgs is in his seventh year. I've played against him. He's better than that."

"You think it's a strategy?" asked one of the Hufflepuffs sitting next to Cedric.

"It would make sense if Slytherin needed some extra points to lead for the Quidditch Cup," Cedric said. "But Slytherin already has us beat for the title. What are they thinking? They could've won right there!"

The game had started at six o' clock in the afternoon. A typical game would have gone until seven or so, at which point it would have been time

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THE TRUTH I: RIDDLES AND ANSWERS

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for dinner. June in Scotland meant plenty of daylight; sunset wasn't until ten.

It was at eight pm and six minutes, according to Harry's watch, when Slytherin had just scored another 10 points bringing the score to 170–140, when Cedric Diggory leapt out of his seat and shouted "*Those bastards!*"

"Yeah!" cried a young boy beside him, leaping to his own feet. "Who do they think they are, scoring points?"

"Not that!" cried Cedric Diggory. "They're—they're trying to *steal the Cup from us!*"

"But we're not in the running any more for—"

"*Not the Quidditch Cup! The House Cup!*"

The word spread, with cries of outrage.

That was Harry's cue.

Harry politely asked a Hufflepuff witch sitting next to him, and another Hufflepuff sitting one row above him, if they could move aside. Then Harry drew forth from his pouch a huge scroll, and unfurled it into a 2-meter-tall banner which stuck in place in midair. The enchantment had been done courtesy of a sixth-year Ravenclaw who had a reputation for knowing less about Quidditch than Harry did.

In huge, glowing purple letters, the sign read:

JUST BUY A CLOCK

2 : 06 : 47

Beneath it was a Snitch, with a blinking red X over it.

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Second, after second, after second, the time counter incremented.

As that counter rose higher, there seemed to be an awful lot of Hufflepuffs who'd decided that they wanted to sit next to Harry's banner.

As the game dragged on past nine, there also seemed to be a lot of Gryffindors.

As the sun set and Harry started using Lumos to read his books—he'd given up on the actual game a long time ago—there were a noticeable number of Ravenclaws who'd betrayed patriotism for sanity.

And Professor Sinistra.

And Professor Vector.

And as the stars began to come out, Professor Flitwick.

The climactic final Quidditch game of the year... dragged on.

* *
*

One of the things Harry hadn't planned on, when he'd decided to do this, was that he would still be out here at—Harry glanced at his watch—eleven-oh-four at night. Harry was now reading a sixth-year Transfiguration textbook; or rather he'd weighted the book open, illuminated by a Muggle glowstick, while he did one of the exercises. Last week, when the graduating Ravenclaws were discussing their N.E.W.T. scores, Harry had overheard that upper-year Transfiguration practice involved several 'shaping exercises' that relied more on control and precise thinking than raw power; and Harry had promptly set out to learn those, whacking himself hard on the forehead for not trying to read *all* the later-year textbooks earlier. Professor McGonagall had approved Harry doing a shaping exercise that involved controlling the way in which a Transfiguring object approached its final form—for example, Transfiguring a quill so that the shaft grew out first, then the barbs. Harry was doing an analogous exercise with pencils, growing out the lead first, then surrounding it with wood and finally having the eraser form on top. As Harry had suspected, focusing his attention and magic into a particular part of the pencil's ongoing transformation had proven similar to the mental discipline used in partial Transfiguration—which could indeed have been used to fake the same effect, by partially Transfiguring only the outer layers of the object. This way was proving relatively easier, though.

Harry finished his current pencil and looked up at the Quidditch game, which was, check, still fantastically boring. Lee Jordan was

commentating in a tone of dull disgust, “Another ten points—yay—whoopee—and now someone takes possession of the Quaffle again—ask if I care who.”

Almost nobody remaining in the stands was paying attention either, since everyone who’d remained in the stadium seemed to have discovered a new and more interesting sport, the debate about how to amend the House Cup rules and/or Quidditch. The argument had become heated to the point where all of the nearby Professors were barely keeping order at a level short of open combat. This argument, unfortunately, had considerably more than two factions. Some darned busybodies were proposing sensible-sounding alternatives to eliminating the Snitch entirely, and this was threatening to split the vote and sap the momentum for reform.

In retrospect, Harry thought, it would have been nice to have Draco unfurl his own banner from the Slytherin side saying ‘SNITCHES ARE AWESOME’, to set the polarity of the debate. Harry had squinted over at the Slytherin section earlier, but he hadn’t been able to spot Draco anywhere in the stands. Severus Snape, who could also have been sympathetic enough to play the villainous opposition, was likewise nowhere to be seen.

“Mr. Potter?” said a voice next to him.

Beside Harry’s seat was standing a short but older Hufflepuff boy, someone who’d never before come to Harry’s attention, holding out a blank parchment envelope with wax dripped on the front. The wax was also blank, without impression.

“What is it?” said Harry.

“It’s *me*,” said the boy. “With the envelope you gave me. I know you said not to talk to you, but—”

“Then don’t talk to me,” Harry said.

The boy tossed the envelope at Harry and walked away, looking offended. It made Harry wince a little, but it probably hadn’t been the *wrong* decision considering the temporal issues...

Then Harry broke the unsigned wax seal and drew out the envelope’s contents. It was parchment instead of the Muggle paper that Harry

would have expected, but the writing on it was his own handwriting, if done with a quill instead of a pen. The parchment said:

*Beware the constellation,
and help the watcher of stars.*

*Pass unseen by the life-eaters' confederates,
and by the wise and the well-meaning.*

*Six, and seven in a square,
in the place that is prohibited and bloody stupid.*

Harry took it in at a glance, then folded the paper again and put it back into his cloak with another exhaled sigh. 'Beware the constellation', really? Harry would have expected a riddle left by himself, to himself, to have been easier to interpret... though some parts were obvious enough. Clearly future-Harry had been worried about this paper being intercepted, and while present-Harry wouldn't ordinarily have thought of the local Aurors as 'the ones in league with the Dementors of Azkaban', maybe that had been the best way to say 'Auror' without potentially tipping off anyone else who read the parchment and did their own best to decrypt it. Translating the idiom back out of the Parseltongue he'd used during the Incident with Azkaban... that worked, Harry supposed.

The note had said that Professor Quirrell needed help, and that whatever was going on needed to pass unnoticed from the Aurors, and from Dumbledore and McGonagall and Flitwick. Since Time-Turning was involved already, the obvious solution was to leave for the loo, travel back in time, and return to the game right after he'd left.

Harry started to rise from his seat, then hesitated. His Hufflepuff side was remarking something about leaving the Auror escorts behind and not telling Professor McGonagall anything, and wondering if his future self was being *stupid*.

Harry unfolded the parchment again, and took another glance at the contents.

On closer examination, the riddle-verse didn't say that Harry couldn't bring *anyone* along. Draco Malfoy... was he missing from the Quidditch game because future-Harry, hours in the past, had brought Draco with him as backup? But that didn't make sense, there wasn't much marginal improvement in safety from bringing along another first-year...

...Draco Malfoy would certainly have been present, regardless of his personal feelings about Quidditch, to watch Slytherin clinch the House Cup. Had something happened to him?

Suddenly Harry didn't feel as tired anymore.

A trickle of adrenaline was starting to rise in Harry, but no, this wouldn't be like the troll. The message had *told* Harry when to arrive. Harry wouldn't be too late, not this time.

Harry glanced over at where Cedric Diggory was looking back and forth, visibly torn between a clutch of Ravenclaws arguing that the Snitch had to be kept because it was traditional and rules were rules, and a pack of Hufflepuffs saying that it wasn't fair for the Seeker to be more important than the other players.

Cedric Diggory had been an excellent dueling tutor to Harry and Neville, and Harry had thought they'd established a good relationship. More importantly, a student taking literally all of the electives would have his own Time-Turner. Maybe Harry could try to get Cedric to go back in time with him? The Super Hufflepuff seemed like a good spare wand to have by your side in any sort of sticky situation...

*
*

LATER, AND EARLIER:

Harry's watch now said 11:45, which translated into 6:45pm after looping back five hours.

"It's time," Harry murmured to the empty air, and began walking down the third-floor corridor above the grand staircase, on the right-hand side.

'The place that is prohibited' would ordinarily mean the Forbidden Forest; that was probably what someone intercepting the message was meant to think. But the Forbidden Forest was huge, and there was more than one distinguished location inside it. No obvious Schelling Point at which to rendezvous, or find some event that needed intervention.

But when you added the 'bloody stupid' modifier, there was only one prohibited place in Hogwarts that fit.

And so Harry set forth on that outlawed path where, if rumor spoke true, all the first-year Gryffindors had gone before. The third-floor corridor, on the right-hand side. A mysterious door leading to a series of rooms filled with dangerous and potentially lethal traps that nobody could possibly get through, especially if they were only in their first year.

Harry didn't know himself what sort of traps awaited. Which, on reflection, meant that the students who'd gone through had been surprisingly scrupulous about not ruining the puzzle for others. Maybe there was a sign down there saying *Don't give it away, just as a favor to me, sincerely Headmaster Dumbledore*. All Harry knew so far was that the outer door would open to *Alohomora*, and that the final room contained a magic mirror that would show your reflection in some situation you found highly appealing, which was apparently the big payoff.

The third-floor corridor was illuminated by dim blue light that seemed to come from nowhere, and the arches were covered with cobwebs, as though the corridor hadn't been used in centuries rather than just the last year.

Harry's pouch was loaded with useful Muggle things, and useful wizarding things, and everything he'd found that could possibly be a quest item. (Harry had asked Professor McGonagall to recommend someone who could expand the pouch's capacity, and she'd just done it herself.)

Harry had applied the Charm he'd learned for battles that made his eyeglasses stick to his face, regardless of how his head moved. Harry had refreshed the Transfigurations he was maintaining, both the tiny jewel in the ring on his hand and the other one, in case he was knocked unconscious. He wasn't literally ready for anything, but Harry was as ready as he thought he could be.

The five-sided floor tiles creaked beneath Harry's shoes and vanished behind him like the future becoming the past. It was almost 6:49—*six, and seven in a square*. Obvious if you thought in Muggle math, otherwise not so much.

Just as Harry was about to round another corner, something tickled at the back of his mind, and he heard a soft voice talking.

"...sensible person... wait until later... after certain faculty had departed..."

Harry stopped, then crept forward as lightly as he could, not going around the corner, trying to hear Professor Quirrell's voice better.

There came a louder cough, and then the soft voice spoke again from around the corner. "But if they were also... to depart themselves... at that time..." murmured the voice, "they might think... this final game... makes for the best distraction... left in this year... a predictable distraction. So I looked... to see what people of significance... were not at the game... and I saw the Headmaster missing... but for all my magic can tell me... he could be in another... realm of existence... I also saw your own absence... so I decided to go... where you were. That is what I am doing here... now... what are *you* doing here?"

Harry breathed shallowly, and listened.

"And just how did you know where I was?" drawled the voice of Severus Snape, so much louder that Harry nearly jumped.

A small, coughing laugh. "Check your wand... for Trace."

Severus said something in magical pseudo-Latin, and then, "You dared tamper with my wand? You *dared*?"

"You are a suspect... just like myself... so your false indignation is wasted... however finely crafted it may be... now tell me... what are you doing?"

"I am watching this door," said the voice of Professor Snape. "And I will ask you to be off from it!"

"On whose authority... are you ordering me... my fellow Professor?"

There was a pause, then, "Why, the Headmaster's," came the smooth voice of Severus Snape. "I was ordered by him to watch this door during the Quidditch match, and as a Professor I must obey his whims. I shall have words about it with the Board of Governors later, but for now I am doing as I must. Now be off with you, as the Headmaster desires."

"What? You mean I am to believe... that you abandoned your Slytherins... during their most important... game of the year... and leapt up like a dog... at Dumbledore's word? Well that... I must say... is entirely plausible. Even so... I think it would be wise... if I kept my own watch over you.. while you watch this fine door." There was a sound of rustling cloth and a soft thud, as if someone had sat down hard upon the ground, or maybe just fallen.

"Oh, for the love of Merlin—" Severus Snape's voice now sounded angry. "Get up, you!"

"Ba-blu-a-bu-bluh—" said the Defense Professor's zombie-mode.

"Get up!" said Severus Snape, and there was a soft thud.

Help the watcher of stars—

Harry stepped around the corner, though it was possible that he'd have done so even without an intertemporal message. Had Professor Snape just *kicked* Professor Quirrell? That would have been foolhardy if Professor Quirrell had been dead and *buried*.

A round-topped door of dark wood was framed within a stone arch, set within the dusty marble bricks of Hogwarts. Where a Muggle would have set a doorknob there was only a handle of polished metal; there were no visible locks, or visible keyholes. Set upon the wall to either side, a pair of torches burned, sending forth an ominous orange glow. Before the door stood the Potions Master in his customary stained robes. Beside the door, to the left side beneath the orange torch, slumped the form of the Defense Professor, back against the wall, head staring out at the surroundings. The eyes seemed to flicker, as if halfway between awareness, and emptiness.

"What," said the towering form of the Potions Master, "are you doing here, Potter?"

Going by facial expressions and tone of voice, the Potions Master was quite angry with Harry; and certainly was not Harry's co-conspirator in councils to which the Defense Professor had never been invited.

"I'm not sure," Harry said. He wasn't sure what role he should be playing, and was, in desperation, falling back on simple honesty. "I think perhaps I'm supposed to be keeping an eye on the Defense Professor."

The Potions Master stared at him coldly. "Where's your *escort*, Potter? Students are not to wander these halls alone!"

Harry's mind was genuinely blank. The game was afoot, and nobody had told him the rules. "I'm not sure how to answer that..."

The cold expression on Professor Snape's face flickered. "Perhaps I should call the Aurors," he said.

"Wait!" Harry blurted.

The Potions Master's hand hovered about his robes. "Why?" said the Potions Master.

"I... I just think you probably shouldn't call them..."

In a blur, the Potions Master's wand was in his hand. "*Nullus confundo!*" A black jet darted out and hit Harry, striking in the direction Harry had already started to evade. There followed four other spells, containing words like *Polyfluis* and *Metamorphus*; and for those Harry politely stood still.

After all of those spells had failed to produce any effect, Severus Snape was staring at Harry with a dark glitter that now seemed genuine. "I suggest," the Potions Master said softly, "that you explain yourself, Potter."

"I can't explain myself," Harry said. "I don't have the Time, not yet."

Harry looked directly into the Potions Master's gaze as he said the words *myself* and *time*, widening his own eyes to try to convey the key information, and the Potions Master hesitated.

Harry was frantically trying to work out who was pretending to be what. Since Professor Quirrell wasn't in on Dumbledore's conspiracy, Severus was pretending to be the evil Potions Master of Hogwarts, who'd been sent here by the Headmaster... and might or might not have actually been sent here by Dumbledore... but Professor Quirrell either thought, or

was pretending to think, that someone needed to keep an eye on Professor Snape... and Harry himself had been sent here by future-Harry and had no idea why... and why were they all standing outside the Headmaster's forbidden door in the first place?

And then...

From behind where Harry stood...

Came the growing sound of another set of footsteps, rapid and many-fold.

Professor Snape stabbed his wand once, creating a burst of darkness that shrouded where the Defense Professor was lying. "*Muffliato*," the Potions Master hissed. "Mr. Potter, if you must be here, then hide! Put on your invisibility cloak! My duty is to guard this door in case *he* comes here. And there has been—a *disturbance*, meant to draw the Headmaster, he thinks—"

"Who—"

Severus took a long stride forward and snapped his wand against the side of Harry's head. There was a trickling sensation like an egg had been cracked over him, the feeling of a Disillusionment Charm; and Harry's hands faded out, followed by the rest of him.

The darkness shrouding one side of the wall dissipated like slow mist, and there was again visible the huddled form of the Defense Professor, who said nothing.

Harry tiptoed away quietly as he could, then turned to watch.

The approaching footsteps rounded the corner—

"What are you doing here?" came many simultaneous cries.

Trimmed in three sets of Slytherin green and one Hufflepuff yellow stood Theodore Nott, Daphne Greengrass, Susan Bones, and Tracey Davis.

"*Where*," said Professor Snape with mounting wrath, "are your *escorts*, children? First-years must be accompanied by a sixth or seventh-year student at all times! Especially you!"

Theodore Nott raised his hand. "We're, um," said Theodore Nott. "We're doing what the Chaos Legion calls a team-building exercise... see, we realized just now that none of us had tried the Headmaster's forbid-

den chamber yet, and there wasn't much time left... and Harry Potter has authorized it, Professor, he said specifically that *you* mustn't interfere."

Severus Snape turned to glance over at where Harry Potter had tiptoed; a storm seemed to be gathering on his brow, and a dark fury in his eyes.

I... maybe? There was still one hour left on Harry's Time-Turner, so it was possible.

"Harry Potter does not have that authority," the Potions Master said in a deceptively mild tone. "Explain yourselves, now."

"Really?" said the form of Susan Bones. "Really? You're telling Professor Snape that Harry Potter authorized the mission, that's your idea of a bluff?" The young Hufflepuff turned to Professor Snape and spoke, her voice strangely firm. "Professor, this is the truth and it's urgent. Draco Malfoy is missing and we think he went down there—"

"If Mr. Malfoy is missing," said Professor Snape, "*why have the Aurors not been notified?*"

"Because of, because of *reasons!*" cried Daphne Greengrass. "There's no time, you've got to let us through!"

Professor Snape's voice was now as sardonic as Harry had ever heard it. "Are you four morons under the impression that you are on some sort of adventure? Well, you are mistaken. I assure you that Mr. Malfoy has not passed through this door."

"We think Mr. Malfoy has an invisibility cloak," Susan Bones said rapidly. "Do you remember the door seeming to open for no reason?"

"No," the Potions Master said. "Now be gone from here. This place is off-limits for today."

"This is *Dumbledore's* forbidden corridor," Tracey said. "The Headmaster himself said nobody was to come here. Who do you think you are, forbidding it too?"

"Miss Davis," said the Potions Master, "you need to stop associating with Gryffindors, especially those named Lavender Brown. And if you are still here in one minute, I will file papers requesting your transfer into that House."

"*You wouldn't dare!*" shrieked Tracey.

"Hm," Susan Bones said, her face screwed up in concentration. "Professor Snape, do you occasionally open the door yourself, to check on whatever's inside?"

Professor Snape froze in place. Then he spun and put his right hand on the metal knocker—

Harry was watching the hand on the knocker, so he didn't notice what Professor Snape was doing with his left hand until he heard the sudden outcry.

"No, in fact," said Professor Snape, now holding the choking head of Draco Malfoy by his collar, though the rest of Draco was still underneath his invisibility cloak. "A fine try, though."

"What?" cried Tracey and Daphne.

Susan Bones hit herself in the forehead. "I can't *believe* I fell for that."

"So, Mr. Malfoy," Professor Snape said. His voice had lowered. "You sent your friends here on a ruse... just in the hopes that you could pass through this door? Now why would you do that?"

"I think we should trust him—" said Theodore Nott. "Mr. Malfoy, we've *got* to trust him, he's the one Professor who would take our side!"

"No!" cried Draco's floating head, from where Professor Snape was still grasping his collar. "You mustn't say anything! Stop!"

"We've got to take the chance!" yelled Theodore. "Professor Snape, Mr. Malfoy finally worked out what's been going on this whole year, and why—Dumbledore is trying to get the Philosopher's Stone away from Nicholas Flamel! Because Dumbledore doesn't think anyone ought to have immortality! So Dumbledore tried to convince Flamel that the Dark Lord was coming back and needed the Stone to revive, and asked Flamel to give it to him, but Flamel wouldn't, and instead Flamel put the Stone in the magic mirror that's down there, and Dumbledore is finding out right now how to get it, and then he'll come for it and we've got to get to it first! Dumbledore really will be all-powerful if he gets the Philosopher's Stone!"

"What?" said Tracey. "That's not what you said before!"

"It—" Daphne said. She looked frightened, but determined. "It doesn't matter—Professor Snape, please, you *have* to believe me. I looked at the books Hermione checked out of the library, and she was

researching the Philosopher's Stone just before someone killed her. Her notes said that something dangerous might happen if the Stone stays inside the mirror too long. We have to get it out of the castle right away."

Susan Bones now had both hands over her face. "I'm not with them, I just came along to prevent anything even stupider from happening."

Severus Snape was staring at Theodore Nott and the others. Then he turned his head to look at Draco Malfoy. "Mr. Malfoy," the Potions Master drawled. "How did you come to discover Dumbledore's plot?"

"I deduced it from evidence!" said Draco Malfoy's floating head.

Professor Snape's head swiveled back to Theodore Nott. "How did you intend to obtain this Stone from inside a magic mirror that could supposedly baffle Dumbledore himself? Answer me at once!"

"We're going to take the whole mirror and send it back to Flamel," said Theodore Nott. "It's not like we want the Stone for ourselves, we just need to stop Dumbledore from stealing it."

Professor Snape nodded, as though confirming something, and turned his head to look at the other students. "Tell me, have any of you noticed one of the others behaving in an unusual fashion? Especially if there is a peculiar object that they have in their possession, or they can use spells a first-year should not know?" Professor Snape's right hand now pointed his wand at Susan Bones. "I see that Miss Greengrass and Miss Davis are trying not to look at you, Miss Bones. If there is a mundane explanation, you would be wise to offer it *immediately*."

Susan Bones's hair turned bright red, though her face didn't change. "I suppose there's not much point keeping it mum any longer," she said, "since I'm graduating in two days anyway."

"Double witches get to graduate *six years* early?" said Tracey Davis. "That's not fair!"

"*Bones is a double witch?*" cried Theodore.

"No, she is Nymphadora Tonks, a Metamorphmagus," Professor Snape said. "Masquerading as another student is extremely against regulation, as you are well aware, Miss Tonks. It is not too late to expel you from Hogwarts two days before your graduation, which would be a dreadful tragedy—from your perspective, that is. From my perspective it would be hilarious. Now tell me what exactly you are doing here."

"That explains it," said Daphne Greengrass. "Um, is there *actually* a Susan Bones, or is the House dying out so they had you secretly—"

The red-haired form of Susan Bones had a palm to her face. "Yes, Miss Greengrass, there's a real Susan Bones. She only sends me in when *you* lot are about to get into ridiculous amounts of trouble. Professor Snape, the reason I'm here is because Draco Malfoy was missing, and this lot *insisted* on trying to find him instead of calling the Aurors. For reasons the real Miss Bones said there was no time to explain to me, which I now realize were stupid. But young students must never go alone, and must be accompanied by a sixth or seventh year at all times. And now we found Draco Malfoy and we can all go back. Please? Before this gets any more ridiculous?"

"*What in Merlin's name is going on here?*"

"Ah," said Professor Snape, who was still pointing the wand at the red-haired form of Susan Bones, his other hand still grasping the collar below the disembodied head of Draco Malfoy, standing next to the crumpled form of the Defense Professor. "Professor Sprout, I perceive."

"It's not what it looks like," volunteered Tracey Davis.

The short, dumpy form of the Herbology Professor stormed forwards. She had, by this point, drawn her wand, though she wasn't pointing it at anyone. "*I don't even know what this looks like!* Down wands, all of you, *right now!* Including you, Professor!"

Distraction. The thought came to Harry with sudden clarity. Whatever he was watching now, from where he stood invisibly and well back of the action, it wasn't *what was really going on*, it wasn't the true thread of the story, it had been *arranged*. Professor Sprout's arrival had broken Harry's suspension of disbelief; things like that didn't happen just for the sake of comedic coincidence. Someone was deliberately causing all this chaos, but what was the point?

Harry really hoped he hadn't gone back in time and done this, because it did seem like the sort of thing he would do.

Severus Snape lowered his wand. His other hand unfisted Draco Malfoy. "Professor Sprout," the Potions Master said, "I am here on the Headmaster's orders to watch this door. Everyone else present is *not* supposed to be here, and I ask you to see them cleared away."

"A likely story," snapped Professor Sprout. "Why would Dumbledore set you of all people to guard the door to his playground? It's not as if he wants to keep the students out, oh no, they need to go in and get stuck in *my* Devil's Snare! Susan, dear, you've got a communications mirror, don't you? Use it to call the Aurors."

The watching Harry nodded to himself. *That* was the point. The Aurors would take away everyone present at this terribly confusing situation, no excuses accepted, and then the door would be unguarded.

But was Harry meant to go into the forbidden corridor himself? Or watch, to see who finally came once all the others were gone?

A loud fit of hacking and coughing caused everyone to look at where the Defense Professor lay.

"Snape—listen—" said the Defense Professor between coughs. "Why—Sprout—here—"

The Potions Master looked down.

"Memory Charm—implies—Professor—" The Defense Professor began coughing again.

"*What?*"

And the logic unfolded in Harry's mind in crystalline dismay, all the steps already suspected, the dreadful realization coming as a repetition with greater confidence.

Someone had Memory-Charmed Hermione to believe she'd tried to kill Draco.

Only a Hogwarts Professor could have done it without alarm.

So all the true mastermind needed to do was Legilimise or Imperius a Hogwarts Professor.

And the last person anyone would suspect would be the Head of House Hufflepuff.

Snape's head snapped around, as Professor Sprout raised her wand, and the Potions Master managed to raise a wordless translucent ward between them. But the bolt that shot from Professor Sprout's wand was a dark brown that produced a surge of awful apprehension in Harry's mind; and the brown bolt made Severus's shield wink out before they touched, clipping the Potions Master's right arm even as he dodged. Professor Snape gave a muffled shriek and his hand spasmed, dropping his wand.

The next bolt that came from Sprout's wand was a bright red the color of a Stunning Hex, seeming to grow brighter and move faster even as it left her wand, accompanied by another surge of anxiety; and that blew the Potions Master into the door, dropping him motionless to the ground.

By that time pink-haired-Susan-Bones was surrounded by a multifaceted blue haze and she was firing hex after hex at Professor Sprout. Professor Sprout was ignoring the hexes to summon plant tendrils that entangled the younger students as they tried to run, except Draco Malfoy, who had again vanished beneath his invisibility cloak.

Not-Susan-Bones stopped casting hexes. She leveled her wand, took a deep breath, and cried aloud an incantation that sent golden worms of light chewing into the shield around Professor Sprout. At that the Herbology Professor turned to face not-Susan, her expression vacant, a new set of plant tentacles rising in the air behind her. Those stalks were a darker green, and seemed to have shields of their own.

Harry Potter murmured to the seemingly empty air, "Attack Sprout. Help Bones. Nonlethal only."

"Yes, my lord," whispered Lesath Lestrange beneath Harry's Cloak of Invisibility, and the fifth-year Slytherin's presence moved off toward the fight.

Harry looked down at at his own hands, and saw with a jolt of unpleasant shock that his Disillusionment Charm wasn't as complete as it had been before. There were hints of distortion in the air, each time Harry moved...

Slowly, Harry stepped backward, until he came to a corner, and ducked behind a wall. Then he took out his communications mirror... which was blank and jammed. Of course. Harry levitated the mirror to where he could use it to see around the corner, and watch the end of the... distraction? *What was happening, why?*

Professor Sprout and the form of Susan Bones were dueling in flashes of light and leaves; and the blazing green of a Greater Drill Hex erupted from midair and chewed halfway through the outer layer of Professor Sprout's shields. The Herbology Professor turned and fired a broad wash of yellow at where the Drill Hex had come from, but the spell didn't seem to hit anything.

Yellow blazes, blue facets, dark green plant-tendrils and swirling purple flower petals...

It was when Professor Sprout started firing arcs of crimson in all directions that one of the crimson blades caught something in midair, the Invisibility Cloak not concealing how the crimson arc was absorbed and winked out; and Lesath's presence beneath the Invisibility Cloak fell to the ground.

And that gave not-Susan-Bones time enough to stand still, catch her breath, and scream something that inspired in Harry another surge of dread; and the white spark that blazed out went through Professor Sprout's chewed shields and her plant-armor and dropped her.

Not-Susan-Bones went to her knees, panting, her robes soaked in sweat.

Her head turned to look around her, at the bodies lying stunned on the floor or wrapped in vines.

"What," said not-Susan. "What. What. *What.*"

There was no reply. The victims entangled in Professor Sprout's vines weren't moving, though they did seem to be breathing.

"Malfoy..." said the pink-haired form of Susan, still gasping for breath. "Draco Malfoy, where are you? Are you there? Call the Aurors already! Merlin damn it—*Homenum Revelio!*"

And Harry found himself visible again, staring in his mirror at the form of Draco Malfoy half-visible beneath a shimmering cloak, standing behind not-Susan, pointing his wand at a gap in not-Susan's blue haze.

Harry's mind moved in flashes of insight, too slow and yet too fast; even as Harry's mouth opened and he inhaled in preparation to shout.

beware the constellation

there was a constellation named Draco

if you could control a Professor you could control a student

"*Duck!*" Harry shouted, but it was too late, a bolt of red light caught the back of not-Susan's head at point-blank, smashing her to the floor.

Harry stepped around the corner and said, "*Somnium Somnium Somnium Somnium Somnium Somnium.*"

Draco Malfoy's shimmering form collapsed in a heap.

Harry took a moment to catch his breath. Then Harry said “*Stupefy!*” and verified that, yes, the Stunning Hex did hit Draco Malfoy’s form.

(You could be mistaken about whether a Somnium had really hit. Harry had seen enough horror movies, not to mention the business with the Sunshine Regiment, that he wasn’t about to make *that* error again.)

After a further reflection on this, Harry cast another Stunning Hex into the prostrate form of Professor Sprout.

Harry gripped his wand, staring at the scene, breathing heavily from the exhaustion. He didn’t have enough magic left to cast a messenger Patronus to Dumbledore and he *really really* should have thought of that possibility immediately this time around. Harry started to reach back to where his mirror had fallen, to see if it was now unjammed.

And then Harry hesitated.

His note to himself had said to avoid notice from Aurors, and Harry still *did not know what was going on*.

The crumpled form of Professor Quirrell gave another series of racking coughs, reached out a hand to the wall beside him, and slowly pulled himself to his feet.

“Harry,” croaked Professor Quirrell. “Harry. Are you there?”

It was the first time Professor Quirrell had ever called him by his first name.

“I’m here,” Harry said. Without any conscious thought, his feet were moving forward.

“Please,” said Professor Quirrell. “Please, I haven’t... much time. Please take me... to the mirror... help me... get the Stone.”

“The *Philosopher’s Stone*?” Harry said. He glanced around at the scattered bodies, but he couldn’t see Draco anymore, the revealment had worn off. “You think Mr. Nott was *right*? I don’t think Dumbledore would—”

“Not—Dumbledore,” gasped Professor Quirrell. “Because—Sprout—”

“I understand,” Harry said. If Dumbledore had been the one behind it all, he wouldn’t have needed to mind-control a Professor in order to use Memory Charms.

“Mirror... ancient relic... could hide anything... Stone could be there... many others want Stone... one sent Sprout...”

Harry repeated rapidly, "The mirror down there is an ancient relic that can be used to hide things, and it would be one possible place to hide the Philosopher's Stone. If the Philosopher's Stone is inside the mirror then any number of people might want to get it. One of them is controlling Sprout and that would explain what their goal really is... only... that doesn't explain why Sprout's controller would go after Hermione?"

"Harry, please," Professor Quirrell said. His breathing was yet more labored now, his voice came with excruciating slowness. "It's the one thing... that can save my life... and I find, now... I don't want to die... please, help me..."

And somehow that tore it.

Somehow that was a little too much.

The sense of detachment that had come over Harry when Professor Sprout had arrived, the broken suspension of disbelief, was returning; his Inner Critic weighing up everything as though it were a set-piece. Timing, probability, so many people showing up at the same door, the Defense Professor's desperation... this whole situation didn't feel real. But he might be able to *solve it* if he just took time to think things through in advance, instead of running off at adventure's first call. All the accumulated experience from the last year had finally crystallized into something like a touch of battle hardening. An instinct born of past disaster was telling Harry that if he just rushed on ahead, he would end up afterward in a sad conversation, realizing that he'd been stupid. *Again.*

"Let me think," Harry said. "Let me think for a minute before we go." He turned away from the Defense Professor, looking at the unconscious bodies draped in various shapes over the floor. There'd been so many puzzle pieces already, this last year, maybe everything would just fall into place with one more piece...

"Harry..." the Defense Professor said in a faltering voice. "Harry, I'm dying..."

One more minute can't make the difference he's had the WHOLE YEAR to be sick it's IMPROBABLE that his life versus death would be precisely timed to rest on this last minute no matter what happened to Hermione—

"I know!" Harry said. "I'll think *quickly!*"

Harry stared at the bodies and tried to think. There was no time for doubts, for caveats, no brakes or second-guessing just take the first thoughts and *run with them*—

In the back of Harry's mind, fragments of abstract thought flitted past, heuristics of problem-solving that there was no time to rehearse in words. In wordless flashes they shot past, to set up the object-level problem.

—*what do I notice I am confused by*—

—*the first place to look for a problem is whatever aspect of the situation seems most improbable*—

—*simple explanations are more probable, eliminate separate improbabilities that must be postulated*—

Professor Snape had already been here then Professor Quirrell had arrived then Harry had arrived (via Time-Turner) then the adventuring party had arrived and Draco had been revealed (part of the party) then Professor Sprout had shown up.

Too many people had shown up *synchronously* and that was too much coincidence, it was *improbable* that so many different parties would show up at the same location within a five-minute window, there *had* to be hidden entanglements.

Label Sprout's controller as the mastermind who had ordered Hermione Memory-Charmed. The mastermind had sent Sprout.

Professor Snape had said that the Headmaster had sent him to guard the door after there'd been some sort of *disturbance*, if the mastermind had caused that as a distraction then that explained Severus's presence as well.

Harry wasn't sure any more that Draco had been controlled by the mastermind, that hypothesis had come to him in the spur of the moment, Draco might have just been trying to drop not-Susan so he could get into the corridor unhindered—

No that was the wrong way to think, turn it around, try to *explain* the timed presence of Draco and his adventuring party, no time for self-questioning, *run with the hypothesis*, therefore suppose Sprout's mastermind had sent Draco or triggered his coming.

That was three arrivals explained.

Harry had shown up because his note to himself had told him to do so. That could be attributed to time travel.

That left the Defense Professor who'd said he was following Snape, only that didn't *really* seem like an adequate reason for Professor Quirrell to show up it didn't really make Harry feel less confused and so maybe the mastermind had also controlled the timing of Professor Quirrell's presence somehow and even arranged for Harry himself to enter the time loop.

Harry's mind hit a stumbling-block, he couldn't see how to extend that reasoning further.

There was no time to stare blankly at stumbling-blocks.

Without any pause or braking Harry's mind attacked the problem from a new angle.

Professor Quirrell had deduced a controlled Hogwarts Professor from the need for some Professor to Memory-Charm Hermione which meant that Professor Sprout's controller had framed and then murdered Hermione which meant Professor Sprout's controller had detailed information about Hogwarts life and maybe a personal interest in the Boy-Who-Lived and his friends.

Harry's mind finally threw up the relevant memory, Dumbledore saying that Lord Voldemort's strongest road to life was hidden here inside Hogwarts *run with the hypothesis* so that resurrection tool was the Philosopher's Stone hidden inside the mirror *why had Dumbledore put the mirror into a corridor first-years could get through no ignore this question it's not important right now* and Professor Quirrell had said the Philosopher's Stone possessed great healing power so that part also fit.

But if it was the Philosopher's Stone that was hidden in the mirror to keep it away from the Dark Lord, that meant the mirror also contained the one thing in the world that could save the Defense Professor's life—

Harry's mind tried to hesitate, to flinch away, feeling a sudden apprehension as to where this was going.

But there was no time allowed for hesitation.

-and that was also far too much coincidence just too much improbability if your mind didn't write it off as an amazing plot twist like you were inside a story.

Could the putative Dark Lord also be manipulating Professor Quirrell so that Professor Quirrell would discover his supposed salvation at the right time so that Harry and Professor Quirrell would go get the resurrection tool from the mirror that might not even actually be the Philosopher's Stone and then the Dark Lord's avatar or some other servant would show up and seize it from them that would explain *all* the synchronies and negate every coincidence.

Or Professor Quirrell had known from the beginning that the one thing that could save his life was hidden inside this mirror and that was why he had agreed to teach Defense at Hogwarts and now he was finally trying to get it but then why wait until he was this sick to even try and why had Sprout shown up at the same time as Professor Quirrell—

Harry's mind faltered harder.

His inner eye was looking in a direction it was afraid to look.

The note I sent myself said to help the watcher of stars. I wouldn't send myself a note saying that, if I hadn't already worked out in the future that it was the right thing to do—maybe the note is just telling me to get on with it—

A small note of confusion was promoted to conscious attention.

The coded message on the parchment... one or two lines hadn't quite sounded right, hadn't sounded like the code Harry would expect himself to use...

"Harry," whispered the dying voice of Professor Quirrell from behind him. "Harry, please."

"I'm almost done thinking," Harry's voice said aloud, and Harry realized as he spoke the words that they were true.

Turn it around.

Look at it from the Enemy's perspective, from where the Enemy does their own intelligent planning, somewhere out of your sight.

There are Aurors in Hogwarts, and your target Harry Potter is now fully on guard. Harry Potter will call in Aurors at the first sign of trouble, or send a Patronus to Albus Dumbledore. Considering that as a puzzle, one creative solution is to—

—forge a supposedly Time-Turned message to Harry Potter from himself, telling Harry Potter *not* to call for help, telling him to be at the place and time you want him to be. You get the target himself to bypass

all the protections he set up. You even bypass his protection of skepticism with the overriding authority of his own future self's judgment.

It isn't even difficult. You can Memory-Charm some random student into remembering Harry Potter handing over an envelope to be given back to himself later.

You can Memory-Charm that student because you are a Hogwarts Professor.

You don't go to the extra effort to steal a pencil and Muggle paper from Harry Potter's pouch. Instead you forge Harry Potter's handwriting on wizard parchment. You can forge Harry Potter's handwriting because you have seen it on Ministry-mandated exams you have graded.

You call Draco Malfoy 'the constellation' because you know Harry Potter is interested in astronomy and you are a wizard and you have taken Astronomy and memorised the names of all the constellations. But it's not the natural code that Harry Potter would use to describe Draco Malfoy to himself, that would have been 'the apprentice'.

You call Professor Quirrell 'the watcher of stars', and tell Harry Potter to help him.

You know that life-eater is how you say 'Dementor' in Parseltongue and you expect Harry Potter to think of the Aurors as being in league with them.

You encode 6:49 as 'six, and seven in a square' because you have been reading a Muggle physics book that Harry Potter gave you.

Who are you, then?

Harry noticed his breathing had sped up, and with a burst of heartrate, Harry slowed his breath down again, Professor Quirrell was *watching him*.

What if hypothetically speaking Professor Quirrell was the mastermind and had faked Harry's message then that explained all five parties showing up the whole synchronous coordination of the comedy and then Professor Sprout was just controlled to give Professor Quirrell deniability let him blame someone else for the False Memory Charm after the dust settled but

But why would Professor Quirrell risk the fragile alliance Harry had with Draco via the attempted murder-frame

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CHAPTER 5

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(that Professor Quirrell had ‘detected’ and ‘stopped’ allegedly via a tracer put on Draco)

Why would Professor Quirrell kill Hermione

(if his first attempt to remove her hadn’t worked)

If Professor Quirrell was the bad guy then he might have lied about everything to do with horcruxes and maybe it wasn’t coincidence at all that the only thing that could save his life was the avenue that could resurrect the Dark Lord what if the Dark Lord had arranged that too somehow

(one day David Monroe had mysteriously disappeared, presumed dead at the Dark Lord’s hands)

An awful intuition had come over Harry, something separate from all the reasoning he’d done so far, an intuition that Harry couldn’t put into words; except that he and the Defense Professor were very much alike in certain ways, and faking a Time-Turned message was just the sort of creative method that Harry himself might have tried to bypass all of a target’s protections—

And that was when Harry finally realized what should have been obvious from the very, very beginning.

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Professor Quirrell was smart.

Professor Quirrell was smart in the same way as Harry.

Professor Quirrell was smart in exactly the same way as Harry’s mysterious dark side.

If you had to guess when the Boy-Who-Lived had acquired his mysterious dark side, the obvious guess was the night of October 31st, 1981.

*
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And

And

And Professor Quirrell had known a password that Bellatrix Black had thought identified the Dark Lord and his presence gave the Boy-Who-

Lived a sense of doom and his magic interacted destructively with Harry's and his favorite spell was Avada Kedavra and and and—

The realization blasted through Harry like a vast dam breaking, releasing out all its water, bursting through his mind in an irresistible flood that swept everything away.

There is only one reality that generates all of the observations.

If different observations seem to point in incompatible directions, it means the true hypothesis is one you haven't thought of yet.

And in those cases, when you finally think of the correct hypothesis, everything aligns behind it, beyond denial or horror, tearing away every doubt and every emotion that might stand in its path.

—and then 'David Monroe' and 'Lord Voldemort' had just been one person playing both sides of the Wizarding War and that was why the Monroe family had been killed before they could meet 'David Monroe' just like Moody had suspected—

Reality settled down into a single known state, one coherent state-of-affairs that compactly generated the observation set.

Harry didn't jump, didn't change his breathing, tried not to show a single sign of the horror and agony flooding his mind.

The Enemy was behind him, watching him.

"All right," Harry said out loud, as soon as he dared trust his voice to sound normal. He kept on staring at the bodies, looking away from Professor Quirrell, because Harry didn't trust his own face. Harry lifted a sleeve to wipe away the sweat on his forehead, trying to make the gesture look casual; Harry couldn't control the sweat, or the rapid hammering in his chest. "Let's go get the Philosopher's Stone."

All Harry needed was a single moment of distraction anywhere along the way to use his Time-Turner.

There was no reply from behind him.

The silence stretched.

Slowly, Harry turned around.

Professor Quirrell was standing upright and smiling.

In the Defense Professor's hand was a shape of black metal pointed at Harry's wand arm, held with the sure grip of someone who knew exactly how to use a semiautomatic handgun.

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CHAPTER 5

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Harry's mouth was dry, even his lips were trembling with adrenaline, but he managed to speak. "Hello, Lord Voldemort."

Professor Quirrell inclined his head in acknowledgement, and said, "Hello, Tom Riddle."

CHAPTER SIX

THE TRUTH, PART II

T*om Riddle.*

The words seemed to echo inside Harry's head, sparking resonances that as quickly died away, broken patterns trying to complete themselves and failing.

Tom Riddle is a

Tom Riddle was the

Riddle

There were other priorities occupying Harry's attention.

Professor Quirrell was pointing a gun at him.

And for some reason Lord Voldemort hadn't fired it yet.

Harry's voice came out in more of a croak. "What is it that you want from me?"

"Your death," said Professor Quirrell, "is clearly not what I am about to say, since I have had plenty of time to kill you if I wished. The fateful battle between Lord Voldemort and the Boy-Who-Lived is a figment of Dumbledore's imagination. I know where to find your family's house in Oxford, and I am familiar with the concept of sniper rifles. You would have died before you ever touched a wand. I hope this is clear to you, Tom?"

"Crystal," Harry whispered. His body was still shaking, running programs more suited to fleeing a tiger than casting delicate spells or *thinking*. But Harry could think of one thing the person pointing a gun at him obviously wanted him to do, a question that person was waiting for him to ask, and Harry did so. "Why are you calling me Tom?"

Professor Quirrell regarded him steadily. "Why *am* I calling you Tom? Answer. Your intellect is not everything I hoped for, but it should suffice for this."

Harry's mouth seemed to know the answer before his brain could manage to focus on the question. "Tom Riddle is your name. Our name. That's who Lord Voldemort is, or was, or—something."

Professor Quirrell nodded. "Better. You have already vanquished the Dark Lord, the one and only time that you will ever do so. I have already destroyed all but a remnant of Harry Potter, eliminating the difference between our spirits and enabling us to reside in the same world. Now that it is clear to you that the battle between us is a lie, you might act sensibly to advance your own interests. Or you might not." The gun jabbed slightly forward, causing prickles of sweat to appear on Harry's forehead. "Drop your wand. *Now*."

Harry dropped it.

"Step away from the wand," said Professor Quirrell.

Harry obeyed.

"Reach toward your neck," said Professor Quirrell, "and remove your Time-Turner, touching it by the chain only. Place the Time-Turner on the ground, then step away from it as well."

This also Harry did. Even in his state of shock, his mind still looked for a way to spin the Time-Turner in the process, a sudden move that would win; but Harry knew that Professor Quirrell would already be imagining himself in Harry's position, looking for the same possible opportunities.

"Remove your pouch and place it also on the ground, then step away."

Harry did this.

"Very good," said the Defense Professor. "Now. It is time for me to obtain the Philosopher's Stone. I mean to bring along these four first-years here, suitably Obliviated of their most recent memories so that they still recall their original purpose. Snape I shall control and set to guard this door. After this day's work is done, I intend to kill Snape for the betrayals he has offered my other identity. The three heir-children I shall take with me afterwards, to shape their future loyalties. And know this, I have taken hostages. I have already set in motion a spell that will kill hundreds of Hogwarts students, including many you called friends. I can stop that spell using the Stone, if I obtain it successfully. If I am interrupted before then, or if I choose not to stop the spell, hundreds of students will die." Professor Quirrell's voice was still mild. "Do you yet perceive any

interests you have at stake, boy? I would smile to hear you say 'no', but that is too much to hope."

"I'd like," Harry managed to say, through the horror, and the heart-break, and the knives slicing away at an emotional connection that hurt like living flesh as it was cut, "for you not to do those things, Professor." *Why, Professor Quirrell, why, why did it have to turn out like this, I don't, I don't, I don't want this to be happening...*

"Very well," Professor Quirrell said. "I grant you permission to offer me something I want." The gun gestured invitingly. "That is a rare privilege, child. Lord Voldemort does not usually negotiate for what he wants."

Some part of Harry's mind scrabbled frantically, looking for something, anything that might be of more value to Lord Voldemort or Professor Quirrell than child hostages or Severus's death.

Another part of him, the part that had never stopped thinking, already knew his answer.

"You already have an idea for what you want from me," Harry said, through the sickness and the bleeding wounds in his soul. "What is it?"

"Your help in obtaining the Philosopher's Stone."

Harry swallowed. He couldn't stop his eyes from going to the gun, then back up at Professor Quirrell's face.

He was aware that the hero in a storybook was supposed to say 'No', but now that he was actually in a situation like this, saying 'No' didn't seem to make sense.

"I am disappointed that you need to think about this," said Professor Quirrell. "It is straightforward that you should obey me for now, since I hold every advantage over you. I have taught you better than this; in this situation you should certainly pretend to lose. You can expect to gain nothing by resisting, except pain. You should have calculated that it was better to answer sooner, and not earn my distrust." Professor Quirrell's eyes studied him curiously. "Perhaps Dumbledore has filled your ears with nonsense about noble defiance? I find such morals amusing, since they are so easy to manipulate. I assure you that I can make defiance seem morally worse, and you would be well advised to submit before I demonstrate how." The gun stayed pointed at Harry; but with a wave of

Professor Quirrell's other hand, Tracey Davis rose up into the air, spun lazily, her limbs stretched out spreadeagle—

—then, even as new adrenaline hammered at Harry's heart, Tracey floated back down again.

"Choose," said Professor Quirrell. "This begins to try my patience."

I should have spoken just then, before he might've ripped off Tracey's legs, no, I shouldn't have, the Headmaster said I mustn't show Lord Voldemort that I'll do things if he threatens my friends because that will just make him threaten more of them—only what he said before isn't a threat it's just the sort of thing Lord Voldemort does—

Harry took a deep breath, several of them. Whatever part of him kept on running on full automatic was screaming at the remainder of his mind that it *could not afford to stay in shock*. Shocks were of finite duration, neurons kept firing regardless, the only reason Harry's mind would shut down while his brain kept running was if Harry's self-model *believed* his mind would shut down—

"I don't mean to try your patience," Harry said. His voice was cracking. That was good. Sounding like he was still in shock meant that Lord Voldemort might give him more time. "But if Lord Voldemort had a reputation for keeping his bargains, I don't know about it."

"An obvious concern," Professor Quirrell said. "There is a simple answer, and I would have enforced it upon you in any case. *Ssnakes can't lie*. And since I have a tremendous distaste for stupidity, I suggest you do not say anything like 'What do you mean?' You are smarter than that, and I do not have time for such conversations as ordinary people inflict on one another."

Harry swallowed. Snakes can't lie. "*Two pluss two equalss four*." Harry had tried to say that two plus two equalled three, and the word *four* had slipped out instead.

"Good. When Salazar Slytherin invoked the Parselmouth curse upon himself and all his children, his true plan was to ensure his descendants could trust one another's words, whatever plots they wove against outsiders." Professor Quirrell had adopted his lecturing pose from Battle Magic, like someone putting on a well-worn mask, but the gun remained pointed in his hand. "Occlumency cannot fool the Parselmouth curse as

it can fool Veritaserum, and you may put that to the trial also. Now listen well. *Come with me, promise your besst aid in getting Sstone, and I sshall leave thesse children behind unharmed. Hosstages are real, hundredss of sstudentss die tonight unlesss I sstop eventss already sset in motion. Will ss spare hosstages if I obtain Sstone ssuccessfully. And mark also this, mark it well: I cannot be truly sslain by any power known to me, and lossing Sstone will not sstop me from returning, nor ss spare you or yourss my wrath. Any impetuous act you are contemplating cannot win the game for you, boy. I do credit your ability to annoy me, and suggest you avoid doing so.*

"You said," Harry's voice was strange in his own ears, "that the Philosopher's Stone had different powers from what legend said. You said that to me in Parseltongue. Tell me what the Stone really does, before I agree to help you get it." If it was something along the lines of gaining total power over the universe, then *nothing* was worth an incrementally greater chance of Lord Voldemort getting the Stone.

"Ah," said Professor Quirrell, and smiled. "You are thinking. That is better, and as a reward I shall offer you a further incentive for cooperation. Eternal life and youth, the creation of gold and silver. Suppose these are true benefits of holding the Stone. Tell me, boy. What is the Stone's power?"

It might have been the adrenaline still in him, being actually useful for his brain for once. It might have been the power of being told that an answer existed, and that the evidence wasn't a lie. "It can make Transfigurations permanent."

Then Harry stopped, as he heard what his own mouth had just said.

"Correct," said Professor Quirrell. "Thus, whoever holds the Philosopher's Stone is able to perform human Transfiguration."

Harry's torn mind was knocked about yet again, as he realized what further incentive would be offered him.

"You stole Miss Granger's remains and Transfigured them into some innocuous-appearing target," said Professor Quirrell. "A Transfigured target that you must keep somewhere about your own person, in order to sustain the Transfiguration. Ah, I see your eyes going to that ring upon your hand, but of course Miss Granger would not be the little jewel set into the ring, would it? That would be too obvious. No, I expect you

Transfigured Granger's remains into the ring itself, letting the aura of the Transfigured jewel mask the magic in the Transfigured ring."

"Yes," Harry said, forcing out the word. It was a lie, for once, and Harry's glance had been deliberate. Harry had expected someone to challenge him on the steel ring, he'd tried to provoke that challenge so he could prove to be innocent yet again, though nobody had taken him up on it—maybe Dumbledore had just sensed that the steel by itself wasn't magical.

"Fine and good," said Professor Quirrell. "Now come with me, help me to obtain the Stone, and I will resurrect Hermione Granger on your behalf. Her death has had unfortunate effects on you, and I would not mind undoing them. That, as I understand you, is your greatest desire. I have done you many kindnesses, and I would not mind doing you this one more." A blank-eyed Professor Sprout had now risen from the ground and was pointing her own wand at Harry. "*Help me obtain Sstone of Transfiguration, and I sshall try my hardesst to ressurrect your girl-child friend to true and lassting life. That ssaid, boy, I am sswiftly running out of patience with you, and you sshall not like what comess next.*" This last line was hissed out in a voice that conveyed the impression of a snake rearing its head to strike.

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Even then.

Even then, with all the world upturned, with shock after shock, even then Harry's brain did not stop being a brain, or completing the patterns its circuits had been wired to complete.

Harry knew that this was too good an offer to make to someone at whom you were pointing a gun.

Unless you *desperately* needed their help to get the Philosopher's Stone out of the magic mirror.

And there wasn't any time left to plan, only the thought that, if Professor Quirrell really was going this far to get his help—what Harry *wanted*

was to demand Professor Quirrell promise not to kill anyone in the future in exchange for his help now, but Harry had a strong sense that Professor Quirrell would reply 'Don't be ridiculous' and there wasn't time for ordinary conversation Harry had to guess the highest safe request in advance—

Professor Quirrell's eyes narrowed, his lips parted—

"If I help you," Harry's mouth said, "I want your promise that you aren't planning to turn on me when this is over. I want you to not kill Professor Snape or anyone else in Hogwarts for at least a week. And I want answers, the truth about everything that's been going on this whole time, everything you know about my nature."

The pale blue eyes regarded him dispassionately.

I really think we could have thought of something better to ask for than that, said Harry's Slytherin side. *But I suppose we were legitimately out of time, and whatever we need to do next, answers will help.*

Harry wasn't listening to that voice right now. Cold chills were still going down his spine from hearing the words that had just come out of his lips, addressed to the man with the gun.

"That is your condition for helping me to obtain the Stone?" said Professor Quirrell.

Harry nodded, unable to form words.

"Agreed," hissed Professor Quirrell. *"Help me, and you sshall have ansswerss to your quesstions, sso long ass they are about passt eventss, and not my planss for the future. I do not intend to raise my hand or magic againsst you in future, sso long ass you do not raise your hand or magic againsst me. Sshall kill none within sschool groundss for a week, unless I musst. Now promise that you will not attempt to warn againsst me or escape. Promise to put forth your own besst efforts toward helping me to obtain the Sstone. And your girl-child friend sshall be revived by me, to true life and health; nor sshall me or mine ever sseek to harm her."* A twisted smile. *"Promise, boy, and the bargain will be sstruck."*

"I promise," whispered Harry.

WHAT? screamed other parts of his mind.

Um, he's still pointing a gun at us, pointed out Slytherin. *We don't actually have a choice, we're just getting as much mileage out of this as possible.*

You bastard, said Hufflepuff. Do you think this is what Hermione would have wanted? This is Lord Voldemort we're talking about, do we even know how many people he's killed, and will kill?

I deny that we are compromising with Lord Voldemort for Hermione's sake, said Slytherin. Since there is, in fact, a gun and we can't otherwise stop him. Also, Mum and Dad would want us to just go along and stay safe.

Professor Quirrell regarded him steadily. "Repeat the full promise in Parseltongue, boy."

"I shall help you obtain the Sstone... I cannot promise I will use my best efforts, my heart will not be in it, I fear. I intend to try. I shall not do anything I think will annoy you to no good end. I shall call no help if I expect them to be killed by you or for hostages to die. I'm sorry, teacher, but it is best I can do." Harry's mind was settling, composing itself, as the decision was made. He would stay with Professor Quirrell, go with him to get the Stone, save the student hostages, and... and... and Harry didn't know, except that he'd go on thinking.

"You actually are sorry about that?" Professor Quirrell looked amused. "I suppose it shall have to do. Then keep two other things in mind: *I have plan to stop even schoolmaster, if he appears before us.* And also this: I will occasionally ask you to say in Parseltongue whether you have betrayed me. *The bargain is struck.*"

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After that, Professor Sprout picked up Harry's wand, and wrapped it in shimmering cloth; then she placed it on the floor, and again pointed her wand at Harry. Only then did Professor Quirrell lower his gun, which seemed to disappear into his hand, and pick up Harry's wrapped wand, tucking it into his robes.

The True Cloak of Invisibility was removed from the sleeping form of Lesath Lestrage, and Professor Quirrell took the Cloak, as well as Harry's pouch and Time-Turner.

Then Professor Quirrell cast a mass Obliviation followed by the mass version of the False Memory Charm, the one that just had the subject fill in the blanks using their own suggestibility, on all the students present.

Afterwards Professor Sprout floated away the sleeping children, now wearing an expression that seemed annoyed and preoccupied, as if they'd been in some Herbology accident.

Professor Quirrell then turned back to where the Potions Master lay sprawled, bent over and placed his wand on Professor Snape's forehead. "*Alienis nervus mobile lignum.*"

The Defense Professor stepped back, and began to move his left fingers in the air as though manipulating a puppet on strings.

Professor Snape pushed himself up from the ground by smooth motions, and stood once more before the corridor door.

"*Alohomora,*" Professor Quirrell said, pointing his wand at the forbidden door. The Defense Professor looked rather amused. "Would you do the honors, boy?"

Harry swallowed. He was once again having second thoughts, and third thoughts.

It was strange how you could do something even while knowing it was the wrong thing, not the selfish thing but the *wrong thing to do* on some deeper level.

But the man behind him was holding the gun; it had once more appeared in his hand at Harry's hesitation.

Harry laid his hand on the door-knocker, and took several deep breaths, again composing his mind as best he could. Go through with it, don't get shot, don't let the hostages die, be there to optimize events, be there to watch for opportunities and stay capable of taking them. It wasn't a good choice, but all the other ones seemed worse.

Harry pushed open the forbidden door, and stepped through.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE TRUTH, PART III

After a single step into Dumbledore's forbidden chamber, Harry shrieked and jumped back and collided with Professor Snape, sending the two of them down in a heap.

Professor Snape picked himself up and resumed standing in front of the door. His head tracked to look at Harry. "I am guarding this door at the Headmaster's orders," said Professor Snape in his usual sardonic tones. "Be off with you at once, or I shall deduct House Points."

This was bone-chillingly creepy, but Harry's attention was occupied by the gigantic three-headed dog which had lunged forward, only to be stopped meters from Harry by the chains upon its three collars.

"That—that—that—" Harry said.

"Yes," Professor Quirrell said from a ways behind him, "that is indeed the usual occupant of that chamber, which is off-limits to all students, especially first-years."

"That's not safe even by wizard standards!" Within the chamber, the enormous black beast gave a multi-voiced bellow, flecks of white saliva flying from three fanged mouths.

Professor Quirrell sighed. "It is enchanted not to eat students, just spit them back out through the door. Now, boy, how would you recommend that we deal with this dangerous creature?"

"Uh," Harry stuttered, trying to think over the continued roaring of the chamber's guardian. "Uh. If it's like the Cerberus from the Muggle legend of Orpheus and Eurydice, then we have to sing it to sleep so we can pass—"

"Avada Kedavra."

The three-headed beast fell over.

Harry looked back at Professor Quirrell, who was giving him a look of extreme disappointment, as if to ask whether Harry had attended any of his classes, ever.

"I sort of *assumed*," Harry said, still trying to catch his breath, "that going through this challenge in any way except the one used by first-years, might perhaps trigger an *alarm*."

"That is a lie, boy, you simply did not remember your lessons when you faced the occasion in true life. As for alarms, I have spent months befuddling all the wards and tripsigns upon these chambers."

"Then why did you send me in first, exactly?"

Professor Quirrell just smiled. It looked significantly more evil than usual.

"Never mind," Harry said, and walked slowly into the chamber, his limbs still shaking.

The chamber was all of stone, illuminated by a pale blue light that shone from arched nooks carved into the wall; as if the light of a grey sky were passing through windows, though there were no windows. At the far end of the chamber was a wooden trapdoor upon the floor, with a single ring attached. In the middle of the chamber lay a gigantic dead dog with three lifeless heads.

Harry turned toward one of the arched nooks and looked inside it. There was nothing there but the sourceless blue glow, so he walked over and looked in the next one, also scrutinizing the wall as he passed.

"What," said Professor Quirrell, "are you doing?"

"Searching the room," Harry said. "There could be a clue, or an inscription, or a key we'll need later, or something—"

"Are you serious, or are you deliberately trying to slow us down? Answer in Parseltongue."

Harry looked back. "*Wass sseriouss*," hissed Harry. "*Would have done ssame if came by mysself*."

Professor Quirrell briefly massaged his forehead. "I confess," he said, "that your approach would serve you well in, say, exploring the tomb of Amon-Set, so I will not quite call you an idiot, but still. The false puzzle, the outer form of the challenge, is a game meant for first-years. We simply go down through the trapdoor."

Beneath the trapdoor was a gigantic plant, something like an enormous dieffenbachia with wide leaves emerging from the central stem like a spiral staircase, but darker-colored than a normal dieffenbachia, with tendril-like vines emerging from the central stem and hanging down. The base spread out wide with bigger leaves and tendrils, as though promising to cushion anyone's fall. Beneath was another stone chamber like the first, with the same nooks like false arched windows, emitting the same grey-blue light.

"The obvious thought is to fly down on the broomstick in my pouch, or toss something heavy to see if those tendrils are traps," Harry said, peering down. "But I'm guessing you'll say that we just walk down the leaves." They certainly looked like they were meant to be a spiral staircase.

"After you," said Professor Quirrell.

Harry carefully put a foot down on a leaf and found that it indeed supported his weight. Then Harry took a last look around the room before departing, to see if there was anything worth noticing.

The enormous dead dog called enough attention to itself that it was hard to focus on anything else.

"Professor Quirrell," Harry said, omitting the phrase *your approach to dealing with obstacles has certain drawbacks*, "what if somebody looks in the door and sees that the Cerberus is dead?"

"Then they have probably already noticed something wrong with Snape," said Professor Quirrell. "But since you insist..." The Defense Professor walked over to the three-headed corpse and placed his wand against it. He began a Latin-sounding incantation that was accompanied by a sense of rising apprehension, the Boy-Who-Lived feeling the Dark Lord's power as he always had.

The last word spoken was "*Inferius*" and it was accompanied by a final surge of *STOP, DON'T*.

And the three-headed dog rose to a stand, its six eyes dull and blank, turning to watch the door once more.

Harry stared at the huge Inferius with a horrible sinking sensation in his stomach, the third-worst feeling he'd ever felt in his life.

He knew then that he'd seen and sensed this procedure before, only without the spoken Latin.

The centaur who'd confronted him in the Forbidden Forest was dead. The Defense Professor had hit it with a real Avada Kedavra, not a fake one.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Harry had thought that if he could just get Hermione *back* then he could return to the code of nobody dying, the ethic of Batman. Most people went through their whole lives without anyone getting killed on whatever adventures they had.

And that was not to be.

He hadn't even noticed, the day he lost his last chance to win. Even if Hermione was resurrected, now, Harry wouldn't have come through the whole mess without anyone getting killed.

He hadn't even learned the centaur's name.

Harry said nothing aloud. The Defense Professor would either confirm the accusation in Parseltongue or lie in plain speech, and either way the Defense Professor would have more reason to suspect Harry's next actions. But Harry knew that—although he didn't know *how* he would stop Professor Quirrell, although he didn't dare any positive act of betrayal, maybe not even making the *decision*, until it was almost time to win—there would never be an amicable settlement between him and Lord Voldemort, for those two different spirits could not exist in the same world.

And it was like that resolution, that knowledge of opposition, invoked a strength from what Harry had thought of as his dark side. Harry had stopped trying to call deliberately on his dark side after the day he'd killed the troll. But his dark side had never been something separate from him. It had been something remembered from Tom Riddle. Harry didn't know how that had happened, but taking the assumption and running with it, whatever echoes of cognitive skill were in his dark side should be there for him to use. Not as a separate mode, as Harry had conceptualized at first, but just as neural patterns with a strong tendency to chain into one another since they had once formed part of a connected whole.

This unfortunately did not change that Professor Quirrell had the same skills with far more life experience backing them up, and also had the gun.

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THE TRUTH III

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Harry turned, and set foot on the giant plant, and began to walk down the spiral staircase provided by the leaves. It had taken Harry too long this time, but he'd recovered himself to some degree, despite the grief still weighing him down like thick water. It wasn't a cold steel rod in his spine, but it was something straight and solid nonetheless. He was going to play this through, see Hermione returned to life first, and then, somehow, stop Professor Quirrell. Or stop Professor Quirrell first and then get the Stone himself. There had to be something, some possibility, some opportunity that would present itself, some way to stop Voldemort *and* return Hermione to life...

Harry continued his descent.

Behind him, the three-headed dog waited, guarding the gate.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE TRUTH, PART IV

The spiraling leaves of the gigantic dieffenbachia felt like forest loam beneath Harry's shoes, not as unyielding as concrete, but supporting his weight. Harry kept a wary eye on the tendrils, but they remained passive.

When Harry reached the bottom of the leafy spiral staircase, the tendrils suddenly whipped out and grasped Harry's arms and legs.

After a brief struggle, Harry allowed himself to go limp.

"Interesting," said Professor Quirrell, as he floated down from above, not touching any of the plant's leaves or tendrils. "I notice that you seem to have no trouble losing to a plant."

Harry looked more closely at the Defense Professor, seeing him now without the lens of panic. Professor Quirrell was upright and moving, flying without apparent difficulty; the sense of doom about him was strong. But his eyes were still sunken in the skull, his arms thin and wasted. The sickness had *not* been bluff, and the obvious hypothesis was that the Defense Professor had recently eaten another unicorn to temporarily regain some strength.

And the Defense Professor was also speaking like the mask of Professor Quirrell, not like Lord Voldemort, which might not be a bad thing from Harry's perspective. Harry didn't know why—unless it was that the Defense Professor still needed him for something—but it certainly seemed to be in Harry's own interests to play along.

"You specifically let me walk into this trap, Professor," Harry answered, just the way he'd have spoken to Professor Quirrell. *Roles, masks, remind him of how it was between us...* "On my own, I'd have used my broomstick."

“Perhaps. How would an ordinary first-year solve this challenge? If they had their wand, that is.” The plant was now reaching tendrils out toward Professor Quirrell, but Professor Quirrell was hovering just out of their reach.

Harry had now remembered Professor Sprout talking about a Devil’s Snare plant, which the Herbology textbook had said liked cool, dark places like caves—though how that could be true of a leafy plant was anyone’s guess. “At a guess, I’d say this is a Devil’s Snare plant and it might retreat from light or heat. So maybe a first-year could use Lumos? Today I’d use *Inflammare*, but I didn’t learn that spell until May.”

A twirl of the Defense Professor’s wand, and a pattern of sprays of liquid shot out from it, striking the plant near the bases of its tendrils, hitting with a quiet splat and then a quiet hissing. All the tendrils touching Harry frantically shot back and began to beat at the growing wounds appearing on the plant’s skin, as if trying to remove the pain-stimulus; something about the plant gave the impression that it was screaming soundlessly.

Professor Quirrell finished drifting downward. “Now it is afraid of light, heat, acid, and me.”

Harry stepped off the final leaves onto the floor, after a careful glance at his robes and then the floor to make sure that none of the acid had splashed anywhere. Harry had begun to suspect that Professor Quirrell was trying to make some sort of point, but Harry did not know what that point might be. “I thought we were on a mission, Professor. I can’t stop you, but is it *smart* to spend this much time on messing with me?”

“Oh, we have time,” said Professor Quirrell, sounding amused. “There would be a great uproar if we were discovered here, guarded by an Inferius. You did not act like you had heard of such an uproar at your Quidditch match, before you arrived in this time and spoke to Snape as you did.”

A slight chill came over Harry, as he comprehended this. Anything he did to beat Professor Quirrell would have to *not* disrupt the school, or at least the Quidditch game, because it *hadn’t* disrupted the Quidditch game. Even if enough forces could be called in to subdue Lord Voldemort, it might not be easy to do it without Professor McGonagall or Professor

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THE TRUTH IV

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Flitwick or anyone else at the Quidditch game noticing...

Fighting a smart enemy was hard.

And even so... even so it seemed to Harry that if he stood in Professor Quirrell's shoes, he would not be having leisurely conversations and playing mind games. Professor Quirrell was gaining *something* by taking his time here. But what? Was there some other process that had to run to completion?

"By the by, have you betrayed me yet?" said Professor Quirrell.

"*Have not betrayed you yet,*" Harry hissed.

The Defense Professor gestured pointedly with the gun he was now holding in his left hand, and Harry walked ahead to the great wooden door at the end of the room, and opened it.

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The next chamber was smaller in diameter, with a higher ceiling. The light shining out of the arched alcoves was white, instead of blue.

Around them whizzed hundreds of winged keys, beating frantically through the air. After watching for a few seconds, it became clear that only a single key was the golden color of a Snitch—though it was moving slower than a Snitch in a real Quidditch game.

On the other end of the room was a door containing a large, prominent keyhole.

Against the left wall leaned a broomstick, the school's workhorse Cleansweep Seven.

"Professor," Harry said, staring up at the clouds and flocks of whizzing keys, "you said you would answer my questions. What exactly is all this about? If you think you've secured a door so that it won't open without a key, you keep the key in a safe place and only give a copy to authorized entrants. You don't *give the key wings* and then *leave a broomstick propped against the wall*. So what the heck are we doing in here and what is going on? It's an obvious guess that the magic mirror is the only real factor guarding the Stone, but why the rest of this—and why encourage first-years to come here?"

"I am truly not sure," said the Defense Professor. He had entered the room and taken up station well to Harry's right, maintaining the distance between them. "But I shall answer, as I said I would. Dumbledore's way is to do a dozen things which seem mad, and then only eight of them, or perhaps nine, conceal an inner meaning. My guess is that Dumbledore intends to make it seem like I am invited to send a student as my proxy. Precisely so that Lord Voldemort, as Dumbledore conceives of him, is less tempted to think himself clever by doing so. Imagine Dumbledore first considering the issue of how to ward the Stone. Imagine Dumbledore considering whether to set true dangers to guard the Mirror. Imagine him imagining some young student blundering through those dangers at my behest. I think that is what Dumbledore is trying to avoid, by making it seem as though that strategy is invited, and so not cunning. Unless, of course, I have misunderstood what Dumbledore thinks Lord Voldemort will think." Professor Quirrell grinned, and it looked just as natural, on him, as any grin he'd shown Harry before. "Plotting does not come naturally to Dumbledore, but he tries because he must. To that task Dumbledore brings intelligence, dedication, the ability to learn from his mistakes, and an utter lack of native talent. He is marvelously hard to predict for that reason alone."

Harry turned away, looking at the door on the opposite side of the room. *It wasn't a game to him, Professor.* "My guess is that the intended solution for first-years is to ignore the broomstick and use *Wingardium Leviosa* to grab the key, since this isn't a Quidditch game and there are no rules forbidding that. So what absurdly overpowered spell are you going to unleash on this one, then?"

There was a brief silence but for the whizzing of keys.

Harry took several steps away from Professor Quirrell. "I probably shouldn't have said that, should I."

"Oh, no," Professor Quirrell said. "I think that is a quite reasonable thing to say to the most powerful Dark Wizard in the world when he is standing not a dozen paces from you."

Professor Quirrell put his wand back into the sleeve of his other hand, the hand that sometimes held the gun.

Then the Defense Professor reached into his mouth and took out what

appeared to be a tooth. He tossed the false tooth high in the air, and when it came down, it had transformed into a wand that sparked a strange sense of recognition in Harry's mind, as though some part of him recognized that wand as being... part of him...

Thirteen and a half inches, yew, with a core of phoenix feather. Harry had memorized the information when the wandmaker Olli-something had given it, because it had seemed like it might be Plot-Relevant. The event, and the thinking that had underlain it, both felt a lifetime distant.

The Defense Professor raised that wand, and traced in the air a flaming rune that was all jagged edges and malevolence; Harry took another instinctive step back. Then Professor Quirrell spoke. "Az-reth. Az-reth. Az-reth."

The flaming rune began pouring out fire that was... *twisted*, as though the jagged edges of the rune had become the nature of the fire itself. The fire was blazing crimson, shaded further red than blood, glowing as searingly intense as an arc-welder. That brilliance in that shade seemed *wrong* in its own right, like nothing shaded so far red should give off that much light; and the searing crimson was shot through with veins of black that seemed to suck the light from the fire. Within the blackened fire, outlined in the interplay of crimson and darkness, animal shapes twisted wildly from one predator to another, cobra to hyena to scorpion.

"Az-reth. Az-reth. Az-reth." When Professor Quirrell had repeated the word six times, as much black-crimson fire had poured out as the volume of a small bush.

The cursed fire slowed in its changes as Professor Quirrell locked eyes upon it, taking on a single form, the form of a blackened blood-burning phoenix.

And something told Harry with a terrible certainty that if that black burning phoenix met Fawkes, the true phoenix would die and never be reborn.

Professor Quirrell made a single gesture with his wand, and the blackened fire went soaring across the room. It met the door and its keyhole, and with a single sweep of crimson-burning wings, most of the door and part of the archway was consumed. Then the tainted crimson blaze swept on.

Harry had only a glance through the hole to see huge statues just beginning to raise swords and clubs, when the blackened fire came among them, and they cracked and burned.

When it ended, the blackened-fire phoenix swept back in through the hole, and hovered above Professor Quirrell's left shoulder, the sun-intense crimson claws staying an inch from his robes.

"Go on ahead," said Professor Quirrell. "It's safe now."

Harry walked forward, needing to invoke his dark side's cognitive patterns in order to maintain calm enough to do it. Harry stepped over the glowing edges of the remaining part of the door, and gazed at a chessboard of ruined huge chess-pieces. The alternating tiles of black and white marble on the floor started five meters after the ruined doorway, and extended from wall to wall, but stopped five meters short of the next door on the opposite side of the room. The ceiling was significantly higher than any of the statues should have been able to reach.

"I would guess," Harry said, and his dark side's cognitive patterns kept his voice calm, "that the intended solution is to fly over the statues using the broomstick from the previous room, since it wasn't actually needed to get the key?"

From behind, Professor Quirrell laughed, and it was Lord Voldemort's laugh. "Proceed," said a voice grown colder and higher. "Go to the next room. I wish to see what you will make of what is there."

Arranged by Dumbledore for first-years, Harry reminded himself, *it WILL be safe*, and he walked across the ruined chessboard, laid his hand upon that door's handle, and pushed it inward.

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Half a second later, Harry slammed the door and leapt back.

It took Harry several seconds to master his breathing, and master himself. From behind the door came continued loud bellows, and great slams as of a rock club pounding the floor.

"I suppose," Harry said in a voice grown cold as well, "that since Dumbledore would hardly put a real mountain troll in there, the next challenge

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THE TRUTH IV

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is an illusion of my worst memories. Like a Dementor, with the memory projected into the outside world. Very amusing, Professor.”

Professor Quirrell advanced himself toward the door, and Harry stepped well aside. Besides the sense of doom that was now strong about the Professor, Harry’s dark side or just plain instinct was advising him not to get anywhere near that black-crimson fire hovering above Professor Quirrell’s shoulder.

Professor Quirrell swung open the door, and looked in. “Hm,” Professor Quirrell said. “Just the troll, as you say. Ah, well. I had hoped to learn something about you more interesting than that. What lies within is a *Kokorhekkus*, also known as the common boggart.”

“A boggart? What does that—no, I suppose I know what it does.”

“A boggart,” Professor Quirrell said, and now his voice was again that of a Hogwarts Professor lecturing, “gravitates to dark enclosures that are rarely opened, such as a neglected cupboard in the attic. It seeks to be left alone, and it will manifest in whatever form it thinks will scare you away.”

“Scare me away?” Harry said. “I *killed* the troll.”

“You leapt backward out of the room without thinking. A boggart seeks out the instinctive flinch, not the reasoned threat. Else it would have selected something more believable. In any case, the standard counter-Charm for a boggart is, of course, *Fiendfyre*.” Professor Quirrell gestured, and the blackened fire leapt off his shoulder and poured through the doorway.

From within the room there was a single squeak, and then nothing.

They advanced into the boggart’s former room, Professor Quirrell going first this time. With the seeming mountain troll gone, the room was just another huge chamber lit by sconces of cold blue light.

Professor Quirrell’s gaze seemed distant, thoughtful. He crossed the room without waiting for Harry, and swung open the door on the opposite wall of his own accord.

Harry followed after, and not closely.

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The next chamber contained a cauldron, a rack of bottled ingredients, chopping boards, stirring sticks, and the other apparatus of Potions. The light coming from the arched alcoves was white instead of blue, presumably because color vision was important to Potions-brewing. Professor Quirrell was already standing next to the brewing apparatus, scrutinizing a long parchment he had picked up. The door to the next chamber was guarded by a curtain of purple fire that would have looked a lot more threatening, if it hadn't seemed pale and weak by comparison to the blackened flame hovering over Professor Quirrell's shoulder.

Harry's suspension of disbelief had already checked out on vacation at this point, so he didn't say anything about how real-world security systems had the goal of *distinguishing* authorized from unauthorized personnel, which meant issuing challenges that behaved *differently* around people who were or weren't supposed to be there. For example, a *good* security challenge would be testing whether the entrant knew a lock combination that only authorized people had been told, and a *bad* security challenge would be testing whether the entrant could brew a potion according to written instructions that had been helpfully included.

Professor Quirrell tossed the parchment toward Harry, and it flutered to the ground between them. "What do you make of this?" said Professor Quirrell, who then stepped back so that Harry could come forward and pick up the parchment.

"Nope," Harry said after skimming the parchment. "Testing whether the entrant can solve a ridiculously straightforward logic puzzle about the order of the ingredients is still not a challenge that behaves differently for authorized and unauthorized personnel. It doesn't matter if you use a more interesting logic puzzle about three idols or a line of people wearing colored hats, you're still completely missing the point."

"Look at the other side," said Professor Quirrell.

Harry turned over the two-foot parchment.

On the other side, written in tiny letters, was the *longest* list of brewing instructions Harry had ever seen. "What on Earth—"

"A *potion of effulgence*, to quench the purple fire," Professor Quirrell said. "It is made by adding the same ingredients, over and over again, in slightly different ways. Imagine some eager young group of first-years,

passing all the other chambers, thinking they are just about to reach the magic mirror, and then encountering this task. This room is the handiwork of the Potions Master indeed.”

Harry glanced pointedly at the blackfire shape on Professor Quirrell’s shoulder. “Fire can’t beat fire?”

“It can,” said Professor Quirrell. “I am not sure it should. Suppose this room is trapped?”

Harry did *not* want to be stuck brewing this potion for laughs, or for whatever other reason Professor Quirrell was taking them through these chambers so slowly. The potions recipe had *thirty-five* separate occasions for adding bellflowers, fourteen times to add ‘a lock of bright hair’... “Maybe the potion gives off a lethal gas that is fatal to adult wizards but not children. Or any of a hundred other deadly tricks, if we’re suddenly being serious. Are we being serious?”

“This room is the handiwork of Severus Snape,” Professor Quirrell said, once more looking thoughtful. “Snape is not a bystander in this game, not quite. He lacks Dumbledore’s intelligence, but possesses the killing intent that Dumbledore never had.”

“Well, whatever’s going on here, it doesn’t actually keep out children,” Harry observed. “Lots of first-years made it through. And if you can somehow keep out everyone *except* children, then that, from Dumbledore’s perspective, forces Lord Voldemort to possess a child to enter. I don’t see the point, given their goals.”

“Indeed,” Professor Quirrell said, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “But see, boy, this room lacks the triggers and trip signs that are upon the others. There are no subtle wards to be defeated. It is as if I am *invited* to bypass the Potion and simply enter—but Snape knows that Lord Voldemort will perceive this. If in fact there was a trap laid for anyone who did not brew the potion, then it would be wiser to lay wards, and give no sign that this room was different from the others.”

Harry listened, frowning in concentration. “So... the only point of leaving off the detection webs is to make you *not* bulldoze this room.”

“I expect Snape expects me to deduce that as well,” the Defense Professor said. “And past that point I cannot predict at what level he thinks I will play. I am patient, and I have given myself plenty of time for this en-

deavor. But Snape does not know me, he only knows Lord Voldemort. He has sometimes seen Lord Voldemort shriek in frustration, and act on impulses that appear counterproductive. Consider this matter from Snape's perspective: it is the Potions Master of Hogwarts telling Lord Voldemort to be patient and follow instructions if he wants to enter, as though Lord Voldemort were a mere schoolboy. I would find it easy to comply, smiling the while, and take my vengeance later. But Snape does not know that Lord Voldemort finds it easy to think this way." Professor Quirrell looked at Harry. "Boy, you saw me floating in the air by the Devil's Snare, did you not?"

Harry nodded. Then he noticed his confusion. "My Charms textbook says that it's impossible for wizards to levitate themselves."

"Yes," said Professor Quirrell, "that is what it says in your Charms textbook. No wizard may levitate themselves, or any object supporting their own weight; it is like trying to lift yourself up by your own bootstraps. Yet Lord Voldemort alone can fly—how? Answer as quickly as you can."

If the question was answerable by a first-year student— "You had someone else cast broomstick enchantments on your underwear, then you Obliviated them."

"Not quite," said Professor Quirrell. "The broomstick enchantments require a long narrow shape, which must be solid. Cloth will not do."

Harry's eyebrows furrowed. "How long does the shape have to be? Can you attach some short broomstick rods to a fabric harness, and fly using those?"

"Indeed, at first I strapped enchanted rods to my arms and legs, but that was only to teach myself a new mode of flight." Professor Quirrell drew back the sleeve of his robes, revealing the bare arm. "As you can see, I have nothing up my sleeve right now."

Harry absorbed this further constraint. "You had someone cast broomstick enchantments on your *bones*?"

Professor Quirrell sighed. "And that was one of Voldemort's most feared feats, or so I am told. After all these years, and some amount of reluctant Legilimency, I still do not truly comprehend what is *wrong* with ordinary people... But you are not one of them. It is time for you to begin

contributing to this expedition. You have known Severus Snape more recently than I. Tell me your own analysis of this room.”

Harry hesitated, trying to look thoughtful.

“I will mention,” said Professor Quirrell, as the blackened-fire-phoenix on his shoulder seemed to extend its head and glare at Harry, “that if you knowingly allow me to fail, I will call it betrayal. I remind you that the Stone is key to Miss Granger’s resurrection, and that I hold hostage the lives of hundreds of students.”

“I remember,” Harry said, and on the heels of this Harry’s wonderful inventive brain came up with a thought.

Harry wasn’t sure if he should say it.

The silence stretched.

“Have you thought of anything yet?” said Professor Quirrell. “Answer in Parseltongue.”

No, this was *not* going to be easy, not against a smart opponent who could force you to tell the literal truth at any time. “Severus, at least the modern-day Severus, respects your intelligence a great deal,” Harry said instead. “I think... I think he might *expect* Voldemort to believe that Severus wouldn’t believe that Voldemort could pass his test of patience, but Severus *would* expect Voldemort to pass it.”

Professor Quirrell nodded. “That is a plausible theory. Do you believe it yourself? Answer in Parseltongue.”

“Yess,” Harry hissed. It might not be safe to withhold information, not even thoughts and ideas... “Therefore, the point of this room is to delay Lord Voldemort for an hour. And if I wanted to kill you, believing what Dumbledore believes, the obvious thing to try would be a Dementor’s Kiss. I mean, they think you’re a disembodied soul—are you, by the way?”

Professor Quirrell was still. “Dumbledore would not think of that method,” the Defense Professor said after a time. “But Severus might.” Professor Quirrell began to tap a finger against his cheek, his gaze distant. “You have power over Dementors, boy, can you tell me if there are any nearby?”

Harry closed his eyes. If there were voids in the world, he could not feel them. “None that I can sense.”

“Answer in Parseltongue.”

"Do not ssense life-eaterss."

"But you were being honest with me when you suggested the possibility? You intended no clever trickery?"

"Wass honesst. Not trick."

"Perhaps there is some means by which Dementors might be concealed, being told to leap out and eat a possessing soul if they see one..." Professor Quirrell was still tapping his cheek. "It is not impossible that I would qualify. Or it can be told to eat anyone who passes through this room too quickly, or anyone who is not a child. Bearing in mind that I hold Hermione and hundreds of other students hostage over you, would you use your power over Dementors to defend me, if a Dementor unmasked itself? Answer in Parseltongue."

"Don't know," Harry hissed.

"Life-eaterss cannot desstroy me, I think," hissed Professor Quirrell. *"And I willssimply abandon thiss body if they approach too closse. Sshall return sswiftly thiss time, and then there will be no sstopping me. Will torture your parentss for yearss, to punissh you for balking me. Hundredss of hosstage sstudentss die, including thosse you call friendss. Now I assk again. Will you usse power over life-eaterss to protect me, if life-eaterss come?"*

"Yess," Harry whispered. The sadness and horror that Harry had pushed down flared up again, and his dark side had no stored patterns for handling the emotions. *Why, Professor Quirrell, why are you like this...*

Professor Quirrell smiled. "That reminds me. Have you betrayed me yet?"

"Have not betrayed you yet."

Professor Quirrell went over to the Potions equipment, and began chopping a root one-handed, the knife moving almost invisibly fast and with no apparent effort. The Fiendfyre phoenix drifted over to the opposite corner of the room and waited there. "All matters considered in their uncertainty, it seems wiser to expend the time to pass this room as a first-year would," said the Defense Professor. "We may as well talk while we are waiting. You had questions, boy? I said that I would answer them, so ask."

CHAPTER NINE

THE TRUTH, PART V: ANSWERS AND RIDDLES

The Defense Professor had set up a cauldron, floating it into place with a wave of his wand, another wave starting a fire beneath it. A brief circling of the Defense Professor's finger had set in motion a long-handled spoon, and it had continued stirring the cauldron without being held. Now the Defense Professor was measuring out a heap of flowers from a large jar, what Harry supposed to be bellflowers; the indigo petals seemed luminous in the white light of the walls, and curved inward in a way that gave the impression of a desire for privacy. The first of these flowers had been added to the potion at once, but then the cauldron had just gone on stirring itself for a while.

The Defense Professor had assumed a position from which he could see Harry just by turning his head slightly, and Harry knew that he was within the Defense Professor's peripheral vision.

In the corner a Fiendfyre phoenix waited, some of the nearby stone beginning to gloss over as it melted to greater smoothness. The burning wings shed crimson light that gave everything in the room a tint of blood, and reflected in scarlet sparks from the glassware.

"Time is wasting," said Professor Quirrell. "Ask your questions, if you have them."

Why, Professor Quirrell, why, why must you be this way, why make yourself the monster, why Lord Voldemort, I know you might not want the same things I do, but I can't imagine what you want that makes this the best way to get it...

That was what Harry's brain wanted to know.

What Harry *needed* to know was... some way out of what was going to happen next. But the Defense Professor had said that he wouldn't talk about his future plans. It was strange enough that the Defense Professor was willing to talk about *anything*, that had to contradict one of his Rules...

"I'm thinking," Harry said aloud.

Professor Quirrell smiled slightly. He was using a pestle to grind the potion's first magical ingredient, a glowing red hexagon. "I *quite* understand," said the Defense Professor. "But do not think over-long, child."

Goals: Prevent Lord Voldemort from harming people, find a way to kill or neutralise him, but first get the Stone and resurrect Hermione...

...convince Professor Quirrell to STOP THIS...

Harry swallowed, pushing down the emotion, trying not to let the water reach his eyes. Tears probably wouldn't make a good impression on Lord Voldemort. Professor Quirrell was already frowning, though from the direction of his gaze he was examining a leaf colored in vivid shades of white, green, and purple.

There wasn't any obvious way to reach any of the goals, not yet. All Harry could do was ask the questions that seemed most likely to provide useful information, even if Harry didn't yet have a plan.

So we just ask about whatever seems most interesting? said Harry's Ravenclaw side. *I'm up for that.*

Shut up, Harry told the voice; and then, on further reflection, decided that he was no longer pretending it was there.

Four topics came to Harry's mind as being priorities from the standpoint of curiosity about important things. Four questions, then, four major subjects, to try to fit in while this potion was still being brewed.

Four questions...

"I ask my first question," Harry said. "What really happened on the night of October 31st, 1981?" *Why was that night different from all other nights...* "I would like the entire story, please."

The question of how and why Lord Voldemort had survived his apparent death seemed likely to matter for future planning.

"I expected you would ask that," Professor Quirrell said, dropping a bellflower and a white glittering stone into the potion. "To begin, every-

thing I told you about the horcrux spell is true; as you should realise, since I spoke in Parseltongue.”

Harry nodded.

“Within seconds after you learned the details of the spell, you perceived the central flaw, and began pondering how the spell might be improved. Do you think the young Tom Riddle was any different?”

Harry shook his head.

“Well, he was,” said Professor Quirrell. “Whenever I was tempted to despair of you, I reminded myself how I was an idiot at twice your age. When I was fifteen I made myself a horcrux as a certain book had shown me, using the death of Abigail Myrtle beneath the eyes of Slytherin’s basilisk. I planned to make a new horcrux every year after I left Hogwarts, and call that my fallback plan if my other hopes of immortality did not come to fruition. In retrospect, the young Tom Riddle was grasping straws. The thought of making a *better* horcrux, of not being content with the spell I had already learned... this thought did not come to me until I had grasped the stupidity of ordinary people, and realised which follies of theirs I had imitated. But in time I learned the habit that you inherited from me, to ask in every instance how it might be done better. To be content with the spell I had learned from a book, when it bore only a faint resemblance to what I truly wanted? Absurd! And so I set forth to create a better spell.”

“You have true immortality, now?” Harry was aware that, even with everything else going on, this was a question more important than war and strategy.

“Indeed,” said Professor Quirrell. He paused in his Potions work and turned to face Harry fully; there was a look of exultation in the man’s eyes that Harry had never seen there before. “In all the Darkest Arts I could find, in all the interdicted secrets to which Slytherin’s Monster gave me keys, in all the lore remembered among wizardkind, I found only hints and smatterings of what I needed. So I reweave it and remade it, and devised a new ritual based on new principles. I kept that ritual burning in my mind for years, perfecting it in imagination, pondering its meaning and making fine adjustments, waiting for the intention to stabilise. At last I dared to invoke my ritual, an invented sacrificial ritual, based on a

principle untested by all known magic. And I lived, and yet live.” The Defense Professor spoke with quiet triumph, as though the act itself was so great that no words could ever do it justice. “I still use the word ‘horcrux’, but only from sentiment. It is a new thing entirely, the greatest of all my creations.”

“As one of my questions you said you’d answer, I ask how to cast that spell,” Harry said.

“Denied.” The Defense Professor turned back to his potion, dropping in a gray-flecked white feather and a bellflower. “I had thought perhaps to teach you when you were older, for no Tom Riddle would be content otherwise; but I have changed my mind.”

Memory is a hard thing to recall, sometimes, and Harry had been trying to remember if Professor Quirrell had dropped any hints about this subject before. Something about Professor Quirrell’s phrasing sparked a memory: *Perhaps you will be told when you are older...*

“There are still physical anchors for your immortality,” Harry said aloud. “It resembles the old horcrux spell by that much, which is another reason you still call them horcruxes.” It was dangerous to say aloud, but Harry needed to *know*. “If I’m wrong, you can always deny it in Parseltongue.”

Professor Quirrell was smiling evilly. “*Your guesss iss right, boy, for all the good it doess you.*”

Unfortunately, that wasn’t a difficult vulnerability to cover if the Enemy was smart. Harry wouldn’t ordinarily have made the suggestion, just in case the Enemy *hadn’t* thought of it for themselves, but in this case he’d already made it. “One horcrux dropped into an active volcano, weighted so it would sink into the Earth’s mantle,” Harry said heavily. “The same place I thought of dropping the Dementor if I couldn’t destroy it. And then you asked me where else I would hide something if I didn’t want anyone to find it ever again. One horcrux buried kilometers down, in an anonymous cubic meter of the Earth’s crust. One horcrux you dropped into the Mariana Trench. One horcrux floating high in the stratosphere, transparent. Even you don’t know where they are, because you Obliviated the exact details from your memory. And the last horcrux is the Pioneer 11 plaque that you snuck into NASA and modified. It’s where you get your

image of the stars, when you cast the spell of starlight. Fire, earth, water, air, void." *Something of a riddle*, the Defense Professor had called it, and therefore Harry had remembered it. *Something of a Riddle*.

"Indeed," said the Defense Professor. "It did give me something of a shock when you remembered it that quickly, but I suppose it makes no difference; all five are beyond my reach, or yours."

That might not be true, especially if there was some way to trace the magical connection somehow and determine the location... though presumably Voldemort would have done his best to obscure it... but what magic had done, magic might be able to defeat. Pioneer 11 might be far away by wizard standards, but NASA knew exactly where it was, and it was probably a lot more reachable if you could use magic to tell the Tsiolkovsky rocket equation to bugger off...

A sudden note of worry plucked at Harry's mind. There was no rule saying the Defense Professor needed to have told the truth about *which* interstellar probe he'd horcruxed, and if Harry recalled correctly, communication and tracking of the Pioneer 10 probe had been lost shortly after the Jupiter fly-by.

Why wouldn't Professor Quirrell have just horcruxed them both?

The obvious next thought came to Harry. It was something that ought not to be suggested, if the Enemy had not thought of it. But it seemed extremely probable that the Enemy had thought of it.

"Tell me, teacher," Harry hissed, "*would desstroying thosse five anchors sslay you?*"

"*Why do you assk?*" hissed the Defense Professor, with a lilt to the hiss that Parseltongue translated as snakish amusement. "*Do you ssuspect that ansswer is no?*"

Harry couldn't think of how to answer, though he strongly suspected that it didn't matter in any case.

"*Your ssuspicion iss right, boy. Desstroying thosse five would not render me mortal.*"

Harry's throat felt a bit dry again. If the spell had no disastrous cost associated with it... "*How many anchorss did you make?*"

"*Would not ordinarily ssay, but iss clear you have already guessed.*" The Defense Professor's smile widened. "*Ansswer iss that I do not know. Sstopped*

counting somewhere around one hundred and seven. Simply made a habit of it each time I murdered someone in private."

Over one hundred murders, in private, before Lord Voldemort had stopped counting. And even worse news—"Your immortality spell still requires a human death? Why?"

"Great creation maintains life and magic within devices created by sacrificing life and magic of others." Again that hissing snake laughter. "Liked false description of previous horcrux spell so much, so disappointed when realised truth of it, thought of improved version came out in that shape."

Harry wasn't sure why the Defense Professor was giving him all this vital information, *but there had to be a reason*, and that was making him nervous. "So you really are a disembodied spirit possessing Quirinus Quirrell."

"Yess. I shall return swiftly, if this body is killed. Will be greatly annoyed, and vengeful. I am telling you this, boy, so that you do not try anything stupid."

"I understand," Harry said. He did his best to organize his thoughts, remember what he'd meant to ask next, while the Defense Professor turned his eyes back to the potion. The man's left hand was dribbling crushed seashell into the cauldron, while his right hand dropped in another bellflower. "So what did happen on October 31st? You... tried to turn the baby Harry Potter into a horcrux, either the new kind or the old kind. You did it deliberately, because you told Lily Potter," Harry took a breath. Now that he knew *why* the chills were there, he could endure them. "Very well, I accept the bargain. Yourself to die, and the child to live. Now drop your wand so that I can murder you." In retrospect, it was clear that Harry had remembered that event mainly from Lord Voldemort's perspective, and only at the very end had he seen it through the baby Harry Potter's eyes. "What did you do? Why did you do it?"

"Trelawney's prophecy," Professor Quirrell said. His hand tapped a bellflower with a strip of copper before dropping it in. "I spent long days pondering it, after Snape brought the prophecy to me. Prophecies are never trivial things. And how shall I put this in a way that does not make you think stupid things... well, I shall say it, and if you are stupid I shall be annoyed. I was fascinated by the prophecy's assertion that someone would be my equal, because it might mean that person could hold up the

other end of an intelligent conversation. After fifty years of being surrounded by gibbering stupidity, I no longer cared whether my reaction might be considered a literary cliché. I was not about to pass up on that opportunity without thinking about it first. And then, you see, I had a *clever idea*." Professor Quirrell sighed. "It occurred to me how I might fulfill the Prophecy my own way, to my own benefit. I would mark the baby as my equal by casting the old horcrux spell in such fashion as to imprint my own spirit onto the baby's blank slate; it would be a purer copy of myself, since there would be no old self to mix with the new. In some years, when I had become bored with ruling Britain and moved on to other things, I would arrange with the other Tom Riddle that he should appear to vanquish me, and he would rule over the Britain he had saved. We would play the game against each other forever, keeping our lives interesting amid a world of fools. I knew a dramatist would predict that the two of us would end by destroying each other; but I pondered long upon it, and decided that both of us would simply decline to play out the drama. That was my decision and I was confident that it would remain so; both Tom Riddles, I thought, would be too intelligent to truly go down that road. The prophecy seemed to hint that if I destroyed all but a remnant of Harry Potter, then our spirits would not be so different, and we could exist in the same world."

"Something went wrong," Harry said. "Something that blew off the top of the Potters' home in Godric's Hollow, gave me the scar on my forehead, and left your burnt body behind."

Professor Quirrell nodded. His hands had slowed in their Potions work. "The resonance in our magic," Professor Quirrell said quietly. "When I had shaped the baby's spirit to be like my own..."

Harry remembered the moment in Azkaban when Professor Quirrell's Killing Curse had collided with his Patronus. The burning, tearing agony in his forehead, like his head had been about to split in half.

"I cannot count how many times I have thought of that night, rehearsing my mistake, thinking of wiser things I should have done," said Professor Quirrell. "I later decided that I should have thrown my wand from my hand and changed into my Animagus form. But that night... that night, I instinctively tried to control the chaotic fluctuations in my magic, even

as I felt myself burning up from inside. That was the wrong decision, and I failed. So my body was destroyed, even as I overwrote the infant Harry Potter's mind; *either* of us destroying all but a remnant of the other. And then..." Professor Quirrell's expression was controlled. "And then, when I regained consciousness inside my horcruxes, it turned out that my great creation did not work as I had hoped. I should have been able to float free of my horcruxes and possess any victim that consented to me, or that was too weak to refuse me. *That* was the part of my great creation that failed my intent. As with the original horcrux spell, I would only be able to enter a victim who contacted the physical horcrux... and I had hidden my unnumbered horcruxes in places where nobody would ever find them. Your instinct is correct, boy, *this would not be a good time to laugh.*"

Harry stayed very quiet.

The Potions-making had come to a temporary pause, a space where no ingredients were added while the cauldron simmered for a time. "I spent most of my time looking at the stars," Professor Quirrell said, his voice quieter now. The Defense Professor had turned from the potion, staring at the white-illuminated walls of the room. "My remaining hope was the horcruxes I had hidden in the hopeless idiocy of my youth. Imbuing them into ancient lockets, instead of anonymous pebbles; guarding them beneath wells of poison in the center of a lake of Inferi, instead of portkeying them into the sea. If someone found one of those, and penetrated their ridiculous protections... but that seemed like a distant hope. I was not sure I would ever be embodied again. Yet at least I was immortal. The worst of all fates had been averted, my great creation had done that much. I had little left to hope for, and little left to fear. I decided that I would not go insane, since there seemed to be no advantage in it. Instead, I gazed out at the stars and thought, as the Sun slowly diminished behind me. I reflected on the errors of my past life; they were many, in that hindsight. In my imagination I constructed powerful new rituals I might attempt, if I was free to use my magic once more, and yet confident of my immortality. I contemplated ancient riddles at greater length than before, for all that I had once thought myself patient. I knew that if I won free, I would be more powerful by far than in my previous life; but I mostly did not expect that to happen." Professor Quirrell turned back

to the potion. "Nine years and four months after that night, a wandering adventurer named Quirinus Quirrell won past the protections guarding one of my earliest horcruxes. The rest you know. And now, boy, you may say what we both know you are thinking."

"Um," Harry said. "It doesn't seem like a very smart thing to say—"

"Indeed, Mr. Potter. It is not a clever thing to say to me. Not even a little. Not in the slightest. But I *know you're thinking it*, and you will *go on thinking it* and I will *go on knowing that* until you say it. So speak."

"So. Um. I realise that this is something that is more obvious in hindsight than in foresight, and I'm certainly not suggesting that you try to correct the error now, but if you are a Dark Lord and you happen to hear about a child who has been prophesied to defeat you, there is a certain spell which is unblockable, unstoppable, and works every single time on anything with a brain—"

"*Yes thank you Mr. Potter that thought occurred to me several times over the next nine years.*" Professor Quirrell picked up another bellflower and began crumbling it in his bare fist. "I made that principle the centerpiece of my Battle Magic curriculum after I learned its centrality the hard way. It was *not* the first Rule on the younger Tom Riddle's list. It is only by harsh experience that we learn which principles take priority over which other principles; as mere words they all sound equally persuasive. In retrospect it would have been better if I had sent Bellatrix to the Potters' home in my place; but I had a Rule telling me that for such matters I must go myself and not try sending a trusted lieutenant. Yes, I considered the Killing Curse; but I wondered if casting the Killing Curse at an infant would somehow cause the curse to bounce off and hit me, thus fulfilling the prophecy. How was I to know?"

"So use an axe, it's hard to get a prophecy-fulfilling spell backfire out of an axe," Harry said and then shut up.

"I decided the safest path was to try to fulfill the prophecy on my own terms," Professor Quirrell said. "Needless to say, the next time I hear a prophecy I do not like, I will tear it apart at *every possible point of intervention*, rather than trying to play along." Professor Quirrell was crushing a rose as though to squeeze the juice out of it, still using his bare fist. "And now everyone thinks the Boy-Who-Lived is somehow immune to the Killing

Curse, even though Killing Curses do not ruin houses or leave burnt bodies behind them, *because it has not occurred to them that Lord Voldemort would ever use any other spell.*"

Harry again stayed quiet. It had occurred to Harry that there was another obvious way that Lord Voldemort could have avoided his mistake. Something that might perhaps be easier to see given a Muggle upbringing, instead of the wizarding way of looking at things.

Harry had not yet decided whether to tell Professor Quirrell about his thought; there were both pros and cons to pointing out that particular error.

After a time Professor Quirrell picked up the next Potions ingredient, a strand of what looked like unicorn hair. "I tell you this as a caution," said Professor Quirrell. "Do not expect me to be delayed another nine years, if you somehow destroy this body of mine. I set horcruxes in better places at once, and now even that is unnecessary. Thanks to you, I learned where to find the Resurrection Stone. The Resurrection Stone does not bring back the dead, of course; but it holds a more ancient magic than my own for projecting the seeming of a spirit. And since I am one who has defeated death, Cadmus's Hallow acknowledged me its master, and answered all my will. I have now incorporated it into my great creation." Professor Quirrell smiled slightly. "I had many years earlier considered making that device a horcrux, but decided against it at the time, since I realized that the ring had magic of unknown nature... ah, such ironies does life play upon us. But I digress. *You*, boy, you brought that about, you freed my spirit to fly where it pleases and seduce the most opportune victim, by being too casual with your secrets. It is a catastrophe for any who oppose me, and you wrought it with one finger drawing wetness on a tea-saucer. This world will be a safer place for all, if you learn the rectitude that wizardborns absorb in childhood. *And all thiss that I have jusst said iss the truth.*"

Harry closed his eyes, and his own hand massaged his forehead; if he had seen it from the outside, it would have looked the mirror of Professor Quirrell in deep thought.

The problem of defeating Professor Quirrell was looking increasingly difficult, even by the standards of the sort of impossible problems that

Harry had solved already. If communicating that difficulty was what Professor Quirrell was trying to do, he was *succeeding*. Harry was starting to seriously consider the possibility that it might be better to offer to rule Britain as Voldemort's *nonhomicidal* delegate, if Professor Quirrell himself would just agree to *stop killing people all the time*. Even *mostly*.

But that wasn't likely to happen.

Harry stared at his hands, from where he had sat down upon the floor, feeling sadness shading over into despair. The Lord Voldemort who'd given Harry his dark side had spent *that long* thinking things over and reflecting on his own thought processes... and had emerged as the calm, clear-headed, and still homicidal Professor Quirrell.

Professor Quirrell added a pinch of golden hair to the *potion of effulgence*, and that reminded Harry that time was continuing to move; the locks of bright hair were rarer than the bellflowers.

"I ask my second question," Harry said. "Tell me about the Philosopher's Stone. Does it do anything besides making Transfigurations permanent? Is it possible to make more Stones, and why is that problem hard?"

Professor Quirrell was bent over the potion, and Harry could not see his face. "Very well, I shall tell you the Stone's story as I have inferred it. The one and only power of the Stone is the imposition of permanency, to render a temporary form into a true and lasting substance—a power absolutely beyond ordinary spells. Conjurations such as the castle Hogwarts are maintained by a constant well of magic. Even Metamorphmagi cannot manifest golden fingernails and then trim them for sale. It is theorized that the Metamorphmagus curse merely rearranges the substance of their flesh, like a Muggle smith manipulates iron with hammer and tongs; and their body contains no gold. If Merlin himself could create gold from thin air, history does not record it. So the Stone, we can guess even before research, must be a very old thing indeed. In contrast, Nicholas Flamel has been known to the world for a mere six centuries. Tell me the obvious next question to ask, boy, if you wanted to trace the Stone's history."

"Um," Harry said. He rubbed his forehead, concentrating. If the Stone was old, but the world had only known Nicholas Flamel for six cen-

turies... “Was there some other very long-lived wizard who disappeared at around the same time Nicholas Flamel showed up?”

“Close,” said Professor Quirrell. “You recall that six centuries ago there was a Dark Lady called undying, the sorceress Baba Yaga? She was said to be able to heal any wound in herself, to change shape into any form she pleased... she held the Stone of Permanency, obviously. And then one year Baba Yaga agreed to teach Battle Magic at Hogwarts, under an old and respected truce.” Professor Quirrell looked... *angry*, a look such as Harry had rarely seen on him. “But she was not trusted, and so there was invoked a curse. Some curses are easier to cast when they bind yourself and others alike; Slytherin’s Parselmouth curse is an example of such. In this case, Baba Yaga’s signature, and signatures from every student and teacher of Hogwarts, were placed within an ancient device known as the Goblet of Fire. Baba Yaga swore not to shed a drop of students’ blood, nor take from the students anything that was theirs. In return, the students swore not to shed a drop of Baba Yaga’s blood, nor take from her anything that was hers. So they all signed, with the Goblet of Fire to witness it and punish the transgressor.”

Professor Quirrell picked up a new ingredient, a loose thread of gold wrapped around a pinch of foul-looking substance. “Entering her sixth year at Hogwarts, then, was a witch named Perenelle. And although Perenelle was new-come into the beauty of her youth, her heart was already blacker than Baba Yaga’s own—”

“You’re calling her evil?” Harry said, then realized he had just committed the fallacy of *ad hominem tu quoque*.

“Hush, boy, I am telling the story. Where was I? Ah, yes, Perenelle, the beautiful and covetous. Perenelle seduced the Dark Lady over the months, with gentle touches and flirtations and the shy pretense of innocence. The Dark Lady’s heart was captured, and they became lovers. And then one night Perenelle whispered how she had heard of Baba Yaga’s shape-changing power and how this thought had enflamed her desires; thus Perenelle swayed Baba Yaga to come to her with the Stone in hand, to assume many guises in a single night, for their pleasures. Among other forms Perenelle bid Baba Yaga take the form of a man; and they lay together in the fashion of a man and a woman. But Perenelle

had been a virgin until that night. And since they were all rather old-fashioned in those days, the Goblet of Fire accounted that as the shedding of Perenelle's blood, and the taking of what was hers; thus Baba Yaga was tricked into being forsworn, and the Goblet rendered her defenseless. Then Perenelle killed the unsuspecting Baba Yaga as she slept in Perenelle's bed, killed the Dark Lady who had loved her and come peacefully to Hogwarts under truce; and that was the end of the pact by which Dark Wizards and Witches taught Battle Magic at Hogwarts. For the next few centuries the Goblet of Fire was used to oversee pointless inter-school tournaments, and then it resided in a disused chamber at Beauxbatons, until I finally stole it." Professor Quirrell dropped a pale beige-pink twig into the cauldron, and its color changed to white just as it touched the surface. "But I digress. Perenelle took the Stone from Baba Yaga, and assumed the guise and name of Nicholas Flamel. She also kept her identity as Perenelle, calling herself Flamel's wife. The two have appeared together in public, but that might be done by any number of obvious methods."

"And the Stone's manufacture?" said Harry, his brain working to process all this. "I saw an alchemical recipe for it, in a book—"

"Another lie. Perenelle was making it appear as though 'Nicholas Flamel' had earned the right to live forever by completing a great magic that any could attempt. And she was giving others a false path to pursue, instead of seeking the one true Stone as Perenelle had sought Baba Yaga's." Professor Quirrell looked rather sour. "It should come as no surprise that I spent years trying to master that false recipe. Next you will ask why I did not kidnap, torture, and kill Perenelle after I learned the truth."

This had not in fact been a question that had come into Harry's mind.

Professor Quirrell continued to speak. "The answer is that Perenelle had foreseen and forestalled the ambitions of Dark Wizards like myself. 'Nicholas Flamel' publicly took Unbreakable Vows not to be coerced by any means into relinquishing his Stone—to guard immortality from the covetous, he claimed, as if that were a public service. I was afraid the Stone would be lost forever, if Perenelle died without saying where it was hidden, and her Vow prevented attempts at torture. Further, I had hopes of

gaining Perenelle's knowledge, if I could find the right strategy to extract it from her. Though Perenelle began with little lore of her own, she has held hostage the lives of wizards greater than herself, holding out dribs and drabs of healing in exchange for secrets, and small reversals of age in exchange for power. Perenelle does not condescend to bestow any real youth upon others—but if you hear of a wizard who lived, greybearded, to the age of two hundred and fifty, you may be sure that her hand was in play. By my own generation, the centuries had given Perenelle enough of an advantage that she could raise up Albus Dumbledore as a counterweight to the Dark Lord Grindelwald. When I appeared as Lord Voldemort, Perenelle raised up Dumbledore yet further, parceling out another drop of her hoarded lore whenever Lord Voldemort seemed to gain an advantage. I felt like I ought to be able to figure out something clever to do with that situation, but I never did. I did not attack her directly, for I was not sure of my great creation; it was not impossible that I would someday need to go begging to her for a dollop of reversed age." Professor Quirrell dropped two bellflowers at once into the potion, and they seemed to merge as they touched the bubbling liquid. "But now I am sure of my creation, and so I have decided that the time has come to take the Stone by force."

Harry hesitated. "I would like to hear you answer in Parseltongue, was all of that true?"

"None of it is known to me to be false," said Professor Quirrell. "Telling a tale implies filling in certain gaps; I was not present to observe when Perenelle seduced Baba Yaga. *The basicss sshould be mosstly correct, I think.*"

Harry had noticed a trace of confusion. "Then I don't understand why the Stone is here in Hogwarts. Wouldn't the best defense just be hiding it under an anonymous rock in Greenland?"

"Perhaps she respected my abilities as a particularly good finder," said the Defense Professor. He appeared focused on his cauldron as he dipped a bellflower into a jar of liquid labeled with the Potions symbol for rain-water.

We are very much alike, the Defense Professor and I, in some ways if not others. If I imagine what I'd do, given his problem...

"Did you bluff everyone into *believing* you had some way of finding

the Stone?" Harry said aloud. "So that Perenelle would put it inside Hogwarts, where Dumbledore could guard it?"

The Defense Professor sighed, not looking up from the cauldron. "I suppose that strategem would be futile to conceal from you. Yes, after I possessed Quirrell and returned, I implemented a strategy I had conceived while gazing at the stars. First I made sure to be accepted as Defense Professor at Hogwarts, for it would not do to have suspicions raised while I was still seeking employment. When that was done, I arranged for one of Perenelle's curse-breaking expeditions to discover a falsified but credible inscription describing how the Crown of the Serpent could be used to seek out the Stone wherever it was hidden. Immediately after, before Perenelle could buy up the Crown, it was stolen; furthermore I left clear indications that the thief had possessed the power to speak to snakes. So Perenelle thought that I could infallibly find the Stone's location, and that it needed a guardian powerful enough to defeat me. That is how the Stone came to be held in Hogwarts, in Dumbledore's domain. Just as I intended, naturally, since I had already gained access to Hogwarts for the year. I think that is all of this that concerns you, if I speak not of future plans."

Harry frowned. Professor Quirrell should not have told him that. Unless the strategy had somehow become irrelevant to any future deception of Perenelle...? Or unless, by answering so quickly, the Defense Professor had hoped to have people conclude that it was a double-bluff, and that the Crown of the Serpent really could find the Stone...

Harry decided not to question this answer in Parseltongue.

Another lock of bright hair, seeming white but not with age, was gently dribbled into the cauldron, again reminding Harry that they were on a time limit. Harry considered, but he couldn't see any further path to pursue this line of questioning; there was no known way to manufacture more Philosopher's Stones and no obvious way to invent such, which was probably the *objectively* worst news Harry had heard all day.

Harry took a deep breath. "I ask my third question," Harry said. "What's the truth behind this entire school year? All the plots you ran, all the plots you know about."

"Hm," said Professor Quirrell, dropping another bellflower into the

potion, accompanied by a plant-shape like a tiny cross. “Let me see... the most shocking twist is that the Defense Professor turns out to be secretly Voldemort.”

“Well, obviously,” Harry said, with a good deal of self-directed bitterness.

“Then where do you wish me to start?”

“Why did you kill Hermione?” The question just slipped out.

Professor Quirrell’s pale eyes glanced up from the potion, watched him intently. “One would think that should be evident—but I suppose I cannot blame you for distrusting what seems evident. To understand the object of an obscure plot, observe its consequences and ask who might have intended them. I killed Miss Granger to improve your position relative to that of Lucius Malfoy, since my plans did not call for him to have so much leverage over you. I admit I am impressed by how far you managed to parlay that opening.”

Harry unclenched his teeth, which took an effort. “That’s after your failed attempt to *frame* Hermione for the attempted murder of Draco and *send her to Azkaban* because of *why*? Because you didn’t like the influence she was having on me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Professor Quirrell said. “If I had only wished to remove Miss Granger, I would not have brought the Malfoys into it. I observed your game with Draco Malfoy and found it amusing, but I knew it could not continue for very long before Lucius learned and intervened; and then your folly would have brought you great trouble, for Lucius would not take it lightly. Had you just been able to *lose* during the Wizengamot trial, *lose* as I had taught you, then in only two more weeks, ironclad evidence would have shown that Lucius Malfoy, after discovering his son’s seeming perfidy, had Imperiused Professor Sprout into using the Blood-Cooling Charm on Mr. Malfoy and casting the False Memory Charm on Miss Granger. Lucius would have been swept off the political gameboard, sent to exile if not Azkaban; Draco Malfoy would have inherited the wealth of House Malfoy, and your influence over him would have been unchallenged. Instead I had to abort that plot in mid-course. You managed to completely disrupt the real plan in the course of sacrificing double your entire fortune, by giving Lucius Malfoy the perfect oppor-

tunity to prove his true concern for his son. You have an incredible anti-talent for meddling, I must say.”

“And you also thought,” Harry said, even with his dark side’s patterns he had to work to keep his voice level and cool, “that two weeks in Azkaban would improve Miss Granger’s disposition, and get her to stop being a bad influence on me. So you somehow arranged for there to be newspaper stories calling for her to be sent to Azkaban, rather than some other penalty.”

Professor Quirrell’s lips drew up in a thin smile. “Good catch, boy. Yes, I thought she might serve as your Bellatrix. That particular outcome would also have provided you with a constant reminder of how much respect was due the law, and helped you develop appropriate attitudes toward the Ministry.”

“Your plot was stupidly complicated and had no chance of working.” Harry knew he ought to be more tactful, that he was engaging in more of what Professor Quirrell called *folly*, but in that instant he could not bring himself to care.

“It was less complicated than Dumbledore’s plot to have the three armies tie in the Christmas Battle, and not much more complicated than my own plot to make you think Dumbledore had blackmailed Mr. Zabini. The insight you are missing, Mr. Potter, is that these were not plots that *needed* to succeed.” Professor Quirrell continued to casually stir the potion, smiling. “There are plots that *must* succeed, where you keep the core idea as simple as possible and take every precaution. There are also plots where it is acceptable to fail, and with those you can indulge yourself, or test the limits of your ability to handle complications. It was not as if something going wrong with any of those plots would have killed me.” Professor Quirrell was no longer smiling. “Our journey into Azkaban was of the first type, and I was less amused by your antics there.”

“What *exactly* did you do to Hermione?” Some part of Harry wondered at the evenness of his voice.

“Obliviations and False Memory Charms. I could not trust anything else to go undetected by the Hogwarts wards and the scrutiny I knew her mind would undergo.” A flicker of frustration crossed Professor Quirrell’s face. “Part of what you rightly call complication is because the first

version of my plot did not go as planned, and I had to modify it. I came to Miss Granger in the hallways wearing the appearance of Professor Sprout, to offer her a conspiracy. My first attempt at suasion failed. I Obliviated her and tried again with a new presentation. The second bait failed. The third bait failed. The *tenth* bait failed. I was so frustrated that I began going through my entire library of guises, including those more appropriate to Mr. Zabini. *Still* nothing worked. The child *would not* violate her childish code.”

“*You* do not get to call her childish, Professor.” Harry’s voice sounded strange in his own ears. “Her code *worked*. It prevented you from tricking her. The whole point of having deontological ethical injunctions is that arguments for violating them are often much less trustworthy than they look. You don’t get to criticize her rules when they worked exactly as intended.” After they resurrected Hermione, Harry would tell her that Lord Voldemort himself hadn’t been able to tempt her into doing wrong, and that was why he’d killed her.

“Fair enough, I suppose,” said Professor Quirrell. “There is a saying that even a stopped clock is right twice a day, and I do not think Miss Granger was actually being reasonable. Still, Rule Ten: one must not rant about the opposition’s unworthiness after they have foiled you. Regardless. After two full hours of failed attempts, I realized that I was being over-stubborn, and that I did not need Miss Granger to carry out the exact part I had planned for her. I gave up on my original intent, and instead imbued Miss Granger with False Memories of watching Mr. Malfoy plotting against her under circumstances that implied she should not tell you or the authorities. In the end it was Mr. Malfoy who gave me the opening I needed, entirely by luck.” Professor Quirrell dropped a bellflower and a scrap of parchment into the cauldron.

“Why did the wards show the Defense Professor as having killed Hermione?”

“I wore the mountain troll as a false tooth while Dumbledore was identifying me to the Hogwarts wards as the Defense Professor.” A slight smile. “Other living weapons cannot be Transfigured; they will not survive the disenchantment for the requisite six hours to avoid being traced by Time-Turner. The fact that a mountain troll was used as a weapon

of assassination was a clear sign that the assassin had needed a proxy weapon that could be Transfigured safely. Combined with the evidence of the wards, and Dumbledore's own knowledge of how he had identified me to Hogwarts, you could have deduced who was responsible—in theory. However, experience has taught me that such puzzles are far harder to solve when you do not already know the solution, and I considered it a small risk. Ah, that reminds me, I have a question of my own." The Defense Professor was now giving Harry an intent look. "What gave me away at the last, in the corridor outside these chambers?"

Harry put aside other emotions to weigh up the cost and benefit of answering honestly, came to the conclusion that the Defense Professor was giving away far more information than he was getting (*why?*) and that it was best not to give the appearance of reticence. "The main thing," Harry said, "was that it was too improbable that everyone had arrived in Dumbledore's corridor at the same time. I tried running with the hypothesis that everyone who arrived had to be coordinated, including you."

"But I had said that I was following Snape," the Defense Professor said. "Was that not plausible?"

"It was, but..." Harry said. "Um. The laws governing what constitutes a good explanation don't talk about plausible excuses you hear afterward. They talk about the probabilities we assign in advance. That's why science makes people do advance predictions, instead of trusting explanations people come up with afterward. And I wouldn't have predicted in advance for you to follow Snape and show up like that. Even if I'd known in advance that you could put a trace on Snape's wand, I wouldn't have *expected* you to do it and follow him just then. Since your explanation didn't make me feel like I would have predicted the outcome in advance, it remained an improbability. I started to wonder if Sprout's mastermind might have arranged for you to show up, too. And then I realised the note to myself hadn't really come from future-me, and that gave it away completely."

"Ah," said the Defense Professor, and sighed. "Well, I think it is all working out for the best. You did understand only too late; and there would have been inconveniences as well as benefits to you remaining unaware."

“What on *Earth* were you trying to do? The reason I was trying so hard to figure it out was that the whole thing was just so weird.”

“That should have pointed at Dumbledore, not myself,” said Professor Quirrell, and frowned. “The fact is that Miss Greengrass was not supposed to arrive in that corridor for several hours... though I suppose, since I did have Mr. Malfoy give her the clue I assigned her, it is not too surprising they banded together. Had Mr. Nott arrived seemingly alone, events would have played out less farcically. But I consider myself a specialist in battlefield control magics, and I was able to ensure that the fight went as I wished. I suppose it did end up looking a bit ridiculous.” The Defense Professor dropped a peach slice and a bellflower into the cauldron. “But let us defer our discussion of the Mirror until we reach it. Did you have any more questions concerning Miss Granger’s regrettable and hopefully temporary demise?”

“Yes,” Harry said in an even voice. “What did you do to the Weasley twins? Dumbledore thought—I mean, the school saw the Headmaster go to the Weasley twins after Hermione was arrested. Dumbledore thought you, as Voldemort, had wondered why Dumbledore had done so, and that you’d checked on the Weasley twins, found and took their map, and Obliviated them afterward?”

“Dumbledore was quite correct,” Professor Quirrell said, shaking his head as though in wonderment. “He was also an utter fool to leave the Hogwarts Map in the possession of those two idiots. I had an unpleasant shock after I recovered the Map; it showed my name and yours correctly! The Weasley idiots had thought it a mere malfunction, especially after you received your Cloak and your Time-Turner. If Dumbledore had kept the Map himself—if the Weasleys had ever spoken of it to Dumbledore—but they did not, thankfully.”

Showed my name and yours correctly—

“I would like to see that,” Harry said.

Without taking his eyes from the cauldron, Professor Quirrell drew a folded parchment from within his robes, hissed at it “*Sshow our ssurround-ingss*”, and tossed the folded parchment toward Harry. It cut unerringly through the air, an increase of doom breathing on Harry’s senses as it moved toward him, and then it fluttered gently to Harry’s feet.

Harry picked up the parchment and unfolded it.

At first the parchment seemed blank. Then, as though an unseen pen were moving across it, the outline of walls and doors appeared, all drawn in handwritten lines. The writing outlined a series of chambers, most of them shown as empty; the last chamber in the series had a confused scribble in its center, as though the Map were trying to indicate its own bewilderment; and the second-to-last chamber showed two names within, written in positions within the chamber corresponding to where Harry was sitting and Professor Quirrell was standing.

Tom M. Riddle.

Tom M. Riddle.

Harry gazed at the parchment, an unpleasant chill coming over him. It was one thing to hear Lord Voldemort claim that your name was Tom Riddle; it was another thing to find that Hogwarts's magic agreed. *"Did you tamper with thiss map to achieve thiss ressalt, or did it appear before you by ssurprisse?"*

"Wass ssurprisse," replied Professor Quirrell, with an overtone of hissing laughter. *"No trickss."*

Harry folded the Map and threw it back in Professor Quirrell's direction; some force caught it in midair before it reached the floor, and drew the Map back into Professor Quirrell's robes.

The Defense Professor spoke. "I should also like to volunteer that Snape was guiding Miss Granger and her underlings toward bullies, and sometimes intervening to protect them."

"I knew that."

"Interesting," said Professor Quirrell. "Did Dumbledore also learn of this? Answer in Parseltongue."

"Not sso far ass I know," hissed Harry.

"Fascinating," said Professor Quirrell. "You may be interested to know this as well: *Potionss-maker had to work in ssecret because hiss plot opposed sschoolmasster's plot.*"

Harry thought about this, while Professor Quirrell blew on the potion as though to cool it, though the fire still burned under the cauldron; then added a pinch of dirt and a drop of water and a bellflower. "Please explain," Harry said.

"Has it never occurred to you to wonder why Dumbledore chose Severus Snape as the Head of House Slytherin? To say that it was a cover for his work as Dumbledore's spy explains nothing. Snape could have been a Potions Master only, and not the Head of Slytherin at all. Snape could have been made Keeper of Grounds and Keys, if he needed to stay within Hogwarts! Why the *Head of House Slytherin*? Surely it occurred to you that this could not have good effects upon the Slytherins, according to Dumbledore's moral pretenses?"

The thought hadn't occurred to Harry in *exactly* those terms, no... "I wondered something like it. I didn't put the dilemma in that precise form."

"And now that you have, is the solution obvious?"

"No," Harry said.

"Disappointing. You have not learned enough cynicism, you have not grasped the *flexibility* of what moralists call morality. To fathom a plot, look at the consequences and ask if they might be intended. Dumbledore was deliberately sabotaging Slytherin House—don't give me that look, boy, *I am speaking truth*. During the last Wizarding War, Slytherins filled out my ranks of underlings, and other Slytherins in the Wizengamot supported me. Look at it from Dumbledore's perspective, and remember that he has no native understanding of Slytherin's ways. Think of Dumbledore becoming increasingly sad over this Hogwarts House that seems the source of so much ill-doing. And then behold, Dumbledore puts in as Head of Slytherin the person of Snape. Snape! Severus Snape! A man who would teach his House neither cunning nor ambition, a man who would impose lax discipline and make its children weak! A man who would offend students of other Houses, who would ruin Slytherin's name among them! A man whose surname was unknown in magical Britain and certainly not noble, who went about half in rags! Do you think Dumbledore ignorant of the consequence? When Dumbledore was the one who brought it about, and had motive to bring it about? I expect Dumbledore told himself that more lives would be saved during the next Wizarding War if Voldemort's future Death Eaters were weakened." Professor Quirrell dropped into the cauldron a chip of ice, slowly melting as it touched the surface froth. "Continue the process long enough, and no child would

want to go to Slytherin. The House would be retired, and if the Hat kept calling the name, it would become a mark of ignominy among children who would afterward be distributed among the other three Houses. From that day on, Hogwarts would have three upstanding Houses of courage and scholarship and industry, with no House of Bad Children added to the mix; just as if the three Founders of Hogwarts had been wise enough in the beginning to refuse Salazar Slytherin their company. That, I expect, was Dumbledore's intended end-game; a short-term sacrifice for the greater good." Professor Quirrell smiled sardonically. "And Lucius let it all happen without protest or even, I expect, *noticing* that anything was going awry. I fear that in my absence my former servants have been quite outmatched in this battle of wits."

Harry was having a bit of trouble taking this in, but decided, after some thought, that now was not the time to try to work it out. Whether Lord Voldemort believed it was not decisive; Harry would have to evaluate this accusation on his own.

Professor Quirrell's mention of his *servants* had reminded Harry of something else that he was... obligated, Harry supposed, to ask. The bad news was predictable. On any other day it would have been horrible. Today it would just wash out in the flood. "Bellatrix Black," Harry said. "What was the truth about her?"

"She was broken inside before I ever met her," Professor Quirrell said. He picked up what looked like a white-grey rubber band and held it over the cauldron; as the rubber was held within the steam, it turned black. "Using Legilimency on her was a mistake. But that glimpse showed me how easy it would be to make her fall in love with me, so I did. Ever after she was the most faithful of all my servants, the only one I could almost trust. I had no intention of giving her what she wanted from me; so I commended her to the Lestrage brothers for their use, and the three of them were happy in their own special way."

"I doubt it," Harry's mouth said, mostly on autopilot. "If that were true, Bellatrix wouldn't have remembered who the Lestrage brothers were, when we found her in Azkaban."

Professor Quirrell shrugged. "You may be right."

"What the hell were we actually doing there?"

"Finding out where Bellatrix had put my wand. I had told the Death Eaters of my immortality, in the hope—now proven futile—that they would stay together for at least a few *days* if I appeared to die. Bellatrix's instructions were to recover my wand from wherever my body had been slain; and take that wand to a certain graveyard where my spirit would appear before her."

Harry swallowed. The image came to him of Bellatrix Black waiting, waiting, waiting at the graveyard, in increasing desperation... it was no wonder she hadn't been thinking strategically when she attacked the Longbottom household. "What did you do with Bellatrix once she was out?"

"*Sent her to a peaceful place to recover strength,*" Professor Quirrell said. A cold smile. "I had a use remaining for her, or rather a certain portion of her, and on my future plans I shall not answer questions."

Harry breathed deeply, trying to maintain control. "Were there any other secret plots in this school year?"

"Oh, a fair number, but not many more that concern you, not that I can think of offhand. The true reason I demanded to try to teach the Patronus Charm to first-years was to bring a Dementor before your own person, and then I arranged for your wand to fall where the Dementor could continue to drain you through it. *Wass no malice in it, only hopess that you would recover ssome of your true memoriess.* That was also why I arranged for certain witches to pull you down from the air during your rooftop episode, so I could appear to save your life; just in case any suspicion fell on me during the Dementor incident I had scheduled for shortly after. *Alsso no malice there.* I arranged some of the attacks on Miss Granger's group, so that the attacks could be defeated; I do rather dislike bullies. *Think that iss all ssecret plotss concerning you from thiss sschool-year, unless I have forgotten ssomething.*"

Life lesson learned, said his Hufflepart. *Try to resist the temptation to randomly meddle in other people's lives. Like, you know, Padma Patil's life. If you don't want to end up like this, that is.*

A pinch of red-brown dust was gently sifted into the potions cauldron, and Harry asked his fourth and final question, the one that had seemed to have the lowest priority, but still mattered.

"What was your objective during the Wizarding War?" Harry said. "I

mean, what—” His voice wobbled. “What was the *point* of the *entire thing*?” His brain repeating endlessly, *Why, why, why Lord Voldemort...*

Professor Quirrell lifted an eyebrow. “They told you about David Monroe, did they not?”

“Yes you were both David Monroe and Lord Voldemort during the Wizarding War, I understood that part. You killed David Monroe, disguised yourself as him, and wiped out David Monroe’s family so they wouldn’t notice any differences—”

“Indeed.”

“You planned to control whichever side won the Wizarding War, regardless of which side won. But why did one side have to be *Voldemort*? I, I mean, wouldn’t it have been easier to gain public support with someone less... with someone less *Voldemort*?”

Professor Quirrell’s mallet made an unusually loud *thud* as it crushed white butterfly wings, mixing them with another bellflower. “I *planned*,” Professor Quirrell said harshly, “for Lord Voldemort to *lose* to David Monroe. The flaw in that strategy was the absolute wretchedness of—” Professor Quirrell stopped. “No, I am telling the tale out of order. Listen, boy, when I had devised my great creation and come into the fullness of my magic, I thought the time had come for me to take political power into my hands. It would be inconvenient, certainly, and take up my time in ways that were not enjoyable. But I knew the Muggles would eventually destroy the world or make war on wizardkind or both, and something had to be done if I was not to wander a dead or dull world through my eternity. Having attained immortality I needed a new ambition to occupy my decades, and to prevent the Muggles from ruining everything seemed a goal of acceptable scope and difficulty. It is a source of continual amusement to me that I, of all people, am the only one really taking action towards that end. Though I suppose it would make sense for the mortal insects not to care about their world’s end; why should they, when they are just going to die regardless, and can save themselves the inconvenience of trying to do anything difficult along the way? But I digress. I saw how Dumbledore had risen to power from his defeat of Grindelwald, so I thought I would do the same. I had long ago taken my vengeance on David Monroe—he was an annoyance from my year in Slytherin—so

I bethought to also steal his identity, and wipe out his family to make myself heir of his House. And I conceived also a great foe for David Monroe to fight, the most terrifying Dark Lord imaginable, clever beyond reckoning; more dangerous by far than Grindelwald, for his intelligence would be perfected in all the ways that Grindelwald had been flawed and self-destructive. A Dark Lord who would do his cunning utmost to disrupt the alliances who would fight him, a Dark Lord who would command the deepest loyalty from his followers through his oratical skills. The most dreadful Dark Lord who had ever threatened Britain or the world, that was who David Monroe would defeat.”

Professor Quirrell’s mallet struck a bellflower and then a different pale flower with two more thuds. “But then, while I had sometimes played the part of Dark Wizard in my wanderings, I had never adopted the identity of a full-fledged Dark Lord with underlings and a political agenda. I had no practice at the task, and I was mindful of the story of Dark Evangel and the disaster of her first public appearance. According to what she said afterward, she had meant to call herself the Walking Catastrophe and the Apostle of Darkness, but in the excitement of the moment she introduced herself as the Apostrophe of Darkness instead. After that she had to ruin two entire villages before anyone took her seriously.”

“So you decided to try a small-scale experiment first,” Harry said. A sickness rose up in him, because in that moment Harry *understood*, he saw himself reflected; the next step was just what Harry himself would have done, if he’d had no trace of ethics whatsoever, if he’d been that empty inside. “You created a disposable identity, to learn how the ropes worked, and get your mistakes out of the way.”

“Indeed. Before becoming a truly terrible Dark Lord for David Monroe to fight, I first created for practice the persona of a Dark Lord with glowing red eyes, pointlessly cruel to his underlings, pursuing a political agenda of naked personal ambition combined with blood purism as argued by drunks in Knocturn Alley. My first underlings were hired in a tavern, given cloaks and skull masks, and told to introduce themselves as Death Eaters.”

The sick sense of understanding deepened, in the pit of Harry’s stomach. “And you called yourself Voldemort.”

"Just so, General Chaos." Professor Quirrell was grinning, from where he stood by the cauldron. "I wanted it to be an anagram of my name, but that would only have worked if I'd conveniently been given the middle name of 'Marvolo', and then it would have been a stretch. Our actual middle name is Morfin, if you're curious. But I digress. I thought Voldemort's career would last only a few months, a year at the longest, before the Aurors brought down his underlings and the disposable Dark Lord vanished. As you perceive, I had vastly overestimated my competition. And I could not *quite* bring myself to torture my underlings when they brought me bad news, no matter what Dark Lords did in plays. I could not *quite* manage to argue the tenets of blood purism as incoherently as if I were a drunk in Knockturn Alley. I was not trying to be clever when I sent my underlings on their missions, but neither did I give them entirely pointless orders—" Professor Quirrell gave a rueful grin that, in another context, might have been called charming. "One month after that, Bellatrix Black prostrated herself before me, and after three months Lucius Malfoy was negotiating with me over glasses of expensive Firewhiskey. I sighed, gave up all hope for wizardkind, and began as David Monroe to oppose this fearsome Lord Voldemort."

"And then what happened—"

A snarl contorted Professor Quirrell's face. "The absolute inadequacy of every single institution in the civilization of magical Britain is what happened! You cannot comprehend it, boy! I cannot comprehend it! It has to be seen and even then it cannot be believed! You will have observed, perhaps, that of your fellow students who speak of their family's occupations, three in four seem to mention jobs in some part or another of the Ministry. You will wonder how a country can manage to employ three of its four citizens in bureaucracy. The answer is that if they did not all prevent each other from doing their jobs, none of them would have any work left to do! The Aurors were competent as individual fighters, they did fight Dark Wizards and only the best survived to train new recruits, but their leadership was in absolute disarray. The Ministry was so busy routing papers that the country had *no* effective opposition to Voldemort's attacks except myself, Dumbledore, and a handful of untrained irregulars. A shiftless, incompetent, cowardly layabout, Mundungus Fletcher,

was considered a key asset in the Order of the Phoenix—because, being otherwise unemployed, he did not need to juggle another job! I tried weakening Voldemort’s attacks, to see if it was *possible* for him to lose; at once the Ministry committed fewer Aurors to oppose me! I had read Mao’s Little Red Book, I had trained my Death Eaters in guerilla tactics—for nothing! For nothing! I was attacking all of magical Britain and in every engagement my forces *outnumbered* their opposition! In desperation, I ordered my Death Eaters to systematically assassinate every single incompetent managing the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. One paper-pusher after another volunteered to accept higher positions despite the fate of their predecessors, gleefully rubbing their hands at the prospect of promotion. Every one of them thought they would cut a deal with Lord Voldemort on the side. It took *seven months* to murder our way through them all, and not a single Death Eater asked why we were bothering. And then, even with Bartemius Crouch risen to Director and Amelia Bones as Head Auror, it was still too little. I could have done better fighting *alone*. Dumbledore’s aid was not worth his moral restraints, and Crouch’s aid was not worth his respect for the law.” Professor Quirrell turned up the fire beneath the potion.

“And eventually,” Harry said through the heart-sickness, “you realized you were just having more fun as Voldemort.”

“It is the least annoying role I have ever played. If Lord Voldemort says that something is to be done, people *obey him* and *do not argue*. I did not have to suppress my impulse to Cruciate people being idiots; for once it was all part of the role. If someone was making the game less pleasant for me, I just said *Avadakedavra* regardless of whether that was strategically wise, and they never bothered me again.” Professor Quirrell casually chopped a small worm into bits. “But my true epiphany came on a certain day when David Monroe was trying to get an entry permit for an Asian instructor in combat tactics, and a Ministry clerk denied it, smiling smugly. I asked the Ministry clerk if he understood that this measure was meant to *save his life* and the Ministry clerk only smiled more. Then in fury I threw aside masks and caution, I used my Legilimency, I dipped my fingers into the cesspit of his stupidity and *tore* out the truth from his mind. I did not understand and I *wanted to understand*. With my com-

mand of Legilimency I forced his tiny clerk-brain to live out alternatives, seeing what his clerk-brain would think of Lucius Malfoy, or Lord Voldemort, or Dumbledore standing in my place.” Professor Quirrell’s hands had slowed, as he delicately peeled bits and small strips from a chunk of candle-wax. “What I finally realized that day is complicated, boy, which is why I did not understand it earlier in life. To you I shall try to describe it anyway. Today I know that Dumbledore does not stand at the top of the world, for all that he is the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation. People speak ill of Dumbledore openly, they criticize him proudly and to his face, in a way they would not dare stand up to Lucius Malfoy. *You* have acted disrespectfully toward Dumbledore, boy, do you know why you did so?”

“I’m... not sure,” Harry said. Having Tom Riddle’s leftover neural patterns was certainly an obvious hypothesis.

“Wolves, dogs, even chickens, fight for dominance among themselves. What I finally understood, from that clerk’s mind, was that to him Lucius Malfoy had dominance, Lord Voldemort had dominance, and David Monroe and Albus Dumbledore did not. By taking the side of good, by professing to abide in the light, we had made ourselves *unthreatening*. In Britain, Lucius Malfoy has dominance, for he can call in your loans, or send Ministry bureaucrats against your shop, or crucify you in the *Daily Prophet*, if you go openly against his will. And the most powerful wizard in the world has no dominance, because everyone knows that he is,” Professor Quirrell’s lips curled, “*a hero out of stories*, relentlessly self-effacing and too humble for vengeance. Tell me, child, have you ever seen a drama where the hero, before he consents to save his country, demands so much gold as a barrister might receive for a court case?”

“Actually there have been a *lot* of heroes like that in Muggle fiction, I’ll name Han Solo just to start—”

“Well, in magical drama it is not so. It is all humble heroes like Dumbledore. It is the fantasy of the powerful *slave* who will never truly rise above you, never demand your respect, never even ask you for pay. Do you understand now?”

“I... think so,” Harry said. Frodo and Samwise from *Lord of the Rings* did seem to match the archetype of a completely non-threatening hero.

"You're saying that's how people think of Dumbledore? I don't believe the Hogwarts students see him as a hobbit."

"In Hogwarts, Dumbledore does punish certain transgressions against his will, so he is feared to some degree—though the students still make free to mock him in more than whispers. Outside this castle, Dumbledore is sneered at; they began to call him mad, and he aped the part like a fool. Step into the role of a savior out of plays, and people see you as a slave to whose services they are entitled and whom it is their enjoyment to criticize; for it is the privilege of masters to sit back and call forth helpful corrections while the slaves labor. Only in the tales of the ancient Greeks, from when men were less sophisticated in their delusions, may you see the hero who is also high. Hector, Aeneas, those were heroes who retained their right of vengeance upon those who insulted them, who could demand gold and jewels in payment for their services without sparking indignation. And if Lord Voldemort conquered Britain, he might then condescend to show himself noble in victory; and nobody would take his goodwill for granted, nor chirp corrections at him if his work was not to their liking. When he won, he would have *true* respect. I understood that day in the Ministry that by envying Dumbledore, I had shown myself as deluded as Dumbledore himself. I understood that I had been trying for the wrong place all along. You should know this to be true, boy, for you have made freer to speak ill of Dumbledore than you ever dared speak ill of me. Even in your own thoughts, I wager, for instinct runs deep. You knew that it might be to your cost to mock the strong and vengeful Professor Quirrell, but that there was no cost in disrespecting the weak and harmless Dumbledore."

"Thank you," Harry said through the pain, "for that valuable lesson, Professor Quirrell, I see that you are right about what my mind was doing." Though Tom Riddle's memories had probably also had something to do with the way he had sometimes lashed out at Dumbledore for no good reason, Harry hadn't been like that around Professor McGonagall... who admittedly had the power to deduct House Points and didn't have Dumbledore's air of tolerance... no, it was still true, Harry would have been more respectful even in his own thoughts if Dumbledore had not seemed *safe* to disrespect.

So that had been David Monroe, and that had been Lord Voldemort...

It still hadn't answered the most puzzling question, and Harry wasn't sure that asking it would be wise. If, somehow, Lord Voldemort had managed *not to think of it*, and then Professor Quirrell had still managed not to think of it during nine years of contemplation, then it wasn't wise to say... or maybe it was; the agonies of the Wizarding War had not been good for Britain.

Harry decided, and spoke. "One thing that did confuse me was why the Wizarding War lasted so long," Harry ventured. "I mean, maybe I'm underestimating the difficulties that were facing Lord Voldemort—"

"You want to know why I did not Imperius some of the stronger wizards who could Imperius others, slay the very strongest wizards who could have resisted my Imperius, and take over the Ministry in, oh, perhaps three days."

Harry nodded silently.

Professor Quirrell looked contemplative; his hand was sifting grass clippings into the cauldron, bit by bit. That ingredient, if Harry remembered correctly, was something like four-fifths towards the end of the recipe.

"I wondered that myself," the Defense Professor said finally, "when I heard Trelawney's prophecy from Snape, and I contemplated the past as well as the future. If you had asked my past self why he did not use the Imperius, he would have spoken of the need to be *seen* to rule, to openly command the Ministry bureaucracy, before it was time to turn his eyes outward to other countries. He would have remarked on how a quick and silent victory might bring challenges later. He would have remarked on the obstacle presented by Dumbledore and his incredible defensive prowess. And he would have had similar excuses for every other quick path he considered. Somehow it was never the right time to bring my plans to their final phase, there was always one more thing to do first. Then I heard the prophecy and I *knew* that it was time, for Time itself was taking notice of me. That the span for hesitation was done. And I looked back, and realised somehow this had been going on for years. I think..." The occasional bit of grass was still dropping down from his hand, but Professor Quirrell did not seem to pay it any mind. "I thought, when

I was contemplating my past beneath the starlight, that I had become too accustomed to playing against Dumbledore. Dumbledore was intelligent, he tried diligently to be cunning, he did not wait for me to strike but presented me with surprises. He made bizarre moves that played out in fascinating and unpredictable ways. In retrospect, there were many obvious plans for destroying Dumbledore; but I think some part of me did not want to go back to playing solitaire instead of chess. It was when I had the prospect of creating another Tom Riddle to plot against, someone even more worthy than Dumbledore, that I was first willing to contemplate the end of my war. Yes, in retrospect that sounds stupid, but sometimes our emotions are more foolish than we can bring our reason to admit. I would never have espoused such a policy deliberately. It would have violated Rules Nine, Sixteen, Twenty, and Twenty-two and that is too much even if you are enjoying yourself. But to repeatedly decide that there was one more thing left to be done, one more advantage left to be gained, one more piece that I simply *had* to move into place, before abandoning an enjoyable time in my life and moving on to the more tedious rulership of Britain... well, even I am not immune to a mistake like that, if I do not realize that I am making it."

And that was when Harry knew what was going to happen at the end of this, after the Philosopher's Stone had been retrieved.

At the end of this, Professor Quirrell was going to kill him.

Professor Quirrell didn't want to kill him. It was possible that Harry was the only person in the world against whom Professor Quirrell *wouldn't* be able to use a Killing Curse. But Professor Quirrell thought he had to do it, for whatever reason.

That was why Professor Quirrell had decided that it was necessary to brew the *potion of effulgence* the long way. That was why Professor Quirrell had been so easily negotiated into answering these questions, into finally talking about his life with someone who might understand. Just like Lord Voldemort had delayed the end of the Wizarding War to play longer against Dumbledore.

Harry couldn't exactly recall what Professor Quirrell had said earlier about not killing Harry. It hadn't been anything straightforward along the lines of 'I am absolutely not planning to kill you in any way, shape,

or form unless you positively insist on doing something stupid'. Harry had been reluctant himself to push the promise too far and insist on unambiguous terms because Harry had already known that he would need to neutralize Lord Voldemort and had expected more precise language to reveal that fact, if they tried to exchange truly binding promises. So there certainly would have been loopholes, whatever had been said.

There was no particular shock to the realization, just an increased sense of urgency; some part of Harry had already known this, and had simply been waiting for an excuse to make it known to deliberation. There had been too many things said here that Professor Quirrell would not reveal to anyone with an expected lifespan measured in more than hours. The overwhelming isolation and loneliness of the life Professor Quirrell had described might explain why he was willing to violate his Rules and talk with Harry, *given* that Harry was going to die soon and that the world did not actually work like a play where the villain disclosing his plans would always fail to kill the hero afterward. But Harry's death certainly had to be in those future plans somewhere.

Harry swallowed, controlling his breathing. Professor Quirrell had just added a tuft of horsethair to the *potion of effulgence*, and that was very late in the potion, if Harry remembered correctly. There weren't many bellflowers left in the heap to be added, either.

It was probably time to stop worrying so much about risk and play this conversation less conservatively, all things considered.

"If I point out one of Lord Voldemort's mistakes," Harry said, "does he punish me for it?"

Professor Quirrell lifted his eyebrows. "Not if the mistake is a real one. I do not suggest that you moralise at me. But I would not curse the bearer of bad news, nor the subordinate who makes an honest attempt to point out a problem. Even as Lord Voldemort I could never bring myself to that stupidity. Of course, there were some fools who mistook my policy for weakness, who tried to thrust themselves forward by pushing me down in their public counsel, thinking me obliged to tolerate it as criticism." Professor Quirrell smiled reminiscently. "The Death Eaters were better off without them, and I do not advise you make the same mistake."

Harry nodded, a slight shiver going through him. "Um, when you told

me about what happened in Godric's Hollow, on Halloween night, in 1981 I mean, um... I thought I saw another flaw in your reasoning. A way you could have avoided disaster. But, um, I think you have a blind spot, a class of strategies you don't consider, so you didn't see it even afterward—"

"I hope you are not about to say anything stupid along the lines of 'don't try to kill people,'" Professor Quirrell said. "I shall be unhappy if that is the case."

"Not valuess difference. True misstake, given your goalss. Will you hurt me, if I act the part of the teacher toward you, and teach lessson? Or if misstake is ssimple and obviousss, and makess you feel sstupid?"

"No," hissed Professor Quirrell. *"Not if lessson iss true."*

Harry swallowed. "Um. Why didn't you test the horcrux system before you actually had to use it?"

"Test it?" said Professor Quirrell. He looked up from the brewing potion, and indignation came into his voice. "What do you mean, *test it*?"

"Why didn't you test if the horcrux system was working correctly, before you needed it on Halloween?"

Professor Quirrell looked disgusted. "You ridiculous—I didn't want to *die*, Mr. Potter, and that was the only way to test my great creation! What good would it have done to risk my life sooner rather than later? How would I have been better off?"

Harry swallowed a lump in his throat. *"There wass way for you to tesst your horcrux ssystem without dying.* The general lesson is important. Do you see it now?"

"No," Professor Quirrell said after a while. The Defense Professor gently crumbled one of the last bellflowers together with a strand of long blonde hair and then dropped it into the potion, which was bubbling brighter, now. Only two more bellflowers remained on the Potions table. "And I do hope your lesson is a sensible one, for your sake."

"Suppose, Professor, that I learned how to cast the improved horcrux spell and I was willing to use it. What would I do with it?"

Professor Quirrell answered at once. "You would find some person whom you found morally abhorrent and whose death you could convince yourself would save other lives, and murder them to create a horcrux."

"And then what?"

"Make more horcruxes," said the Defense Professor. He picked up a jar of what looked like dragon scales.

"Before that," Harry said.

After a time the Defense Professor shook his head. "I still do not see it, and you will cease this game and tell me."

"I would make horcruxes for my friends. If you'd ever really cared about one single other person in the entire world, if there'd been just one person who gave your immortality *meaning*, someone that you wanted to live forever *with* you—" Harry's throat choked. "Then, then the idea of making a horcrux for someone else wouldn't have been such a counterintuitive thought." Harry was blinking hard. "You have a blind spot around strategies that involve doing nice things for other people, to the point where it stops you from achieving your selfish values. You think... it's not your style, I suppose. That... particular part of your self-image... is what cost you those nine years."

The dropper of mint oil that the Defense Professor was holding added liquid to the cauldron, drip by drip.

"I see..." the Defense Professor said slowly. "I see. I should have taught Rabastan the advanced horcrux ritual, and forced him to test the invention. Yes, that is supremely obvious in retrospect. For that matter, I could have ordered Rabastan to try marking himself onto some disposable infant, to see what happened, before I took myself to Godric's Hollow to create you." Professor Quirrell shook his head bemusedly. "Well. I am glad I am realizing this now and not ten years earlier; I had enough to chide myself for at that time."

"You don't see nice ways to do *the things you want to do*," Harry said. His ears heard a note of desperation in his own voice. "Even when a nice strategy would be *more effective* you don't see it because you have a self-image of *not being nice*."

"That is a fair observation," said Professor Quirrell. "Indeed, now that you have pointed it out, I have just now thought of some nice things I can do this very day, to further my agenda."

Harry just looked at him.

Professor Quirrell was smiling. "Your lesson is a good one, Mr. Potter. From now on, until I learn the trick of it, I shall keep diligent watch for

cunning strategies that involve doing kindnesses for other people. Go and practice acts of goodwill, perhaps, until my mind goes there easily.”

Cold chills ran down Harry’s spine.

Professor Quirrell had said this without the slightest visible hesitation.

Lord Voldemort was absolutely certain that he could never be redeemed. He wasn’t the tiniest bit afraid of it happening to him.

The second-to-last bellflower was dropped into the potion, gently.

“Any other valuable lessons you would like to teach to Lord Voldemort, boy?” said Professor Quirrell. He was looking up from the potion, and grinning as though he knew exactly what Harry was thinking.

“Yes,” Harry said, his voice almost breaking. “If your goal is to obtain happiness, then doing nice things for other people feels better than doing them for yourself—”

“Do you *really* think I never thought of that, boy?” The smile had vanished. “Do you think I am stupid? After graduating Hogwarts I wandered the world for years, before I returned to Britain as Lord Voldemort. I have put on more faces than I bothered counting. Do you think I never tried to play the hero, just to see how it would feel? Have you come across the name of Alexander Chernyshov? Under that guise, I sought out a forlorn hellhole ruled over by a Dark Wizard, and I freed the wretched inhabitants from their bondage. They wept tears of gratitude for me. It did not feel like anything in particular. I even stayed about and killed the next five Dark Wizards to try taking command of the place. I spent my own Galleons—well, not my own Galleons, but the same principle applies—to prettify their little country and introduce a semblance of order. They groveled all the more, and named one in three of their infants Alexander. I still felt nothing, so I nodded to myself, wrote it off as a fair try, and went upon my way.”

“And were you happy as Lord Voldemort, then?” Harry’s voice had risen, grown wild.

Professor Quirrell hesitated, then shrugged. “It appears you already know the answer to that.”

“Then *why*? Why be Voldemort if it *doesn’t even make you happy*?” Harry’s voice broke. “I’m you, I’m based on you, so I *know* that Professor

Quirrell isn't just a mask! I *know* he's somebody you really could have been! Why not just stay that way? Take your curse off the Defense Position and just *stay here*, use the Philosopher's Stone to take David Monroe's shape and let the real Quirinus Quirrell go free, if you say you'll stop killing people I'll swear not to tell anyone who you really are, just *be Professor Quirrell*, for always! Your students *would* appreciate you, my father's students appreciate *him*—"

Professor Quirrell was chuckling over the cauldron as he stirred it. "There are perhaps fifteen thousand wizards living in magical Britain, child. There used to be more. There's a reason they're afraid to speak my name. You'd forgive me that because you liked my Battle Magic lessons?"

Secoded, said Harry's inner Hufflepuff. *Seriously, what the hell?*

Harry kept his head raised, though it was trembling. "It's not my place to forgive anything you've done. But it's better than another war."

"Ha," said the Defense Professor. "If you ever find a Time-Turner that goes back forty years and can alter history, be sure to tell Dumbledore that before he rejects Tom Riddle's application for the Defense position. But alas, I fear that Professor Riddle would not have found lasting happiness in Hogwarts."

"Why not?"

"Because I still would've been surrounded by idiots, and I wouldn't have been able to kill them," Professor Quirrell said mildly. "Killing idiots is my great joy in life, and I'll thank you not to speak ill of it until you've tried it for yourself."

"There's *something* that would make you happier than that," Harry said, his voice breaking again. "There has to be."

"Why?" said Professor Quirrell. "Is this some scientific law I have not yet encountered? Tell me of it."

Harry opened his mouth, but couldn't find any words, there had to be something *had to be something* if he could just find the right thing to say—

"And *you*," said Professor Quirrell, "have no right to speak of happiness either. Happiness is not what you hold precious above all. You decided that in the beginning, all the way back in the beginning of this year, when the Sorting Hat offered you Hufflepuff. Which I know about, because I received a similar offer and warning all those years ago, and I

refused it just as you did. Beyond this there is little more to say, between Tom Riddles." The Defense Professor turned back to the cauldron.

Before Harry could think of any way to reply, Professor Quirrell dropped in the last bellflower, and a burst of glowing bubbles boiled up from the cauldron.

"I believe we are done here," Professor Quirrell said. "If you have further questions, they must wait."

Harry shakily rose to his feet; even as Professor Quirrell took up the cauldron and poured out a ridiculously huge volume of effulgent liquid, more than seemed like it could fit in a dozen cauldrons, onto the purple fire that guarded the doorway.

The purple fire winked out.

"Now for the Mirror," said Professor Quirrell, and he drew forth the Cloak of Invisibility from his robes, and floated it to drop before Harry's shoes.

CHAPTER TEN

REFLECTIONS

Even the greatest artifact can be defeated by a counter-artifact that is lesser, but specialized.

That was what the Defense Professor had told Harry, after dropping the True Cloak of Invisibility to pool in fuliginous folds near Harry's shoes.

The Mirror of Perfect Reflection has power over what is reflected within it, and that power is said to be unchallengeable. But since the True Cloak of Invisibility produces a perfect absence of image, it should evade this principle rather than challenging it.

There had followed a series of questions in Parseltongue establishing that Harry currently did not intend to do anything stupid or try to run away, and further reminders that Professor Quirrell could sense him and had spells to detect the Cloak and was holding hostage hundreds of lives plus Hermione.

Then Harry was told to don the Cloak, open the door that lay beyond the quenched fires, and advance through the door into the final chamber; as Professor Quirrell stood well back, outside of that door's sight.

The last chamber was illuminated in lights of soft gold, and the stone walls were of gentle white and faced with marble.

In the center of the room stood a simple and unornamented golden frame, and within the frame was a portal to another gold-illuminated room, beyond whose door which lay another Potions chamber; that was what Harry's brain told him. The Mirror's transformation of light was so perfect that conscious thought was required to deduce that the room inside the frame was only a reflection, rather than a portal. (Though it might have been easier to intuit if Harry hadn't been invisible, just then.)

The Mirror did not touch the ground; the golden frame had no feet. It didn't look like it was hovering; it looked like it was fixed in place, more solid and more motionless than the walls themselves, like it was nailed to the reference frame of the Earth's motion.

"Is the Mirror there? Is it moving?" came Professor Quirrell's commanding voice from the Potions Chamber.

"*Iss there,*" Harry hissed back. "*Not moving.*"

Again tones of command rang forth. "Walk around to the back of the Mirror."

From behind, the golden frame appeared solid, showing no reflections, and Harry said so in Parseltongue.

"Now take off your Cloak," commanded Professor Quirrell's voice still from within the Potions room. "Report to me at once if the Mirror moves to face you."

Harry took off his Cloak.

The Mirror remained nailed to the reference frame of Earth's motion; and Harry reported this.

Shortly after there came a hissing and seething, and a balefire phoenix melted through the marble wall behind Harry, the ambient light in the room taking on a red tinge as it entered. Professor Quirrell followed behind it, walking out of the new-made corridor that had been carved, his black formal shoes unharmed by the red-glowing molten surface beneath. "Well," Professor Quirrell said, "that is one possible trap averted. And now..." Professor Quirrell exhaled. "Now we will think of possible strategies for retrieving the Stone from the Mirror, and you will try them; for I prefer not to let my own image be reflected. I give you fair warning, this is the part that may prove tedious."

"I take it this isn't a problem you can solve with Fiendfyre?"

"Ha," said Professor Quirrell, and gestured.

The balefire phoenix moved forward in a rush of crimson terror, the red light casting writhing shadows on the remaining marble walls. Harry jumped back before he could think.

The dreadful dark-red blaze rushed past Professor Quirrell, surged into the golden back of the Mirror, and disappeared as fast as it touched the gold.

Then the fire was gone, and the room was tinged scarlet no more.

There was no scratch upon the golden surface, no glow to mark the absorption of heat. The Mirror had simply remained in place, untouched.

Chills went down Harry's spine. If he'd been playing Dungeons and Dragons and the dungeon master had reported that result, Harry would have suspected a mental illusion, and rolled to disbelieve.

Upon the center of the golden back had appeared a sequence of runes in no known alphabet, black absences of light in small lines and curves, arranged in a level horizontal row. The thought occurred to Harry that some minor concealing illusion had been consumed in the Fiendfyre, a far lesser enchantment that had been added to prevent children from seeing those letters...

"How old is this Mirror?" Harry said in almost a whisper.

"Nobody knows, Mr. Potter." The Defense Professor reached out his fingers toward the runes, a look of something like reverence on his face; but his fingers did not touch the gold. "But my guess is the same as yours, I think. It is said, in certain legends that may or may not be fabrications, that this Mirror reflects *itself* perfectly and therefore its existence is absolutely stable. So stable that the Mirror was able to survive when every other effect of Atlantis was undone, all its consequences severed from Time. You can see why I was amused when you suggested Fiendfyre." The Defense Professor let his hand fall.

Even in the middle of everything else, Harry felt the awe, if that was true. The golden frame gleamed no brighter than before, for all the revelation; but you could imagine it going back, and back, into a civilization that had been made to never be... "What—does the Mirror *do*, exactly?"

"An excellent question," said Professor Quirrell. "The answer is in the runes that are written upon the Mirror's golden back. Read them to me."

"They're not in any alphabet I recognize. They look like randomly oriented chicken-scratches drawn by Tolkien elves."

"Read them anyway. *Iss not dangerous.*"

"The runes say, *noitilov detalo partxe tnere hoc ruoy tu becafruoy ton wo hsi—*" Harry stopped, feeling more prickles at his spine.

Harry knew what the rune for noitilov *meant*. It meant noitilov. And the next runes said to detalo the noitilov until it reached partxe, then

keep the part that was both tner and hoc. That belief felt like knowledge, like he could have answered 'Yes' with confident authority if somebody asked him whether the ton wo was ruoy or becafruoy. It was just that when Harry tried to relate those concepts to any other concepts, he drew a blank.

"Do you undersstand what wordss mean, boy?"

"Don't think sso."

Professor Quirrell gave a soft exhalation, his eyes not leaving the golden frame. "I had wondered if perhaps the Words of False Comprehension might be understandable to a student of Muggle science. Apparently not."

"Maybe—" Harry began.

Really, Ravenclaw? said Slytherin. *You're pulling this NOW?*

"Maybe I could try again to understand the words if I knew more about the Mirror?" said Harry's Ravenclaw part, which had assumed direct control.

Professor Quirrell's lips quirked up. "As with most ancient things, scholars have written down enough lies that it is hard to be sure of anything by now. It is definite that the Mirror is at least as old as Merlin, for it is known that Merlin used it as a tool. It is also known that after his death, Merlin left written instructions that the Mirror did not need to be sealed away, despite it having certain powers that might normally cause one to worry. He wrote that, given how painstakingly the Mirror had been crafted to not destroy the world, it would be easier to destroy the world using a lump of cheese."

This statement struck Harry as not entirely reassuring.

"Certain other facts about the Mirror are attested by famous wizards who were reasonably skeptical, and whose word has otherwise proven reliable. The Mirror's most characteristic power is to create alternate realms of existence, though these realms are only as large in size as what can be seen within the Mirror; it is known that people and other objects can be stored therein. It is claimed by several authorities that the Mirror alone of all magics possesses a true moral orientation, though I am not sure what that could mean in practical terms. I would expect moralists to call the Cruciatus Curse by their name of 'evil' and the Patronus Charm

by their name of ‘good’; I cannot guess what a moralist would think was any *more* moral than that. But it is claimed, for example, that phoenixes came into our world from a realm that was evoked inside this Mirror.”

Words like *Jeepers* and what his parents would have termed inappropriate language were all running through Harry’s head, none very coherently, as he stared at the golden back of the Mirror.

“I have wandered the world and encountered many stories that are not often heard,” said Professor Quirrell. “Most of them seemed to me to be lies, but a few had the ring of history rather than storytelling. Upon a wall of metal in a place where no one had come for centuries, I found written the claim that some Atlanteans foresaw their world’s end, and sought to forge a device of great power to avert the inevitable catastrophe. If that device had been completed, the story claimed, it would have become an absolutely stable existence that could withstand the channeling of unlimited magic in order to grant wishes. And also—this was said to be the vastly harder task—the device would somehow avert the inevitable catastrophes any sane person would expect to follow from that premise. The aspect I found interesting was that, according to the tale writ upon those metal plates, the rest of Atlantis ignored this project and went upon their ways. It was sometimes praised as a noble public endeavor, but nearly all other Atlanteans found more important things to do on any given day than help. Even the Atlantean nobles ignored the prospect of somebody other than themselves obtaining unchallengeable power, which a less experienced cynic might expect to catch their attention. With relatively little support, the tiny handful of would-be makers of this device labored under working conditions that were not so much dramatically arduous, as pointlessly annoying. Eventually time ran out and Atlantis was destroyed with the device still far from complete. I recognise certain echoes of my own experience that one does not usually see invented in mere tales.” A twist in the dry smile. “But perhaps that is merely my own preference for one tale among a hundred other legends. You perceive, however, the echo of Merlin’s statement about the Mirror’s creators shaping it to not destroy the world. Most importantly for our purposes, it may explain why the Mirror would have the previously unknown capability that Dumbledore or Perenelle seems to have evoked, of showing any person who steps before

it an illusion of a world in which one of their desires has been fulfilled. It is the sort of sensible precaution you can imagine someone building into a wish-granting creation meant to not go horribly wrong.”

“Wow,” Harry whispered, and meant it. This was Magic with a capital M, the sort of Magic that appeared in *So You Want To Be A Wizard*, not just a collection of random physics-violating things you could do with a wand.

Professor Quirrell gestured at the golden back. “The final property upon which most tales agree, is that whatever the unknown means of commanding the Mirror—of that Key there are no plausible accounts—the Mirror’s instructions cannot be shaped to react to individual people. So it is not possible for Perenelle to command this Mirror, ‘only give the Stone to Perenelle’. Dumbledore cannot state, ‘Only give the Stone to one who wishes to give it to Nicholas Flamel’. There is in the Mirror a blindness such as philosophers have attributed to ideal justice; it must treat all who come before it by the same rule, whatever rule may be in force. Thus, there must be some rule for reaching the Stone’s hiding-place which anyone can invoke. And now you see why *you*, called the Boy-Who-Lived, shall implement whatever strategies the two of us devise. For it was said that this thing possesses a moral orientation, and it may have been given commands reflecting the same. I am well aware that on conventional terms you are said to be Good, just as I am said to be Evil.” Professor Quirrell smiled, rather darkly. “So as our first attempt—though not our last, rest assured—let us see what this Mirror makes of your attempt to retrieve the Stone in order to save the life of Hermione Granger and hundreds of your fellow students.”

“And the *first* version of that plan,” said Harry, who was beginning to finally understand, “the one you invented on Friday in my first week of Hogwarts, called for the Stone to be retrieved by Dumbledore’s golden child, the Boy-Who-Lived, making a selfless and noble attempt to save the life of his dying Defense teacher, Professor Quirrell.”

“Of course,” said Professor Quirrell.

It was a poetical sort of plot, Harry supposed, but his appreciation of that elegance was being hampered by the surrounding circumstances.

Then another thought occurred to Harry.

“Um,” Harry said. “You think that this Mirror is a trap for you—”

"There is no way beneath the heavens that it is not meant as a trap."

"That is to say, it's a trap for Lord Voldemort. Only it can't be a trap for him personally. There has to be a general rule that underlies it, some generalizable quality of Lord Voldemort that triggers it." Without conscious awareness, Harry was frowning hard at the Mirror's golden back.

"As you say," said Professor Quirrell, who was beginning to frown at Harry's frowning.

"Well, on the first Thursday of this year, the mad Headmaster Dumbledore, who I'd just seen incinerate a chicken, told me that I had no chance whatsoever of getting into his forbidden corridor, since I didn't know the spell *Alohomora*."

"I see," said Professor Quirrell. "Oh, dear. I wish you had thought to mention this to me a good deal earlier."

Neither of them needed to state aloud the obvious, that this bit of reverse reverse psychology had successfully ensured that Harry would stay the heck away from Dumbledore's forbidden corridor.

Harry was still concentrating. "Do you think Dumbledore suspects that I am, in his terms, a horcrux of Lord Voldemort, or more generally, that some aspects of my personality were copied off Lord Voldemort?" Even as Harry asked this aloud, he realized what a dumb question it was, and how much completely blatant evidence he'd already seen that—

"Dumbledore cannot *possibly* have missed it," said Professor Quirrell. "It is not exactly subtle. What else is Dumbledore to think, that you are an actor in a play whose stupid author has never met a real eleven-year-old? Only a gibbering dullard would believe that—ah, never mind."

The two of them stared at the Mirror in silence.

Finally Professor Quirrell sighed. "I have outwitted myself, I fear. Neither you nor I dare be reflected in this Mirror. I suppose I must command Professor Sprout to undo my Obliviations of Mr. Nott and Miss Greengrass... You see, the other great difficulty of the Mirror is that the rule by which it treats those reflected will disregard external forces, such as False Memories or a Confundus Charm. The Mirror reflects only those forces arising from within the person themselves, the states of mind they arrive at through their own choices; so it is said in several places. That is why I had Mr. Nott and Miss Greengrass, believing different stories about why

the Stone's extraction was necessary, ready to appear before this Mirror." Professor Quirrell rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "I constructed other stories for other students, ready for me to set into motion with the chosen trigger... but as this day approached, I began to feel pessimistic about the project. Such as Nott and Greengrass still seem worth trying, if we cannot think of something better. But I wonder if Dumbledore has tried to construct this puzzle to specifically resist Voldemort's cunning. I wonder if he might have succeeded. If you devise an alternative plan which I approve enough to try, *I promise that whatever pawn I send forth shall not be harmed by me, then or ever; nor do I expect to break that promise.* And I remind you again of the hostages I hold to my failure, both Miss Granger and all the others."

Again they stared at the mirror in silence, the elder Tom Riddle and the younger.

"I suspect, Professor," Harry said after a time, "that your entire class of hypotheses about somebody needing to want the Stone for good or honest purposes is mistaken. The Headmaster wouldn't set a retrieval rule like that."

"Why?"

"Because Dumbledore knows how easy it is to end up believing that you're doing the right thing when you're actually not. It'd be the first possibility he imagined."

"Is it truth or trickery that I hear?"

"Am being honest," Harry said.

Professor Quirrell nodded. "Then your point is well taken."

"I'm not sure why you think this puzzle is solvable," Harry said. "Just set a rule like, your left hand must hold a small blue pyramid and two large red pyramids, and your right hand must be squeezing mayonnaise onto a hamster—"

"No," Professor Quirrell said. "No, I think not. The legends are unclear on what rules can be given, but I think it must have something to do with the Mirror's original intended use—it must have something to do with the deep desires and wishes arising from within the person. Squeezing mayonnaise onto a hamster will not qualify as that, for most people."

"Huh," Harry said. "Maybe the rule is that the person has to not want to use the Stone at all—no, that's too easy, the story you gave Mr. Nott solves it."

"In some ways you may understand Dumbledore better than I," said Professor Quirrell. "So now I ask you this: how would Dumbledore use his notion of the acceptance of death to guard this Stone? For that above all he thinks I cannot comprehend, and he is not far wrong."

Harry thought about this for a while, considering several ideas and discarding them. And then, having thought of something, Harry considered remaining silent... before mapping out the obvious part of the future conversation where Professor Quirrell asked him to say in Parseltongue if he'd thought of something.

Reluctantly, Harry spoke. "Would Dumbledore think that this Mirror could reach the afterlife? Could he put the Stone into something that he *thinks* is an afterlife, so that only people who believe in an afterlife can see it?"

"Hm..." Professor Quirrell said. "Possibly... yes, there is a certain plausibility to it. Using this setting of the Mirror to show people their heart's desires... Albus Dumbledore would see himself reunited with his family. He would see himself united with them *in death*, wanting to die himself rather than wishing for them to be returned to life. His brother Aberforth, his sister Ariana, his parents Kendra and Percival... it would be Aberforth to whom Dumbledore gave the Stone, I think. Would the Mirror recognize that Aberforth particularly had been given the Stone? Or will any person's dead relative do, if that person believes their relative's spirit would give them back the Stone?" Professor Quirrell was pacing in a short circle, keeping well away from Harry and the Mirror as he moved. "But all this is only one idea. Let us devise another."

Harry began to tap his cheek, then stopped abruptly as he realized where he'd picked up that gesture. "What if Perenelle is the one who put the Stone in here? Maybe she keyed the Mirror to give the Stone only to the person who put it in originally."

"Perenelle has lived this long by knowing her limitations," said Professor Quirrell. "She does not overestimate her own intellect, she is not prideful, if that were so she would have lost the Stone long ago. Perenelle

will not try to think of a good Mirror-rule herself, not when Master Flamel can leave the matter in Dumbledore's wiser hands... but the rule of only returning the Stone to the one who remembers placing it, also works if Dumbledore himself has placed the Stone. It would be a hard rule to bypass, since I cannot simply Confund someone into believing that they put in the Stone... I would have to create a false Stone, and a false Mirror, and arrange the drama..." Professor Quirrell was frowning, now. "But it is still something that Dumbledore would imagine Voldemort being able to arrange, given time. If at all possible, Dumbledore will want to make the key to the Mirror a state of mind he thinks I *cannot* arrange in a pawn—or a rule that Dumbledore thinks Voldemort can never comprehend, such as a rule involving the acceptance of one's own death. That is why I considered your previous idea plausible."

Then Harry had an idea.

He was not sure if it was a good idea.

...it wasn't like Harry had a lot of choice here.

"Arguendo," Harry said. "We're not sure what's necessary to retrieve the Stone. But a *sufficient* condition should involve Albus Dumbledore, or maybe someone else, in a state of mind where they believe that the Dark Lord has been defeated, that the threat is over, and that it is time to take out the Stone and give it back to Nicholas Flamel. We aren't sure which part of that person's state of mind, let's say Dumbledore's, will be the necessary part that he thinks Lord Voldemort can't understand or duplicate; but under those conditions Dumbledore's entire state of mind will be *sufficient*."

"Reasonable," said Professor Quirrell. "So?"

"The corresponding strategy," Harry said carefully, "is to mimic Dumbledore's state of mind under those conditions, in as much detail as possible, while standing in front of the mirror. And this state of mind must have been produced by internal forces, not external ones."

"But how are we to get that without Legilimency or the Confundus Charm, both of which would certainly be external—ha. I *see*." Professor Quirrell's ice-pale eyes were suddenly piercing. "You suggest that I Confund *myself*, as you cast that hex upon yourself during your first day in Battle Magic. So that it is an internal force and not an external one, a

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state of mind that comes about through only my own choices. Say to me whether you have made this suggestion with the intention of trapping me, boy. Say it to me in Parseltongue.”

“My mind that you assked to devisse ssstrategy may perhapss have been influenced by ssuch an intent—who knowss? Knew you would be ssusspiciouss, assk thiss very question. Decission is up to you, teacher. I know nothing you do not know, about whether thiss iss likely to trap you. Do not call it betrayal by me if you choosse thiss for yourssself, and it failss.” Harry felt a strong impulse to smile, and suppressed it.

“Lovely,” said Professor Quirrell, who was smiling. “I suppose there are some threats from an inventive mind that even questioning in Parseltongue cannot neutralize.”

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Harry put on the Cloak of Invisibility, at Professor Quirrell’s orders, to *sstop the man who sshall believe himssself to be sschoolmasster from sseeing you*, as Professor Quirrell said in Parseltongue.

“Wearing the Cloak or no, you will stand in range of the Mirror yourself,” Professor Quirrell said. “If a gush of lava comes forth, you will also burn. I feel that much symmetry should apply.”

Professor Quirrell pointed to a spot near the right of the door through which they’d entered the room, before the Mirror and well back of it. Harry, wearing the Cloak, went to where Professor Quirrell had pointed him, and did not argue. It was increasingly unclear to Harry whether both Riddles dying here would be a bad thing, even with hundreds of other student hostages at stake. For all of Harry’s good intentions, he’d mostly shown himself so far to be an idiot, and the returned Lord Voldemort was a threat to the entire world.

(Though either way, Harry couldn’t see Dumbledore doing the lava thing. Dumbledore was probably sufficiently angry at Voldemort to discard his usual restraint, but lava wouldn’t permanently stop an entity that Dumbledore believed to be a disincorporate soul.)

Then Professor Quirrell pointed with his wand, and a shimmering circle appeared around where Harry was standing on the floor. This, Professor Quirrell said, would soon become a Greater Circle of Concealment, by which nothing within that circle could be heard or seen from the outside. Harry would not be able to make himself apparent to the false Dumbledore by taking off the Cloak, nor by shouting.

"You *will not* cross this circle once it is active," Professor Quirrell said. "That would cause you to touch my magic, and while Confunded I might not remember how to halt the resonance that would destroy us both. And further, since I do not want you throwing shoes—" Professor Quirrell made another gesture, and just within the Greater Circle of Concealment, a slight shimmer appeared in the air, a globe-shaped distortion. "*This barrier will explode if touched, by you or other material thing.* The resonance might lash at me afterward, but you would also be dead. Now tell me in Parseltongue that you do not intend to cross this circle or take off your Cloak or do *anything* at all impulsive or stupid. Tell you me you will wait quietly here, under the Cloak, until this is over."

This Harry repeated back.

Then Professor Quirrell's robes became black tinged with gold, such robes as Dumbledore might wear upon a formal occasion; and Professor Quirrell pointed his own wand at his head.

Professor Quirrell stayed motionless for a long time, still holding his wand to his head. His eyes were closed in concentration.

And then Professor Quirrell said, "*Confundus.*"

At once the expression of the man standing there changed; he blinked a few times as though confused, lowering his wand.

A deep weariness spread over the face Professor Quirrell had worn; without any visible change his eyes seemed older, the few lines in his face calling attention to themselves.

His lips were set in a sad smile.

Without any hurry, the man quietly walked over to the Mirror, as though he had all the time in the world.

He crossed into the Mirror's range of reflection without anything happening, and stared into the surface.

What the man might be seeing there, Harry could not tell; to Harry it seemed that the flat, perfect surface still reflected the room behind it, like a portal to another place.

"Ariana," breathed the man. "Mother, father. And you, my brother, it is done."

The man stood still, as if listening.

"Yes, done," the man said. "Voldemort came before this mirror, and was trapped by Merlin's method. He is only one more sealed horror now."

Again the listening stillness.

"I would that I could obey you, my brother, but it is better this way." The man bowed his head. "He is denied his death, forever; that vengeance is terrible enough."

Harry felt a twinge, watching this, a sense that this was *not* what Dumbledore would have said, it seemed more like a strawman, a shallow stereotype... but then this wasn't the real Aberforth's spirit either, this was who Professor Quirrell imagined Dumbledore imagined Aberforth was, and that doubly-reflected image of Aberforth wouldn't notice anything amiss...

"It is time to give back the Philosopher's Stone," said the man who thought he was Dumbledore. "It must go back into Master Flamel's keeping, now."

Listening stillness.

"No," said the man, "Master Flamel has kept it safe these many years from all who would seek immortality, and I think it will be safest in his hands... no, Aberforth, I do think his intentions are good."

Harry couldn't control the tension that was running through him like a live wire; he was having trouble breathing. Imperfect, Professor Quirrell's Confundus Charm had been imperfect. The underlying personality of Professor Quirrell was leaking through and seeing the obvious question, why it was okay for Nicholas Flamel himself to have the Stone if immortality was so awful. Even if Professor Quirrell conceptualized Dumbledore as being blind to the question, Professor Quirrell hadn't included a clause in the Confundus saying that *Dumbledore's image of Aberforth* wouldn't think of it; and all of this was ultimately a reflection of

Professor Quirrell's own mind, an image from within the intelligence of Tom Riddle...

"Destroy it?" said the man. "Maybe. I am not sure it *can* be destroyed, or Master Flamel would have done it long since. I think, many times, that he has regretted making it... Aberforth, I promised him, and we are not so ancient or so wise ourselves. The Philosopher's Stone must go back into the keeping of the one who made it."

And Harry's breath stopped.

The man was holding an irregular chunk of scarlet glass in his left hand, the size perhaps of Harry's thumb from fingernail to the first joint. The sheened surface of the scarlet glass made it seem wet; the appearance was of blood, suspended in time and made into a jagged surface.

"Thank you, my brother," the man said quietly.

Is that what the Stone should look like? Does Professor Quirrell know what the true Stone should look like? Will the Mirror give back the real Stone under these conditions, or make an imitation and return that?

And then—

"No, Ariana," the man said, smiling gently, "I fear I must go now. Be patient, my dearest, it will be soon enough that I join you in truth... why? Why, I am not sure why I must go... when I hold the Stone I am to step aside from the Mirror and wait for Master Flamel to contact me, but I am not sure why I need to step aside from the Mirror to do that..." The man sighed. "Ah, I am getting old. It is well this dreadful war ended when it did. I suppose there is no harm if I speak to you for a time, my dearest, if you wish it so."

A headache was starting behind Harry's eyes; some part of Harry was trying to send a message about not having breathed in a while, but no one was listening. *Imperfect*, Professor Quirrell's Confundus Charm had been imperfect, Professor Quirrell's image of Dumbledore's image of Ariana wanted to talk to Dumbledore, and maybe didn't want to wait because Professor Quirrell knew on some level that there wasn't really an afterlife, and the previously implanted impulse to leave after getting the Stone *wasn't standing up to Riddle-Ariana's arguments...*

And then Harry felt himself become very calm. He started breathing again.

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Either way, there wasn't much Harry could do about it. Professor Quirrell had stopped Harry from intervening; well, Professor Quirrell was welcome to reap the consequences of that decision. If the consequences caught Harry as well, so be it.

The man who thought he was Dumbledore was mostly nodding patiently, sometimes replying to his dearest sister. Sometimes the man cast an uneasy look to one side; as if feeling a strong impulse to go, but suppressing that impulse with the great patience and politeness and concern for his sister that Professor Quirrell imagined Albus Dumbledore having.

Harry saw it the instant the Confundus wore off, and the man's expression changed, becoming again the face of Professor Quirrell.

And in the same instant the Mirror changed, no longer showing Harry the reflection of the room, showing instead the form of the real Albus Dumbledore, as though he were standing just behind the Mirror and visible through it.

The real Dumbledore's face was set, and grim.

"Hello, Tom," said Albus Dumbledore.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

REFLECTIONS, PART II

The grimness on Albus Dumbledore's face lasted only an instant before giving way to bewilderment. "Quirinus? What—"

And then there was a pause.

"Well," said Albus Dumbledore. "I do feel stupid."

"I should hope so," Professor Quirrell said easily; if he had been at all shocked himself at being caught, it did not show. A casual wave of his hand changed his robes back to a Professor's clothing.

Dumbledore's grimness had returned and redoubled. "There I am, searching so hard for Voldemort's shade, never noticing that the Defense Professor of Hogwarts is a sickly, half-dead victim possessed by a spirit far more powerful than himself. I would call it senility, if so many others had not missed it as well."

"Quite," said Professor Quirrell. He lifted his eyebrows. "Really, am I that hard to recognise without the glowing red eyes?"

"Oh, yes indeed," Albus Dumbledore said in level tones. "Your acting was perfect; I confess myself utterly deceived. Quirinus Quirrell seemed—what is the term I am looking for? Ah yes, that is the word. He seemed sane."

Professor Quirrell chuckled; he looked for all the world as though the two of them were just having a casual conversation. "I never was insane, you know. Lord Voldemort was just another game for me, the same as Professor Quirrell."

Albus Dumbledore did not look like he was enjoying a casual chat. "I thought you might say that. I regret to inform you, Tom, that anyone who can bring himself to act the part of Voldemort is Voldemort."

"Ah," said Professor Quirrell, raising an admonishing finger. "There is a loophole in that reasoning, old man. Anyone who acts the part of Voldemort must be what moralists call 'evil', on this we agree. But perhaps the real me is completely, utterly, irredeemably evil in an interestingly different fashion from what I was pretending with Voldemort—"

"I find," Albus Dumbledore ground out, "that I do not care."

"Then you must think yourself to be rid of me very soon," said Professor Quirrell. "How interesting. My immortal existence must depend on discovering what trap you have set, and finding a way to escape from it, as soon as possible." Professor Quirrell paused. "But let us pointlessly delay to talk of other matters first. How did you come to be waiting inside the Mirror? I thought you would be elsewhere."

"I am there," Albus Dumbledore said, "and *also* inside the Mirror, unfortunately for you. I have always been here, all along."

"Ah," said Professor Quirrell, and sighed. "I suppose my little distraction was for naught, then."

And the rage of Albus Dumbledore was no longer leashed. "*Distraction?*" roared Dumbledore, his sapphire eyes tight with fury. "*You killed Master Flamel for a distraction?*"

Professor Quirrell looked dismayed. "I am wounded by the injustice of your accusation. I did not kill the one you know as Flamel. I simply commanded another to do so."

"*How could you? Even you, how could you? He was the library of all our lore! Secrets you have forever lost to wizardry!*"

There was an edge to Professor Quirrell's smile, now. "You know, I still do not comprehend how your twisted mind can consider it acceptable for Flamel to be immortal, but when I try for the same it makes me a monster."

"Master Flamel never descended into *immortality*! He—" Dumbledore choked. "He only stayed awake past his evening, for our sakes, through his long, long day—"

"I don't know if you recall this," Professor Quirrell said, his voice airy, "but do you recall that day in your office with Tom Riddle? The one where I begged you, where I went down on my knees and begged you, to introduce me to Nicholas Flamel so that I could ask to become his apprentice,

to someday make for myself the Philosopher's Stone? That was my last attempt to be a good person, if you are curious. You told me no, and gave me a lecture on how unvirtuous it was to be afraid of death. I went from your office in bitterness and in fury. I reasoned that if I was to be called evil in any case, just for not wanting to die, then I might as well be evil; and one month later I killed Abigail Myrtle to pursue immortality by other means. Even when I knew more of Flamel, I remained quite put out with your hypocrisy; and for that reason I tormented you and yours more than I otherwise would have done. I have often felt that you ought to know this, but we never had a chance to talk frankly."

"I decline," said Albus Dumbledore, whose gaze did not waver. "I do not accept the tiniest shred of responsibility for what you have become. That was all, entirely, you and your own decisions."

"I am not surprised to hear you say that," said Professor Quirrell. "Well, now I am curious as to what responsibilities you do accept. You have access to some unusual power of Divination; that much I deduced long ago. You made too many nonsensical moves, and the paths by which they worked out in your favor were too ridiculous. So tell me. Were you forewarned of the result, that night of All Hallow's Eve when I was vanquished for a time?"

"I knew," said Albus Dumbledore, his voice low and cold. "For that, I accept responsibility, which is something you will never understand."

"You arranged for Severus Snape to hear the Prophecy that he brought to me."

"I allowed it to happen," said Albus Dumbledore.

"And there I was, all excited at having finally gained my own foreknowledge." Professor Quirrell shook his head as though in sadness. "So the great hero Dumbledore sacrificed his unwitting pawns, Lily and James Potter, merely to banish me for a few years."

Albus Dumbledore's eyes were like stones. "James and Lily would have gone willingly to the death, if they had known."

"And the little baby?" Professor Quirrell said. "Somehow I doubt the Potters would have been so eager to leave him in the path of You-Know-Who."

You could scarcely see the flinch. “The Boy-Who-Lived came out of it well enough. Tried to turn him into *you*, did you? Instead you turned yourself into a corpse, and Harry Potter became the wizard you should have been.” Now there was something like the usual Dumbledore behind the half-moon glasses, a tiny twinkle in those eyes. “All of Tom Riddle’s icy brilliance, tamed to the service of James and Lily’s warmth and love. I wonder how you felt when you saw what Tom Riddle could have become, if he had grown up in a loving family?”

Professor Quirrell’s lips quirked. “I was surprised, even shocked, by the abyssal depths of Mr. Potter’s naivete.”

“I suppose the humor of the situation would be lost on you.” It was then, finally, that Albus Dumbledore smiled. “How I laughed when I realised it! When I saw you had made a Good Voldemort to oppose the evil one—ah, how I laughed! I never had the steel for my role, but Harry Potter shall be more than equal to it, when he comes into his power.” Albus Dumbledore’s smile disappeared. “Though I suppose Harry shall have to find some other Dark Lord to vanquish for it, since you will not be there.”

“Ah, yes. That.” Professor Quirrell made to walk away from the Mirror, and seemed to halt just before reaching the point where the Mirror would no longer have reflected him, if it had been reflecting him. “Interesting.”

Dumbledore’s smile was colder, now. “No, Tom. You are not going anywhere.”

Professor Quirrell nodded. “What have you done, exactly?”

“You have refused death,” said Dumbledore, “and if I destroyed your body, your spirit would only wander back, like a dumb animal that cannot understand it is being sent away. So I am sending you outside Time, to a frozen instant from which neither I nor any other can return you. Perhaps Harry Potter will be able to retrieve you someday, if prophecy speaks true. He may wish to discuss with you just who is at fault for the deaths of his parents. For you it will only be an instant—if you ever return at all. Either way, Tom, I wish you the best of it.”

“Hm,” said Professor Quirrell. The Defense Professor had paced past where Harry stood, watching mute and with something like horror, only to halt again at the other edge of the mirror. “As I suspected. You are

using Merlin's old method of sealing, what the tale of Topherius Chang names as the Process of the Timeless. If legend speaks true, not even you can stop the process, now that it has been in motion this long."

"Indeed," said Albus Dumbledore. But his eyes were suddenly wary.

And Harry, from where he stood just before and to the right of the door, waiting in silence and controlled terror, could feel it in the air; he could feel the sense of a *presence* gathering within the Mirror's field. Something more alien than magic, everything about it incomprehensible except for the fact of its strangeness and the fact of its power. It had been slow but now it was waxing faster, that presence.

"But you could still reverse the effect, if Chang's account is true," said Professor Quirrell. "Most powers of the Mirror are double-sided, according to legend. So you could banish what is on the other side of the Mirror instead. Send yourself, instead of me, into that frozen instant. If you wanted to, that is."

"And why would I do that?" Albus Dumbledore's voice was tight. "I suppose you are going to tell me that you have taken hostages? That was futile, Tom, you *fool!* You utter *fool!* You should have known that I would give you nothing for any hostages you had taken."

"You always were one step too slow," said Professor Quirrell. "Allow me to introduce you to my hostage."

Another presence invaded the air around Harry, a crawling sensation all over his flesh as another Tom Riddle's magic passed very close to his skin. The Cloak of Invisibility was torn away from him, and the shimmering black Cloak flew away from him, through the air.

Professor Quirrell caught it, and swiftly drew it over himself; in less than a second he had pulled down the Cloak's hood over his head, and disappeared.

Albus Dumbledore staggered, as though some essential support had been removed from him.

"Harry Potter," the Headmaster breathed. "*What are you doing here?*"

Harry stared at the image of Albus Dumbledore, on whose face utter shock and utter dismay were warring.

The guilt and the shame were too much, too much, hitting Harry all at once, and he could feel the incomprehensible presence around him rising

to a peak. Harry knew without words that there was no time left, and that he was done.

"It's my fault," Harry said in a tiny voice, from whatever part of him had taken over his throat in the final extremity. "I was stupid. I've always been stupid. You mustn't rescue me. Goodbye."

"Why, look at that," sang out Professor Quirrell's voice from the empty air, "I don't seem to have a reflection any more."

"No," said Albus Dumbledore. "No, no, *NO!*"

Into the hand of the Albus Dumbledore flew from his sleeve his long, dark-grey wand, and in his other hand, as though from nowhere, appeared a short rod of dark stone.

Albus Dumbledore threw these both violently aside, just as the building sense of power rose to an unbearable peak, and then disappeared.

The Mirror returned to showing the ordinary reflection of a gold-lit room of white stone, without any trace of where Albus Dumbledore had been.

CHAPTER TWELVE

FAILURE, PART I

The Dark Lord was laughing.

From the empty air came the voice of the Defense Professor laughing wildly, so high and terrible his laughter; it was Voldemort's laughter now, the Dark Lord's laughter beyond all hiding or restraint.

Harry's mind was disarrayed. His eyes kept staring at where Albus Dumbledore had been. There was a horror in him that was too huge for understanding or reflection. His mind kept trying to fall back through time and undo reality, but that wasn't a sort of magic that existed, and reality stayed the same.

He had lost, he had lost Dumbledore, there were no take-backs, and that meant he had lost the war.

And the Dark Lord went on laughing.

"Ah, ah hah, ah hah hah ha! Professor Dumbledore, ah, Professor Dumbledore, such a fitting end to our game!" Another burst of wild laughter. "The wrong sacrifice even at the finish, for the piece you gave up everything to save was already in my possession! The wrong trap even from the beginning, for I could have abandoned this body at any time! Ah, hahahaha, aha! You never did learn cunning, you poor old fool."

"You—" A voice was coming from Harry's throat. "You—"

"Ahahahaha! Why, yes, little child, you were always along on this adventure as my hostage, it was your whole purpose in being here. Ha, hahahaha! You are decades too young to play this game against the real Tom Riddle, child." The Dark Lord drew back the hood of the Cloak, his head becoming visible, and began to remove the rest of the Cloak. "And now, boy, *you have helped me, yess indeed, and so it iss time to ressurect your girl-child friend. To keep promise.*" The Dark Lord's smile was cold, cold indeed.

"I suppose you have doubts? Mark well, I could kill you this instant, for there is no longer a Headmaster of Hogwarts to be informed of it. Doubt me all you wish, but remember that." The hand was once more holding the gun. "Now come along, foolish child."

And they left.

They went back out through the door into the Potions room, the Dark Lord banishing the returned purple fire with a stroke of his wand. They went through the chamber where the boggart had been, and the chamber of ruined chess statues, and through the burned door of the chamber of keys. The Dark Lord floated up through the trapdoor, and Harry struggled up afterward through the spiral staircase of leaves, the tendrils of the Devil's Snare twitching and then moving back as though afraid. The Boy-Who-Lived was trying hard not to burst into tears, and his dark-side patterns weren't helping, maybe because Voldemort had never known or dealt with guilt.

They passed the huge three-headed Inferi, and at a whispered word from the Dark Lord it collapsed over the trapdoor and became a corpse again.

They passed Severus Snape standing guard, who told them both that he was guarding the door, and that they must leave or he would deduct House points.

The Dark Lord spoke the words "*Hyakuju montauk*" without pausing in his stride, accompanied by a jab of his wand; and Severus staggered before he lifelessly drew himself up beside the door once more.

"What—" Harry said, as he followed. "What did you—"

"Just fulfilling my obligation to my faithful servant. It shall not kill him, as I promised you." The Dark Lord laughed again.

"The hostages—" Harry said. It was hard to keep his voice steady. "The students, you said you'd stop whatever is going to kill them—"

"Yess. *Sstop worrying. Will do on our way out.*"

"Out?"

"We are leaving, child." The Dark Lord was still smiling.

The bad feeling this raised was lost in a sea of other bad feelings.

The Dark Lord was now consulting what he'd called the Hogwarts Map, the handwritten lines upon it seeming to move as they walked.

Some part of Harry's mind that had been considering what to do if they ran into Aurors on patrol (whom the Dark Lord could kill, or Oblivate, in an instant) gave up that hope as well.

They went down the Grand Staircase to the second floor, encountering no one.

The Dark Lord made a turn Harry did not know, and went down another stair-flight. As they descended past one floor and another, the windows stopped and the torches began, they were within the Slytherin dungeons now.

Ahead, the form of a person in Hogwarts robes appeared.

The Dark Lord kept walking toward that person.

Harry followed.

A sixth or seventh-year Slytherin was waiting by a section of wall that was set with an artistic carving of Salazar Slytherin wielding his wand, against what looked like a giant covered in icicles. The witch made no comment at seeing Professor Quirrell walking upright, or seeing Harry in his company, or seeing the gun in the Defense Professor's hand. If her eyes were blank, Harry couldn't tell the difference.

The Dark Lord reached into his robes, took out a Knut, and flipped it to her. "Klaudia Alicja Tabor, I command you thus. Take this Knut to the spell circle I showed you beneath the Quidditch stands and put it in the center. Then Oblivate yourself of the last six hours."

"Yes, lord," the witch said, bowing to him, and went on her way.

"I thought—" Harry said. "I thought you needed the Stone to—"

The Dark Lord was still smiling, he had never stopped smiling. "I did not say that part in Parseltongue, child. All I said in Parseltongue was that I had set events in motion to kill students, events that I would stop if I obtained the Stone. The rest was in human speech. I would also have stopped the Blood Fort sacrifice if I had not obtained the Stone, so long as I was not discovered and restrained. The students of Hogwarts are a valuable resource, whom I have already spent much time training." Then the Dark Lord hissed to the wall, "*Open.*"

Harry's eyes saw the tiny snake that had been set in the upper-left of the carving, even as the wall slowly swung backward, revealing the open-

ing of a huge pipe. Moss grew on its sides and a musty dusty smell welled up from it; the interior was also covered with cobwebs in multiple sheets.

"Spiders..." murmured the Dark Lord. He sighed, and for that brief moment he sounded once more like Professor Quirrell.

The Dark Lord walked into the huge pipe, the cobwebs burning away before him. Harry, not seeing any other better options, followed.

The pipe branched in a Y-shape, then branched again. The Dark Lord went left, then right.

The pipe came to a solid metal wall. "Open," the Dark Lord hissed, and a crack appeared in the metal; it seemed to fold into itself.

Beyond was the middle of a long, stone tunnel.

"We shall be walking a while," said the Dark Lord. "Did you have more questions to ask, little child?"

"I—I can't think of any—right now—"

Another cold laugh replied to this, and they walked into the tunnel, turning right.

Harry didn't know, then or ever, how long he walked; the light of burning spiderwebs was too dim to read his mechanical watch, and Harry had not thought to look at the time before entering. It felt like they walked for miles, miles beneath the ground.

Slowly, Harry's mind tried to recover itself a final time. Very possibly final, if he was right about the Dark Lord killing him after this... though the Dark Lord had said that he would resurrect Hermione, which seemed pointless if that was true... was that simply the Dark Lord following through on a promise he would not otherwise have been able to make in Parseltongue... why had he not just shot Harry on the spot...

Seriously, some last functioning part of his brain said to all the other parts, this would be a good time to think of something, something that the Dark Lord has not already thought of, something we can do without our pouch or our wand or our Time-Turner, something that Professor Quirrell has not imagined we can do... think, think, pretty pretty please think of something? Don't shut down now, even if you're scared, even if we've never really really faced death before in the sense of being about to die in the next hour, THIS IS NOT THE TIME TO SHUT DOWN—

Harry's mind stayed blank.

Suppose, said that last remaining part, suppose we try to condition on the fact that we win this, or at least get out of this alive. If someone TOLD YOU AS A FACT that you had survived, or even won, somehow made everything turn out okay, what would you think had happened—

Not legitimate procedure, whispered Ravenclaw, the universe doesn't work like that, we're just going to die.

Someone realises we're missing, thought Hufflepuff, and Mad-Eye Moody shows up with a squad of Aurors and rescues us. I think the time has come to admit we're not more competent than the standard authorities.

The saving factor does have to be something we do somehow, said the last voice. Otherwise there's no point in our thinking about it.

Problem two, said Gryffindor. Harry Potter isn't missing, he's right there at the Quidditch match where everyone can see him. Professor Quirrell thought of that too, it's part of why he sent that fake note. Problem three. I don't think Mad-Eye Moody and an Auror squad can beat the Dark Lord, and certainly not before he kills us. I'm not sure the entire DMLE can beat the Dark Lord if he's fighting seriously and Dumbledore is gone. Problem four. The Quidditch match was not disrupted, that's probably the only reason why Professor Quirrell was willing to try something as complicated as bringing us along on this trip in the first place.

Thinking along different lines, ventured Slytherin, maybe Professor Quirrell calls in someone else to Memory-Charm us. Legilimency, Imperius, Confundus, who knows what else, we're not a perfect Occlumens. Then the Dark Lord would have a smart—well, sort-of smart lieutenant that he could use. That could be another reason why Professor Quirrell was so willing to tell us secrets, if he knew that the memory would disappear. It's also a reason to leave the Hogwarts wards, so the Dark Lord can call Bellatrix to Apparate in and do the work...

This entire reasoning process is illegitimate and I refuse to participate, said Ravenclaw.

What lovely last words, said the last voice. Now shut up and think.

Rough stone tunnel went by underfoot, Harry's shoes sometimes dipping into moisture or nearly slipping on a curved surface. The neurons in his brain, which kept on firing, imagined voices talking to each other, yelling at each other, even as the Listener stayed numb with horror and shame.

Gryffindor and Hufflepuff were conducting a debate about suicide by charging the Dark Lord's gun, or by swallowing the little jewel on Harry's steel ring. It seemed unclear whether the fate of the world was better or worse if the Dark Lord had Harry as a mind-slave; if the Dark Lord was going to win anyway, it might be better if he won faster.

And the last voice kept talking through it all; even in the depths of failure that last voice remained. *What else did the Dark Lord always say in human speech and never in Parseltongue? Do we remember? Anything like that, anything at all?*

It was all too distant in time, too distant in time even though it had all happened this very day. The Dark Lord had told him in Parseltongue just now that it was time to revive Hermione, and then he'd said other things all in English, Harry could hardly remember for all that they'd just been spoken. Before then... before then there'd been the Circle of Concealment, when Professor Quirrell had hissed that the barrier would explode if touched. And the Defense Professor had said in English for Harry not to take off his Cloak or try crossing the Circle, said in English that the resonance might strike Professor Quirrell afterwards but Harry would be dead. Said in English that if Harry touched the magic and Professor Quirrell didn't remember how to halt the resonance, it would kill them both...

Suppose it doesn't kill us both, said the last voice. On Halloween in Godric's Hollow, the Dark Lord's body was burned and we only ended up with a scar on our forehead. Suppose the resonance between us is deadlier to the Dark Lord than to us. What if this entire time we've been able to kill the Dark Lord at any time, just by dashing forward and touching our hands to any part of his exposed skin? And then it makes our scar bleed again, but that's all. The sense of 'stop, don't do that' is inherited from the Dark Lord's worst memory of his mistake in Godric's Hollow, it may not actually apply to the Boy-Who-Lived.

A small note of hope rose.

Rose, and was quashed.

The Dark Lord can just throw away his wand, droned Ravenclaw. Professor Quirrell can turn into his Animagus form. Even if he dies the Dark Lord will possess someone else and return, and then torture our parents, to punish us.

We might be able to get to our parents in time, said the last voice. We might

be able to hide them. We might be able to get the Philosopher's Stone away from the Dark Lord if we killed his current body now, and that Stone could provide the nucleus of a counter-army.

The Dark Lord was moving on through the stony corridor. His hand still held the gun. He was at least four meters away from Harry.

If we dart forward, he will sense us approaching through the resonance, said Hufflepuff. He will fly forward rapidly, he can do that, he has the broomstick-enchantments that let him fly. He will fly forward, turn around, and fire the gun. He knows about the resonance, he's thought of this already. This is not something the Dark Lord has failed to consider. He will be ready for it, and waiting.

Continuing the same line of argument, said the last voice. Suppose we can freely cast magic on Professor Quirrell but he can't cast it on us.

Why would that be true? demanded Ravenclaw. In fact, we have evidence that it's false. In Azkaban, when Professor Quirrell's Avada Kedavra hit our Patronus Charm, it felt like our head was splitting apart—

Suppose that was all his magic going out of control. Suppose if we'd just cast, say, a Luminos targeting him, nothing bad would have happened.

But why? said Ravenclaw. Why suppose that?

Because, thought Harry, it explains why Professor Quirrell didn't warn me not to cast any magic on him in Azkaban. Because Professor Quirrell never said in Parseltongue, that I can remember, that I'd hurt myself if I tried to cast magic on him. He could have given me that warning, but he didn't, even though he gave me a lot of other warnings. Absence of evidence is weak evidence of absence.

There was a pause while Harry's parts considered this.

We don't actually have our wand, said Ravenclaw.

We might get it back at some point, thought the last voice.

But even then, Harry thought, and the grey hopelessness returned, the resonance is something the Dark Lord knows about. He's already thought of everything I can do with that, he already has a response prepared. That was my mistake from the beginning. I didn't respect the Dark Lord's intelligence, I didn't think that maybe he knew everything I knew and could see everything I saw and had already taken it into account.

Then, said the last voice, conditional on our winning, we must have hit him with something he doesn't know about.

Dementors, offered Gryffindor.

The Dark Lord knows we can destroy, deflect, and possibly control Dementors, said Ravenclaw. He doesn't know how, but he knows we have the capability, and where the heck would we get a Dementor anyway?

Maybe, ventured Hufflepuff, the Dark Lord's whole horcrux system would short out via the resonance if we grabbed him and held him, sacrificing our own life to destroy him forever.

Bullhockey, said Ravenclaw. But I guess it doesn't hurt to engage in some pleasant fantasy before we die, no matter how stupid.

If Lord Voldemort had a strong enough fear of death, Hufflepuff argued, if he wanted strongly enough to just not need to think about death again, then the horcrux system could have design flaws like that. It never occurred to Voldemort to test his horcruxes on someone else, that could indicate he wasn't able to think about the subject clearly—

So his fear of death is his fatal weakness? said Ravenclaw. Yeah, no. I'm thinking someone with over a hundred horcruxes might have a few failsafe mechanisms in there.

And Harry's brain went on thinking.

A genuine asymmetry in the magical resonance between them... seemed improbable, there was no reason for the magical effect to work like that. But the magical backlash could hit the stronger wizard harder, the more powerful magic resonating more dangerously. That could explain the observed event in Godric's Hollow (Voldemort explodes, baby survives), and also explain the observed event in Azkaban (Voldemort severely impaired by backlash of his strong magic, first-year Boy-Who-Lived hit by lighter backlash of his weak magic). Or if it was only the caster's magic that resonated, that could also explain both those two observations. That might even explain why Professor Quirrell had been in no rush to warn Harry against casting any magic on him. Though there was another obvious reason why Professor Quirrell would avoid raising the subject of the resonance; it was a gigantic hint about the mystery of Godric's Hollow, if Harry had ever made the connection.

The part that was numb with grief and guilt took this opportunity to observe, speaking of obliviousness, that after events at Hogwarts had turned serious, they really really *really* REALLY should have reconsidered the decision made on First Thursday, at the behest of Professor McGona-

gall, *not to tell Dumbledore about the sense of doom that Harry got around Professor Quirrell*. It was true that Harry hadn't been sure who to trust, there was a long stretch where it had seemed plausible that Dumbledore was the bad guy and Professor Quirrell the heroic opposition, but...

Dumbledore would have realised.

Dumbledore would have realised instantly.

The wise old wizard with the true phoenix on his shoulder would have known, and Harry hadn't trusted him, Harry hadn't told him all the relevant facts, and the reason for this had been sheer neglect to reconsider a cached decision made four days into the start of the school year. It had been marked 'something not to tell Dumbledore' and even after Azkaban, even after Hermione died, even after everything, Harry had simply forgot to promote the question to deliberation and reconsider the tradeoff.

Another wave of grief and shame washed over Harry, and for a time he walked on in the silence of the last voice, other voices being happy enough to fill the gap.

After what was at least several miles, and many grey thoughts, the stone tunnel ended.

The Dark Lord climbed up stone steps, and Harry followed after.

The two of them came into a dark, dank stone building. Dirty old stone doors swung open without being touched.

Before them lay marble slabs, rising up from bare ground, upon them names and dates. The tombstones were scattered in nothing like neat rows, and the rest of the graveyard ran wild.

The moon above was over three-quarters full, already seeming bright with night not fully fallen.

Harry had stopped walking upon seeing the graveyard. There was a blaring alarm in his brain saying to be *anywhere other than here*, but there weren't any options for accomplishing that. So that alarm cried unanswered, even as behind Harry the stone doors of the mausoleum swung shut again and sealed themselves.

The Dark Lord came into the center of the scattered graveyard. He stopped walking, and waved his wand above his head in a small circle.

There was a rumbling sound, and smoothly from the ground rose an altar, at least two meters wide and of black stone carved with grey sig-

ils. And then surrounding the altar groaned up six dark-marble obelisks, regularly spaced, gleaming darkly beneath the fading twilight sky.

The unanswerable alarm in Harry's brain grew louder.

"This," said the Dark Lord in Professor Quirrell's cadences, "is a workspace I made for myself, convenient to either Hogwarts or Hogsmeade." The Dark Lord flourished a hand at the altar. "That is where Miss Granger shall revive, and also where I shall be reborn into my true body. I shall remake myself first, of course. *Magicc to revive girl-child eassier with true body.*" A strange snakish laughter accompanied these words. "*Resst assured that though ssome aspects of girl-child'ss resurrection sshall be what other'ss conssider Dark, girl-child will not be harmed or made ugly by it. Sshall sstill look like hersself, mind sshall be her own, nor sshall I or mine harm her after.*"

Harry's tongue was dry and his mind was having trouble functioning. "Please, Professor, would you say in Parseltongue what is your real purpose in resurrecting Miss Granger?"

"To resstore to you girl-child friend'ss counssel and resstraint. To make ssure sshe iss part of the world for you to care about. That, boy, iss truly the greater part of the reason I am doing thiss deed." Again snakish laughter accompanied these words, conveying sardonic awareness of some vast irony.

A small spark of hope kindled inside Harry, alongside the much greater note of confusion, and the fear that a perfect Occlumens could indeed lie in Parseltongue. Harry didn't understand why the Dark Lord was doing this, if the next step was just to kill the Boy-Who-Lived or enslave him...

Maybe he'd just never understood Professor Quirrell at all, maybe somehow Harry's model of Tom Riddle was just *that wrong*... maybe the Boy-Who-Lived would be Obliviated of the last day and dropped off somewhere with a confused Hermione Granger, while Lord Voldemort went on to conquer the world...?

Hope flared up in Harry, but it was a confused hope that didn't make any sense. It didn't square with the Dark Lord who had mocked Dumbledore and laughed at his defeat. Harry couldn't come up with any consistent account of Professor Quirrell's motives that allowed for something like that.

I do not know what is meant to happen next.

The Dark Lord had moved forward to the altar. He knelt there, and seemed to reach deep into the stone of the altar itself, drawing forth a vial of liquid that looked black in the fading twilight.

When the Dark Lord spoke again his voice was clipped and precise. “Blood, blood, blood so wisely hidden,” said the Dark Lord.

And the obelisks surrounding the altar began to speak, voices like a chanting chorus coming from the motionless stones, cadences older than Latin.

Apokatastethi, apokatastethi, apokatastethi to soma mou emoi.

Apokatastethi, apokatastethi, apokatastethi to soma mou emoi.

The obelisks’ chant echoed after the end of each line, as if they were speaking out of synchrony with each other. The blood was poured from the vial, and it seemed to catch and hang over the altar, slowly expanding through the air, taking on a shape.

Apokatastethi, apokatastethi, apokatastethi to soma mou emoi (emoi).

Apokatastethi, apokatastethi, apokatastethi to soma mou emoi (emoi).

A tall form rested upon the altar, and even in the dimming twilight it looked too pale.

The Defense Professor reached his hand into his robe, and drew forth a small irregular chunk of red glass.

He placed that upon the tall pale body.

The Stone stayed there for a time, minutes at least. The irregular chunk of red glass did not glow, or flash, or give any other indication of power.

Then the Stone moved, just a little, turning slightly upon the body.

The Defense Professor took back the Stone into his robes, and prodded the tall form that lay motionless upon the altar, touching the eyes with his fingers, poking the chest with his wand.

He threw back his head, then, and laughed.

“Incredible,” said the Dark Lord, in the voice of the Defense Professor that Harry had known. “Fixed, it is fixed in form! A mere construct sustained by magic, become the true substance at the Stone’s touch! And yet I sensed nothing! Nothing! I feared I had been deceived, that I had obtained a false Stone, but the substance proves true to my every test!”

The Defense Professor tucked the red glass back into his robes. "That is eldritch even by my standards, I admit."

Then the Defense Professor walked around the altar, five times he walked around it, chanting something too low for Harry to hear.

The Dark Lord placed his wand in the hand of the figure lying on the altar.

He placed his hands, both of them, over the body's forehead.

The Dark Lord spoke. "*Fal. Tor. Pan.*"

Without any warning there was a flash like lightning that lit up the entire graveyard, and Harry staggered back a step, his hands involuntarily going to his forehead. It felt as if he had been shot there, or a wasp stung him, upon his scar.

The Defense Professor collapsed.

And the too-tall figure sat up upon the altar.

It swung around smoothly, and stood tall upon the ground, at least a head higher than a normal man. The form's limbs were lean and pale, little-muscled but giving an impression of terrible strength.

Harry took another staggering step back, his hands still clasped to his scar. Though the distance between them was wide, Harry felt a sense of terrifying apprehension in the air, as though the sense of doom had always been *out of focus* and had now clarified, concentrated into a physical pain in the scar on Harry's forehead.

Was that what Voldemort was *supposed* to look like? The nose looked like, it looked like it had *malfunctioned* during the resurrection process—

The too-tall figure threw back his head and laughed, raising his hands and wand to look at them. The left hand opened wide and it was like a pale half-spider with four over-long legs, fingers caressing the wand held in the other hand. Leaves stirred up from the graveyard, approaching to dance around the too-tall figure, surrounding him and clothing him, reforming into a high-necked shirt and flowing robes; and Lord Voldemort was laughing. Exactly the mirthless laughter that Harry remembered coming from his own throat inside the Dementor's nightmare, precise in tone and timbre.

Red eyes gleamed beneath the fading twilight, their pupils slitted like a cat's.

The form that Voldemort had abandoned raised itself, quivering, from the ground; and in a voice that Harry could barely hear, Quirinus Quirrell gasped, "Free—oh, free—"

"*Stupefy*," said the high cold voice of Voldemort, and Quirinus Quirrell was blasted down into the ground; then, with a wave of Voldemort's other hand, Quirinus Quirrell was picked up and flung away from the altar.

Voldemort walked away from the altar, then turned and looked at Harry; and the pain in Harry's scar flared at it.

"Frightened, child?" Voldemort hissed, like there was an undercurrent of Parseltongue even to the Dark Lord's human speech. "Good. Place the girl on the altar, and break your Transfiguration. *It's time for me to revive her.*"

Is this really going to happen? Are we really going to do this?

Harry swallowed, mastering his fear through that note of impossible hope amid the confusion, and walked over to the altar. Then Harry took off his left shoe, and his left sock, and took off the toe-ring that was Hermione Granger, the Transfigured shape identical to the toe-ring that had been given Harry as an emergency portkey. There was a twinge of regret in Harry for not having the real portkey now, but only a twinge; an inner-circle Death Eater would routinely put up boundaries against portkeys, if Severus had been right. Behind Harry, Voldemort laughed again in what sounded like surprised appreciation.

"I need my wand to *Finite* her," Harry said aloud.

"You do *not*." High the voice and cruel. "You learned to sustain a Transfiguration by touch alone, without further use of the wand. You can likewise break your own Transfiguration wandlessly, by commanding your sustaining magic to drain away. Do so now."

Harry swallowed, and touched the toe-ring. He had to try three times, and clear his mind, before he could push his magic out of the toe-ring, as before he had learned to make a tiny stream of magic flow in.

The breaking of the spell went much more slowly that way than a *Finite Incantatem*, almost like the sped-up reverse of watching something being Transfigured. The toe-ring distorted, flowing together, expanding. Colors changed, textures changed.

Two-thirds of a dead girl lay strewn across the altar, on her side with one arm falling off the altar's edge, the position in which the reversion had chanced to place her. No blood flowed now from the chewed stumps of her thighs. The dead girl wore Hermione Granger's face, but twisted and pale. It was as Harry had seen before in the hospital's back room, the image burned into his brain during thirty long minutes of Transfiguration, the image he had reproduced during four even longer hours to Transfigure the decoy. The dead girl was naked, for her clothes were not part of her, and had not been Transfigured.

The sight brought back flashbacks, of the hours spent in the infirmary room, of the nightmares afterward, all of which Harry suppressed.

"Go back," said Voldemort's high voice. "This is my work, now."

Harry swallowed, and retreated from the altar, to the mouth of the long corridor where he'd stood before. "Her body is, should be, around five Celsius, I cooled her so, so there wouldn't be brain damage—" Harry's own voice was wavering in pitch. *Is he really going to do this? Really?* There had to be a catch and Harry just couldn't see it. Voldemort had said that neither he nor any of his would harm Hermione, that her body and mind would be her own—*why?*

Voldemort walked forth to the altar once more, orienting the body before him with a wave of his hand to lie straight across the altar. The Dark Lord spoke with high monotone precision, "Flesh, flesh, flesh so wisely hidden."

The obelisks began chanting once more.

Apokatastethi, apokatastethi, apokatastethi to soma hou emoi (emoi).

Apokatastethi, apokatastethi, apokatastethi to soma hou emoi (emoi).

New flesh flowed out of the stumps of the girl's thighs, creeping forward like an ooze and solidifying.

The obelisks ceased chanting. A complete form lay naked upon the altar.

It didn't look like Hermione. A Hermione Granger should be standing up and talking, she should have her Hogwarts uniform.

Voldemort raised a hand, then hissed, as though in annoyance. With a violent gesture, the robes around Quirinus Quirrell's sleeping form were torn in half, his purple-and-green tie shredded, and his suit-jacket

drawn from him to where Voldemort stood. Some part of Harry flinched, as if seeing the Dark Lord Voldemort attacking Professor Quirrell.

Voldemort plunged his hand deliberately into the suit jacket, which jerked as though something were being broken; then Voldemort shook out the suit jacket onto the ground beside him, emptying out the contents. Harry's pouch fell from it, and his Time-Turner, and a broomstick, and Voldemort's gun, and the Cloak, and a number of amulets and rings and stranger devices that Harry did not recognize.

And finally a chunk of red glass, which was laid upon Hermione Granger's form, and allowed to stay there for a time.

Minutes passed. The Dark Lord donned an amulet from the heap of things beside the altar; also from the heap, Voldemort took four short wooden rods with straps upon them, and reached beneath his robes to attach them, it looked like they went on his upper arms and upper thighs. The Dark Lord rose into the air, moved left, right, up and down, seeming to wobble slightly at first; then his flight stabilized.

The chunk of red glass turned, slightly.

The Dark Lord Voldemort floated to the ground, and prodded Hermione Granger's body with his wand.

"There iss an obsstacle," hissed Voldemort.

In Harry's mind the expectation of betrayal or other failure had already been so strong that the confirmation came only as a dull shock, not a sharp one. *"What obsstacle?"*

"Girl'ss body iss resstored. Ssubstance iss repaired. But not magic, or life... thiss iss body of dead Muggle." Voldemort turned from the altar, began to pace. "The full ritual would solve this. But that would require time... time and the blood of Granger's enemy, and I do not think Draco Malfoy still qualifies, nor can I take my own blood unwillingly... foolish." Voldemort's voice was a lower hiss. "Foolish, I should have foreseen this, and prepared. Her brain might awaken with an electrical shock, I know that much of Muggle medicine... but would her magic return to her? That I do not know, and I suspect if she awakens as a Muggle she will be a Muggle forever. Still, I can think of nothing better." The Dark Lord raised his wand—

"Wait!" Harry blurted, feeling hope return. *She needs a spark of life and magic, just a spark to get her started...*

Voldemort turned and looked at him. The snakelike face showed some slight degree of surprise.

"Think I have something that might work," Harry hissed. *"Needss wand. Have no intentionss to usse it againsst you."* Harry said nothing about expecting his intentions wouldn't change; he'd simply blurted out the idea fast enough that he hadn't formed any specific intentions yet.

"This," Voldemort hissed, "I desire to see." The Dark Lord reached into the heap of things by the altar, and picked up the wrapped form of Harry's wand. It was thrown, gliding through the air and then dropping at Harry's feet; and then the Dark Lord floated back, the heap of things moving smoothly backwards with him.

Harry unwrapped his wand, and moved forward.

We have our wand back, that's step one, said the last voice, the voice of hope.

No part of Harry had any idea what step two might be, but it was still step one accomplished.

And Harry stood before the reformed body of Hermione Granger, who was still naked and dead, on a twilight-lit stone altar.

"Lord Voldemort," Harry said, "I beg you, please give her some clothes. It might help me do this."

"Granted," hissed Voldemort. The pain in Harry's scar flared as the naked girl's body lifted into the air, then flared again as dead leaves danced around her and she was clothed in the seeming of a Hogwarts uniform, though the trim was red instead of blue. Hermione Granger's hands folded over her chest, her legs straightened, and her body drifted back down.

Harry looked at her.

Focused on her, now that she looked human again.

She looks like she is sleeping, not dead. It took a conscious effort to look for breathing, fail to see it, and make the deduction. So far as naked perception was concerned... Hermione might as well be alive, right now.

That Hermione Granger would not approve of this situation, taken as a whole, seemed beyond question. But it didn't mean that she would rather stay dead than be alive, other things being equal, though they might not be.

Because you wish to live, because my best guess is that you would wish to live...

Harry reached out his shaking left hand, and touched Hermione's forehead. It was warm now, not the chill of five degrees Celsius; either Voldemort had increased her body temperature to normal, or the magic of the ritual had done it automatically. Which meant that Hermione's brain was currently warm and without oxygen, come to think.

That did it, the sense of urgency rising in him.

Harry's feet assumed the stance, his wand swung up to point at Hermione Granger's dead body. The *only* thing wrong with Hermione's body was that it was dead; everything else about that body was right, only one thing needed changing.

You don't belong here, death.

"*Expecto*," Harry shouted, feeling *the magic and the life* rise up into the Patronus Charm that was fueled by both, "*PATRONUM!*"

The girl in the Hogwarts uniform was surrounded by a blazing aura of silver fire, as the Patronus was born inside her.

Harry staggered, as he felt a *dip*, a bite. Intuition or Tom Riddle's memory told Harry that the life and magic that had just flowed into Hermione would never return to him, either one. It hadn't been all his life or all his magic, not by a long shot, there hadn't been *time* to expend that much, but whatever he'd just expended was gone forever.

And Hermione Granger was breathing, just like she was sleeping, rhythmic inhalations and exhalations. The twilight sky had dimmed further, and Harry could not see if color was returning to her, but it should have been, it certainly should have been. She looked to be sleeping peacefully, and it wasn't because being dead looked like sleeping, it was because she was asleep and her body was fine and nothing was hurting her while she slept.

Some part of Harry, that had somehow managed not to speak up earlier, quietly pointed out that they were still in a graveyard, the recently victorious Lord Voldemort was still in control of the situation, and that his guess about Hermione wanting to be alive was just a guess.

Harry was still smiling, as he slowly lowered his wand. The celebratory fireworks going off inside his mind were restrained, Harry wasn't

screaming and running around in little circles like Professor Flitwick, but that—

That—

THAT, Harry said aloud inside his mind, *THAT is what I call Step Two.*

“Interesting,” said the cold high voice. “Your Patronus draws upon your life as well as your magic... I guessed that much, for it was too powerful for a first-year to fuel with magic alone. And yet there must be more to the puzzle, since not just any life-fueled spell would have done... was your happy thought the image of her returning to life? Was that all it took?” Lord Voldemort was again toying with his wand, a dark interest in those red-slitted eyes. “I suspect I will feel quite stupid when I finally comprehend that spell, someday in my eternity. Now step away from the girl. *There iss more work I intend to do, to give her besst chance of continued life.*”

Harry stepped back, reluctantly, the sense of tension starting to return to him. He almost tripped over one haphazard grave marker, as the Dark Lord continued to walk forward.

Standing before the altar, the Dark Lord laid one finger upon Hermione Granger’s forehead.

Then the Dark Lord tapped his finger upon Hermione Granger’s forehead, and said, in a voice so low Harry almost did not hear, “*Requiescus.*”

Voldemort waved his hand at an obelisk, which began to rotate, turning itself to lay flat upon the ground, pointing outward. “Fascinating indeed,” Voldemort hissed. “She is alive, and magical, and not another Tom Riddle as I feared you might have made her.”

The tension was rising again in Harry. He’d put his wand away into the back belt of his pants, he *did not want* to remind Voldemort that he still had the wand on him. “What are you doing to her now?”

Another obelisk turned, lay flat upon the ground. “*There iss old, losst ritual to ssacrifice magical creature, transsfer magical nature to ssubject. Limitationnss are great. Transsfer iss temporary, only few hourss. Ssubject ssometimess diess when transsfer wearss off. But Sstone will make permanent.*”

Four obelisks lay flat upon the ground, evenly spaced; the other two obelisks had been floated away.

Voldemort began to reach into his own mouth, checked himself, hissed with annoyance again. He gestured at the sleeping mouth of Quir-

inus Quirrell, and from Quirrell's mouth floated up two teeth, almost invisible in the falling night. One of these went to the pile of items, the other floated to before the altar.

Moments later, Harry cried out and took a step back.

Huge and misshapen, lumpy skin, legs thick as tree-trunks, a small head that looked like a coconut perched upon a boulder.

A mountain troll stood within the circle of obelisks, motionless as though asleep while standing.

"What are you doing?"

Voldemort's mouth was stretched in a wide smile; it looked *horrible* on him, like his face had too many teeth. *"Sshall ssacrifice my fallback weapon, and girl-child sshall gain troll'ss power of regeneration. Transsfiguration ssickness iss nothing before that, if perchance it wass not fixed by previous ritual. And no knife sshall sslay girl-child, nor cutting curse, nor ssicknesss take her."*

"Why—why are you doing this?" Harry's voice shook.

"Have not the tiniest intention of letting girl-child die again, after going to ssuch lengthss to ressurect her."

Harry swallowed. "I'm very confused." Was Voldemort *practicing being nice*? This hypothesis did not seem like a sufficient explanation.

"Stay well back," Voldemort said coldly. "This ritual is Darker than the last." The Dark Lord began a new chant, softer syllables that seemed to seethe through the air like living things; and Harry, feeling a new surge of apprehension, stepped backwards.

Then Harry cried aloud, as pain flared again within his scar. The mountain troll crumbled in on itself, becoming ashes hanging in the air, then dust, and then the dust seemed to blow away without going anywhere; it was gone.

Hermione Granger slept on peacefully, whatever spell of repose Voldemort had cast on her being sufficient to the task.

"Um," Harry said in a small voice. "Did it work?"

"Diffindo."

Harry stepped forward with a choked yell, and then halted, both as the stupidity of his motion caught up with him, and as the sudden cut that the Severing Charm had opened on Hermione's leg closed almost as

quickly as it had been made. In seconds there was only a light stain of blood on the surrounding flesh.

The Stone was laid again on Hermione, and after a time it turned. Voldemort laughed once more, as he passed his hand over her. "Marvelous."

Then another tiny tooth was floating within the circle of obelisks; and an instant later, a unicorn stood where the troll had stood before, eyes dull and head lowered.

"What?" Harry said. "Why a unicorn?"

"Power of unicorn's blood to preserve life makes excellent combination with troll's healing. Only Fiendfyre and Killing Curse shall girl-child fear, from this day." A flicker of snakish laughter. *"Besides, had spare unicorn left over, might as well use."*

"Unicorn's blood has side effects—"

"That is only when power of unicorn's blood is stolen by another. This spell will make power of unicorn belong inside girl-child, as if she was always born that way."

The grim chant and its seething words began again.

Harry watched, not understanding in the slightest.

Forget understanding, what am I seeing?

I'm seeing the Dark Lord Voldemort going to enormous lengths to resurrect Hermione Granger and keep her alive. It's like he thinks that his own life depends on Hermione Granger being alive, somehow.

The confused parts of Harry looked around for a procedure to follow. 'Make a prediction based on your best current hypothesis' was the first thought that came to mind, but it didn't seem to lead anywhere. The plot of the story wasn't going how it ought to, after the villain had won.

Again the blaze of pain in his scar, like a blow to Harry's forehead. The unicorn swayed, and then disintegrated as the troll had done.

The Dark Lord laid the Stone upon Hermione's form once more, clasping her hands around it.

Voldemort watched the unremarkable process for a time, then turned while the Stone still laid on her, making a high humming sound in his throat. "Ah, yes," hissed Voldemort. "That would be most appropriate. Do you still have the diary I gave you, boy? The diary of the famous scientist?"

Harry's brain took a moment to place what Voldemort was talking about. It had been in Mary's Room, in Mary's Place, in October, that precious gift from a friend. The thought should have triggered a wave of awful sadness, for the Professor Quirrell that had been lost or never real; but there had been enough of that emotion already, and his brain had set it aside for now.

"Yes," Harry said aloud. "I think it's in my pouch, can I check?" Harry *knew* it was in the pouch. He'd loaded it up with everything that he might possibly conceivably need, that he owned or had bought; everything that could have been a quest item.

From the heap of items by the altar, Harry's moleskin pouch was drawn out, tossed to Harry's feet.

"Roger Bacon's diary," Harry said as he reached in a hand, and the diary appeared. Professor Quirrell had said that the diary would emerge unscathed from a fire, so Harry threw it toward Voldemort's altar. Harry did not wince; there were more important things to worry about than polite treatment of books, even that one.

Voldemort picked up the diary, examining it, appearing quite absorbed.

Harry, as quietly and unobtrusively as he could, attached the pouch to his belt loop in back, where it wouldn't be visible, near where Harry had put his wand.

Step three, the pouch.

"Yes," Voldemort hissed as he flipped pages of the diary, "this will do quite well." The Stone moved slightly, and the Dark Lord's other hand stored the Stone again within his robes.

"What was your hidden purpose behind the diary?" Harry said when the pouch was attached to his belt, and he'd put both of his empty hands where Voldemort could see them again. "I tried translating a little at the beginning, but it was going slowly—" Actually, it had been excruciatingly slow and Harry had found other priorities.

"Diary was exactly what it seemed, a gift meant to seduce you to my side." Voldemort made intricate gestures in the air with his wand, not even looking at what his hand was doing, as he held the diary in his other hand. For a moment Harry thought he could see a trail of darkness in the air, but

the moonlight was too faint for certainty. "And now, my dear boy," Voldemort's high voice was laced with grim amusement, as his wand briefly tapped Hermione Granger's forehead with a casual gesture, "I make this diary into a far more precious gift, a sign of how much wisdom I have learned from you. For I would never want you to be deprived of Hermione Granger's counsel and restraint, not ever while the stars yet live. *Avadake-davra.*"

The green bolt of the Killing Curse blazed out faster than Harry could possibly have cast the Patronus Charm, faster than he could possibly have moved, it was already over even as Harry cried out and went for his wand.

Quirinus Quirrell's unconscious body did not even jerk, in death. The green light struck into it without other sign.

Darkness glowed in the air, anti-light in the trails that Voldemort had made before, and the Diary of Roger Bacon darkened as though corruption were creeping over it, even as a shiver appeared in the air around Hermione Granger's form.

The pain in Harry's scar flared overwhelmingly, like a brand driven into his forehead, it sent Harry dodging unthinkingly to one side as Tom Riddle's reflexes took over.

And Voldemort was also screaming, shrieking as he dropped the diary to the ground, holding his own head and screaming.

Chance—

The last voice of hope said that, as Harry tried frantically to think, to understand. There wasn't any *point* in trying to kill Voldemort now, it might only *annoy* him, weapons couldn't kill him while any of his hundreds of horcruxes remained—

But it still seemed worth it to temporarily discarnate Voldemort, take the Stone and Hermione and run.

Harry's right hand had already taken his wand. His left hand went around to his back, reached awkwardly into his pouch, began to make a silent sign, three English letters.

"No!" cried Voldemort. He'd dropped his hands from his head, was staring at Hermione's body as though bewildered. "No, no!"

The item came up from Harry's pouch into his hand, and Harry began to step forward as smoothly as he could, diminishing the range between

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*

FAILURE I

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them to what his brief trials had shown was doable.

“My great creation—” gasped Voldemort. His voice was high, sounding panicked. “Two different spirits cannot exist in the same world—it is gone, it is severed! A horcrux, I must make a horcrux at once—” Voldemort’s gaze fell on Hermione Granger’s still-sleeping form, and he began to raise his wand in the air, executing the same gestures as before.

Harry raised his gun and pulled the trigger three times.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FAILURE, PART II

Even as Harry had raised the gun, he'd *known* he was making a mistake, his forebrain saw it and tried to stop his hand, but somehow the sick certainty didn't propagate fast enough to prevent his finger from pulling the trigger—

The echo of the shots died away within the graveyard.

A fraction of a second before Harry had pulled the trigger, Voldemort had jabbed his wand downward, and a wide wall of dirt had shot up between them from the graveyard earth, intercepting all three bullets.

An instant after that, pain flared in Harry's scar, a crawling feeling came close to his skin; and then Harry's pouch, clothes, gun, everything except his wand disappeared, leaving him naked but for the wand still in his right hand, and the glasses he'd Charmed to stick to his nose. The steel ring upon his left pinky finger was yanked off hard enough to scrape skin, taking the Transfigured jewel with it.

"That," said the voice of Voldemort from behind the dirt wall, "was *absolutely* predictable. Do you really think I would shout it aloud for you to hear, if my immortality were disrupted? Really, stupid child? Lower your wand, do not raise it up again at any time, or you die upon the spot."

Harry swallowed, and pointed his wand downward. "You would have been disappointed in me," Harry said, his own voice now unusually high, "if I'd missed an opportunity like that, I mean." There was no time to think, and Harry's mouth was operating on autopilot for trying to placate evil overlords that might have paternal feelings for you and whom you'd just failed to assassinate.

Voldemort stepped around from behind the dirt wall, smiling that horrible smile that seemed to contain too many teeth. "I promised not to

raise my hand or wand against you, child, if you did not raise your hand or wand against me.”

“I used bullets,” Harry said, his voice still high. “That’s not a fist or a spell.”

“My curse thinks differently. That is the puzzle piece that you missed. Did you think I would leave the peace between us to mere fortune? Before I created you, I invoked a curse upon myself and all other Tom Riddles who would descend from me. A curse to enforce that none of us would threaten the others’ immortality, so long as the other made no attempt upon our own. Typical of that ridiculous fiasco, the curse seems to have ended up binding me, but taking no hold upon the infant with his self so lost.” A low, lethal chuckle. *“But you tried to end my true life jusst then, sstupid child. Now cursse iss lifted, and I may kill you any time I wissh.”*

“I see,” Harry said. He did see; *that* was why Voldemort had told him about his horcrux system in the first place, just to set up the moment when Harry knowingly tried to violate his immortality. Harry’s mind was frantically churning through options, none of which seemed helpful. His pouch, his clothes, Harry saw by the moonlight that they all now lay in another heap by the altar, out of reach. “And now you kill me?” Harry still had his wand, presumably the Dark Lord couldn’t cast his own magic on that, or his glasses, because of the disharmony. *Cast my own spell first? No, Voldemort just jabs his wand downward to make another shield, then shoots me—what else is there? WHAT ELSE?*

“Still a fool. If no further matters remained between us, I would already have killed you.” The dirt wall crumbled at another gesture of the wand, and Voldemort moved smoothly back toward the heap of items by the altar. The Dark Lord stretched out a hand, and the diary of Roger Bacon flew to him. *“Thiss iss, indeed, horcrux of girl-child, my ssuperior verssion.”* In his other hand appeared a parchment. *“Thiss iss ritual for ressurrecting her, if it musst be done again. Insstructionss are honesst, no trapss. Remember that girl-child’s sspirit cannot float free like ghosst, Ressurrection Sstone iss my horcrux, not herss. Do not losse her horcrux, or her sspirit may be trapped within it.”* Voldemort reached down, picked up Harry’s pouch, fed both the diary and the parchment into it. *“Remember that, in casse something goess wrong with next movess.”*

“I don’t understand what is happening,” Harry said. There was noth-

ing else left. "Please explain to me."

The Dark Lord was now regarding Harry with a grim look. *"When girl-child died, wass in company of sschool'ss Sseer, heard prophecy ssoken that you would become force of vasst desstruction. You would become threat beyond imagination, beyond apocalypse. That iss why I went to ssuch lengthss to undo my killing of girl-child, keep it undone."*

"Are," what "are you sure," what.

"Dare not ssay sspecificss to you. Prophecy I heard of mysself led me to fulfill it. Have not forgotten that dissasster." Voldemort backed further away from Harry, red slitted eyes fixed upon the Boy-Who-Lived, gun unwavering in the left hand. *"All thiss, all I have done, iss to ssmassh that desstiny at every point of intervention. If ssome fate makess me fail in what comess next, idiot-child of foretold desstruction, then you musst kill yoursself to ssave girl-child. Elsse all you claim to value diess by your own hand."*

"I," Harry's voice went up an octave, "I," another octave, "I really really wouldn't do that, seriously!"

"Ssilence, fool. Remain ssilent unlessss given leave by me to sspeak. Keep your wand pointed down and do not raise it unlessss told. Elsse you die upon the sspot, and mark that I ssaid that in Parsseltongue." Voldemort reached into the altar again.

For a second Harry's mind couldn't process what he was seeing, and then he saw that Voldemort was holding a human arm, severed near the shoulder; it seemed too thin, that arm.

The Dark Lord pressed his wand to the flesh above the severed arm's elbow, and the fingers twitched, twitched like they were alive; by dim moonlight Harry saw a darker mark appear on that flesh, just above the elbow.

Seconds later the first hooded figure appeared inside the graveyard with the popping sound of an Apparition. A moment after that came another pop, and then another.

The hooded figures wore silver skull masks, and moonlight fled from the robes beneath them.

"Master!" cried one of the black robes, the third to arrive. The voice was of peculiar timbre, from behind the silver skull mask. "Master—it has been so long—we had lost hope—"

"Silence!" shouted the high voice of the Dark Lord Voldemort. Every trace of Professor Quirrell was now gone from the too-tall figure. "Train your wand upon the Boy-Who-Lived, and watch him! Do not be distracted, not by anything! Stun him at once if he moves, if he begins to speak!"

More pops. Between graves, behind a tree, in all the shadowy spaces, more black robes were Apparating, all hooded and masked. Some of them voiced exclamations of joy, many of those sounding rather forced; others moved forwards as though to greet their Master. Voldemort gave them all the same instruction, except that some were commanded to Cruciate Harry Potter if he moved, others to restrain the Boy-Who-Lived if he moved, others told to fire hexes and curses, others told to cancel his magic.

Thirty-seven pops, Harry counted before the black robes and skull masks seemed to stop arriving.

All of them were now holding their wands pointed at Harry, aligned in a semicircle before him, where they wouldn't get into each other's lines of fire.

Harry continued pointing his wand downward, insofar as he had been told that, if he tried to raise it, he would die. He remained silent, insofar as he had been told that if he tried to speak, he would die. He tried not to shiver in the falling night temperatures, for he was naked, and it was getting colder.

You know, said the last voice within Harry, the voice of hope, *I think this is getting pretty bad even by my standards.*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FINAL EXAM

The gibbous moon riding higher in the cloudless sky, the stars and wash of the Milky Way visible in all their majesty within the darkness: All these illuminated thirty-seven skull masks gleaming above black robes, and the darker-clad Lord Voldemort, whose eyes shone red.

“Welcome, my Death Eaters,” spoke Lord Voldemort’s voice, smooth and high and terrible. “No, do not look at me, you fools! Eyes upon the Potter child! Ten years, it has been, ten years since we last met. Yet you answer my call as though it were yesterday...” The Dark Lord Voldemort came near to one hooded figure, tapped fingers upon the mask. “In a hastily Transfigured *mockery* of a Death Eater’s true armor, with a childish Charm to distort your voice. Explain, Mr. Honor.”

“Our old masks and robes...” said the robe whose mask the Dark Lord had tapped. Even through the distorting timbre of the mask, the fear in it was audible. “We... we were not fighting in them, Master, with you gone... so I did not maintain their enchantments... and then you summoned me to appear here, masked, and I... I always held faith in you, Master, but I did not know you would return this very day... I am truly sorry to have displeased you...”

“Enough.” The Dark Lord moved on to stand behind another figure, that seemed to tremble, though it kept its mask facing the Boy-Who-Lived, and its wand held level. “I might think more kindly of such neglect, if you had pursued my agenda by other means... Mr. Counsel. Yet I return to find—what? A country conquered in my name?” The high voice climbed higher. “No! I find you playing ordinary politics in the Wizengamot! I find your brothers still abandoned in Azkaban! It is a disappointment to me... I confess myself disappointed... You thought

I was gone, the Dark Mark dead, and you forsook my purpose. Is that right, Mr. Counsel?"

"No, Master!" cried that masked figure. "We knew you would return—but, but we could not fight Dumbledore without you—"

"*Crucio.*"

A horrible scream tore out of the mask, piercing the night, it continued for long, long seconds.

"Get up," the Dark Lord said to the figure that had collapsed upon the ground. "Keep your wand on Harry Potter. *Do not lie to me again.*"

"Yes, Master," sobbed the figure, as it pushed itself to its feet.

Voldemort resumed pacing behind the black-robed figures. "I suppose you are also wondering what Harry Potter is doing here... Why he is a guest at my rebirthing party."

"I know, Master!" said one of the robes. "You mean to prove your power by killing him, in front of us all, to leave no doubt as to which of you is stronger! To show how your Killing Curse can slay even this so-called Boy-Who-Lived!"

There was a pause. None of the cloaked figures dared to speak.

Slowly, the Dark Lord Voldemort, in his high-collared shirt and dark robes, turned to face the Death Eater who had spoken.

"That," whispered Voldemort in a voice chill as death, "is a little too much folly for me to credit, Mr. Sallow. You heard that theory of how I died, and tried to provoke me into repeating a mistake?" Lord Voldemort was floating, rising high off the ground. "I suppose you came to prefer your laziness to my mastery, *Macnair?*"

The Death Eater who'd spoken was suddenly surrounded by a blue haze. He spun, slashed his wand at the Dark Lord, and cried "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Voldemort simply tilted to one side in midair, dodging the green bolt.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" cried the Death Eater. His hand that didn't hold a wand was making other gestures, further colors and layers building up in his shielding haze with each gesture completed. "Help me, my brothers! If we all—"

The Death Eater fell in seven flaming pieces to the ground, chunks of flesh with the cauterized edges still glowing.

"Eyes and wands on Harry Potter, all of you," Voldemort repeated, his voice low and dangerous. "And Macnair acted in sheer stupidity just then, for I command your Marks, as I *always* shall. *I am immortal.*"

"Master," said another robe. "The girl upon the altar—is she to serve us for a Dark Revel? She seems unworthy of such a joyous occasion. I could find better, Master, if you give me leave for just a short time—"

"No, Mr. Friendly," said Voldemort, sounding rather amused. "The little witch you see upon the altar is none other than Hermione Granger—"

"What?" cried one of the black robes, and then, "I'm sorry, Master, I'm sorry, I beg your—"

"*Crucio.*" This screaming only lasted a few seconds, and Voldemort had performed it as though it were perfunctory. Afterward Voldemort's voice returned to low amusement. "I have resurrected this mudblood through the Darkest of magics, for my own purposes. You shall not offer her the slightest trouble, any of you. You are better off dead than if I learn my little experiment came to harm at your hands. This order is absolute, regardless of other circumstances—even if she escapes, let us say." A cold high laugh, as if at some joke that nobody else understood.

"Master," one of the robes said in a faltering voice distorted by his skull mask. "Master, please—I would never defy you, I am obedient as you see—but Master, I beg you, let me return, the better to serve you later—I came here in haste, forsaking—Master, with so many of us being gone, others will wonder, they will mark the absences, who has disappeared. Soon there shall be no alibi I can offer."

A cold high laugh. "Ah, Mr. White, the most delinquent of my servants. I have not yet decided if you will survive your punishment. I have less need of you than I once did, Mr. White. In two days' time the Death Eaters shall walk openly. My powers have increased, and I have just this day disposed of Dumbledore." More gasps of shock arose from the Death Eaters, Voldemort paid them no heed. "Tomorrow I shall slay Bones, Crouch, Moody, and Scrimgeour, if they have not fled. The rest of you shall go into the Ministry and the Wizengamot, and cast Imperius Curses as I direct you. We are *finished* waiting. By tomorrow's nightfall I shall have declared myself Lord Ruler of Britain!"

Intakes of breath rose from the gathered masks, but one figure was laughing.

"You find me amusing, Mr. Grim?"

"Apologies, Master," said the robed figure who had laughed, his wand perfectly level upon where Harry stood. "I was glad to hear you had dispatched Dumbledore. I fled from Britain in cowardly fear of him, having lost faith in your return."

Voldemort's chuckle resounded within the graveyard. "Your candor earns you my mercy, Mr. Grim. I was surprised to see you here tonight; you are more competent than I suspected. But before we turn our attention to happier matters, there is a certain affair to which we must attend. Tell me, Mr. Grim, if the Boy-Who-Lived swore an oath to you, might you trust him?"

"Master... I don't understand..." said Mr. Grim. One or two of the other Death Eaters turned their masks toward Voldemort before quickly fixing the skull gaze on Harry.

"Answer me," Voldemort hissed. "This is not a trick, Mr. Grim, and you *will* answer truthfully or bear the consequences. You knew the boy's forebears, did you not? Knew them for straightforward folk? If the boy freely chose to swear to you an oath, even knowing you for a Death Eater, might you trust in his words? Answer me!" Voldemort's voice rose to a shriek.

"I... yes, Master, I suppose I might..."

"Good," Voldemort said coldly. "The potential for trust must exist, to be sacrificed. And for the bonder of the Unbreakable Vow... which of you shall sacrifice their magic? It shall be quite the long Vow... much longer than usual... much magic shall be required for that..." Voldemort smiled his awful smile. "Mr. White shall do."

"No, please! *Master, I beg you!* I served you better than any—as best I could—"

"*Crucio*," said Voldemort, and Mr. White screamed through his mask's distortion for what seemed like a full minute. "Be grateful if I leave you your life! Now approach the boy, Mr. Grim, Mr. White. From behind him, idiot! You must not block the others' wands! And the rest of you, you

must fire if Harry Potter tries to run, even if it means striking at your fellow Death Eaters.”

Mr. White took time to approach, the black robes seeming to shake, even as Mr. Grim moved smoothly into position.

“What is to be the Vow, Master?” came the voice of Mr. Grim.

“Ah, yes,” Voldemort said. The Dark Lord went on pacing behind the semicircle of Death Eaters. “Today—though I hardly expect even you to believe me—today we are doing Merlin’s work, my Death Eaters. Yes! Before us stands a great danger, who in his blundering folly has been prophesied to wreak destruction such as even I can scarcely imagine. The Boy-Who-Lived! The boy who frightens *Dementors*! The cattle who believe they own this world should have been more worried when they saw that. Useless, all of them!”

“Forgive me—” said one black robe in a halting voice. “Master—surely, if that is so—Master, why don’t we just kill him right away?”

Voldemort laughed, a strange bitter laugh. When he spoke on his high voice was precise. “Here is the oath’s intent, Mr. Grim, Mr. White, Harry Potter. Listen well and comprehend the Vow that must be sworn, for its intent is also binding, and you three must share an understanding of its meaning. You will swear, Harry Potter, not to destroy the world, to take no risks when it comes to not destroying the world. This Vow may *not* force you into any positive action, on account of that, this Vow does not force your hand to any stupidity. Do you understand that, Mr. Grim, Mr. White? We are dealing with a prophecy of destruction. A *prophecy*! They can fulfill themselves in twisted ways. We must be cautious that this Vow itself does not bring that prophecy about. We dare not let this Vow force Harry Potter to stand idly after some disaster is already set in motion by his hand, because he must take some lesser risk if he tries to stop it. Nor must the Vow force him to choose a risk of truly vast destruction, over a certainty of lesser destruction. But all Harry Potter’s *foolishness*,” Voldemort’s voice climbed, “all his *recklessness*, all his *grandiose schemes* and *good intentions*—he shall not risk them leading to disaster! He shall not gamble with the Earth’s fate! No researches that might lead to catastrophe! No unbinding of seals, no opening of gates!” Voldemort’s voice lowered again. “Unless this very Vow itself is somehow leading into the destruc-

tion of the world, in which case, Harry Potter, you must ignore it in that particular regard. You will *not* trust yourself alone in making such a determination, you must confide honestly and fully in your trusted friend, and see if that one agrees. Such is this Vow's meaning and intent. It forces only such acts as Harry Potter might choose himself, having learned that he is a prophesied instrument of destruction. For the capacity for choice must also exist, to be sacrificed. Do you understand, Mr. White?"

"I—I think so—oh, Master, *please*, do not let the Vow be so long—"

"Silence, fool, you do a more useful thing this day than you have ever done. Mr. Grim?"

"I think, Master, that it must be repeated to me."

Voldemort smiled that too-wide smile, and said it all again using different words.

"And now," Voldemort said coldly, "Harry Potter, you will keep your wand low, and permit Mr. Grim to touch his wand to yours; and you will speak such words as I direct you. If Harry Potter speaks any other word, then cut him down, the rest of you."

"Yes, Master," came the thirty-four-fold chorus.

Harry was chilled, and shivering, and not only because he was naked in the night. He didn't understand why Voldemort was *not* just killing him. There seemed to be only a single line leading into the future, and it was Voldemort's chosen line, and Harry did not know what came after this.

"Mr. White," said Voldemort. "Touch your wand to Harry Potter's hand, and repeat these words. Magic that flows in me, bind this Vow."

Mr. White spoke those words. Even through the distortion effect of his mask, it sounded as though his heart were breaking.

Behind Voldemort the obelisks chanted, a language that Harry did not know; three times they repeated their words, then fell silent.

"Mr. Grim," said Voldemort. "Think of the reasons why you might trust this boy, if he had given this oath freely. Think of that potential for trust, and *sacrifice* it as you say..."

"By my trust that I hold for you," said Mr. Grim, "be you held."

And then it was Harry Potter's turn to repeat Lord Voldemort's words, and Harry did so.

"I vow..." Harry said. His voice shook, but he spoke. "That I shall not... by any act of mine... destroy the world... I shall take no chances... in not destroying the world... if my hand is forced... I may take the course... of lesser destruction over greater destruction... unless it seems to me that this Vow itself... leads to the world's end... and the friend... in whom I have confided honestly... agrees that this is so. By my own free will..." Harry could feel it, as the rite was invoked, the shining cords of power wrapping around his wand and Mr. Grim's wand, wrapping around his hand where Mr. White's wand touched it, wrapping around his *self* on some disturbingly abstract level. Harry could feel himself *invoking* his power of free choice, and he knew that his next words would *sacrifice* it, that this was absolutely the last chance to turn back.

"...so shall it be," said the coldly precise voice of Lord Voldemort.

"...so shall it be," Harry repeated, and he knew in that moment that the content of the Vow was no longer something he could decide whether or not to do, it was simply the way in which his body and mind would move. It was not a vow he could break even by sacrificing his life in the process. Like water flowing downhill or a calculator summing numbers, it was just a thing-Harry-Potter-would-do.

"Did the Vow take, Mr. White?"

Mr. White sounded like he was weeping. "Yes, Master... I have lost so much, please, I have been punished enough."

"Return to your places..." said Voldemort. "Good. All eyes on the Potter child, prepare to fire the instant he tries to flee, or raise his wand, or speak any word..." The Dark Lord floated high in the air, the black-clad figure overlooking the graveyard. Again he held a gun in his left hand, and his wand in his right. "Better. *Now* we shall kill the Boy-Who-Lived."

Mr. White staggered. Mr. Grim was laughing again, and so were others.

"I did not do that to be funny," Voldemort said coldly. "We are dealing with a *prophecy*, fools. We are snipping the threads of destiny one by one; carefully, carefully, not knowing when we may first encounter resistance. This is the order in which the next acts shall be done. First Harry Potter shall be stunned, then his limbs severed and the wounds cauterized. Mr. Friendly and Mr. Honor will examine him for any trace

of unusual magics. One of you shall shoot the boy many times with my Muggle weapon, and then as many of you as can shall strike him with the Killing Curse. Only then will Mr. Grim crush his skull and brains with the mundane substance of a tombstone. I shall verify his corpse, then his corpse shall be burned with Fiendfyre, then we will exorcise the surrounding area in case he has left a ghost. I myself will guard this place until six hours have passed, for I do not fully trust the wards I have set against Time's looping; and four of you shall search the surroundings for signs of anything noteworthy. Even after that we must remain vigilant for any sign of Harry Potter's renewed presence, in case Dumbledore has left some unimagined trick in play. If you can think of any trick that I have missed in being sure that Harry Potter's threat is ended, speak now and I shall reward you handsomely... speak now, in Merlin's name!"

There was stunned silence amid the cemetery; no one made to speak.

"Useless, the lot of you," Voldemort said with bitter scorn. "Now I shall ask Harry Potter one final question, and he is to answer that question for my ears alone, in Parseltongue. Strike the boy down at once if he answers with anything but hisses, if he tries to speak one word of human speech." Then Voldemort hissed, *"Power I know not, it wass ssaid that you would have. The Muggle Artss I have now learned of from you, and I am already ssstudying them. Your power over life-eaterss musst be comprehended for onesself, or sso you ssay. If there iss any other power you posssesss, that I may come to have, tell me of it now. Elsse, I intend to torment certain of thosse you care for. Ssome livess I have already promissed you, but otherss I did not. Your mudblood sservantss in your little army. Your preciouss parentss. All sshall ssuffer for what will sseem to them like eternitiess; and then I sshall ssend them, broken, into the life-eater prisson to remember it, until they wasste and die. For each unknown power you tell me how to masster, or other ssecret you tell me that I desire to know, you may name one more of thosse to insstead be protected and honored under my reign. Thiss alssso I promisse and intend to keep."* Voldemort's smiling expression now came through as if it were a snake's gaping fangs, and the meaning that expression bore among snakes, a promise that whoever beheld the teeth was to be consumed by them. *"Wasste not time in thoughtss of essscape, if you care for thosse oness. You have ssixty ssecondss to begin telling me ssomething I wissh to know, and then your death beginss."*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SHUT UP AND DO THE IMPOSSIBLE

The gibbous moon riding higher in the cloudless sky, the stars and wash of the Milky Way visible in all their majesty within the darkness, all these shone down upon the graveyard to bear witness from their unimaginable distances.

In the instant when Harry had realised there was no way at all left to save everyone, his mind's voices had fallen away, become one, a single purpose taking up every fraction of his mind.

Fifty seconds.

Forty seconds.

Harry's eyes tracked slowly across the air, until his gaze landed on the first Death Eater, the one closest to him.

Thirty seconds?

Twenty seconds?

"Time'ss almosst up—" hissed Voldemort.

"I do know ssecretss you would like to know," Harry hissed. He didn't look directly at the Dark Lord as he spoke. "But mosst valuable knowledge to you, I think, would be my ideass ass to how world might be desstroyed. Yet, to tell you ssuch thoughtss might lead to desstruction of world. Do not know prophecy, but if there iss prophecy, that makess it more than usually probable that any action I take might have that effect. Or to tell you ssuch might prevent desstruction of world, ssince you do sseem motivated to avoid it. Not allowed to make ssuch a decission myssself. Would need to awaken and consult girl-child friend. Vow requiress."

There was a long pause. The Dark Lord, floating above and behind the curve of Death Eaters with leveled wands, began to laugh as Salazar

Slytherin had thought a snake would laugh, cold amusement in the form of a hiss. "Do you know how to desstroy world, then?"

"Cannot deliberately try to imagine method. You might have way for sservant to ssteal my thoughtss. Vow prohibitss. But ssusspect I could devisse method, if girl-child ssaid to try."

Harry's eyes drifted slowly to another Death Eater, and another.

More snakish laughter. "Clever. You have my complimentss for thinking of ssuch tacticss. But no."

"Know it iss annoying, but with world and your eternity at ssake, would you not—"

"Greater rissk to world in introducing ssuch complicationss, delaying your end. I will sstudy Muggle ssciencess mysself, think of all you might imagine. Now sspeak ssuch ssecretss as you may tell me, or thiss endss."

Slowly Harry's vision tracked across the graveyard in careful arcs, ignoring the Dark Lord except as a floating blackness in his peripheral vision. His mouth went on speaking with only half his attention. "Have thought of idea you might not have considered, teacher. Your attempt to kill me might fail in certain sspecific way deesspite all your precautionss, perhapss lead into my desstroying world later. Would not ordinarily deem probable, but with prophecy at hand, may well be sso."

Voldemort went still, in the air. "How?"

"Am not obligated to tell you."

A cold anger began to seethe through the snakish reply. "Though I undersstand well your deessperation and attempted clevernesss, thiss beginss to annoy me. I will not withhold from killing you, for that iss sstill greater rissk. To fail to tell me your thought rissks desstroying world. Sspeak!"

"No. Vow does not obligate me to any possitive action."

The Dark Lord stared down at Harry Potter, who glanced up at the angry face only briefly before his eyes went back to the next Death Eater. Some of them were shifting their stances slightly, but they stood still, and said no words as they leveled their wands. The silver skull masks could not be read.

Then the Dark Lord began to chuckle again. "Ssurvive your death, you think you might? No, child, my horcruxess are not linked to you alssso. I would know

if they were. Or iss there other reasson you think you might ssurvive beyond my ways of enssururing your death?"

Harry didn't allow himself to be distracted. The repeated failures didn't matter, they only led into the next action in the chain—but he still needed a next action—

"Now sspeak a ssecret," the Dark Lord hissed, "or I—"

"Life-eaterss will purssue you alwaysss, hate you alwaysss, sseek you out wherever you go, if what I have jusst done wass ssuccessssful, I have caused them to be set upon you! Guardian Charm ssecret will be beyond you for long time to come, perhapss forever! Besst defensesse againsst life-eaterss would die with me!"

"Thiss iss sstarting to become ssad..." the Dark Lord's voice trailed off. "Ah. I ssee. Life-eaterss ressspond to expectationss. You tell me I will be hunted, I expect to be hunted, they hunt me. Ssuch iss rare, but not unheard-of. Valuable ssecret, yess. Can ssee many ussess." A cruel smile. "I sshall allow you to sselect one persson to be ssaved."

"Myssself."

"Would tell you to die with dignity, but knowing myssself, I know it for futility. You have wassted my kindly gift jusst then by annoying me, and I retract it. Any other ssecretss?"

"Yess. Really interessting oness, too. Ssome you are unlikely to figure out on your own, not for very long time if ever. If I ssay I have told you all that do not rissk world, will you not torment any of my friendss or family? All of thiss sspeech sstarted because you left me no way at all to ssave everyone."

The Dark Lord stood still in the air for a long moment.

And Harry's eyes went on tracking slowly across the graveyard, as his hand remained tight upon his wand.

In the instant when Harry had realized there was no way left to save everyone—

He couldn't speak any incantation in English. But Transfiguration was wordless.

There was no material in contact with his wand's end except air, which couldn't be Transfigured. But Voldemort didn't know about partial Transfiguration, which Harry could use to Transfigure a tiny bit of the material from his wand itself.

"You're sstalling," the Dark Lord said. "Jusst to delay death? Or with other purposse?"

Harry said nothing, his other work slowing as his mind sought a continuation of the conversation that would work even against the Dark Lord's will—

"Sspeak and tell me purposse, or thiss endss now and your friendss suffer for life-timess!"

"Lower Muggle weapon and do not point wand in my direction," Harry hissed, putting as much cold danger as he could into the snake's voice. "Sspeak no commandss to sservantss. I do possessss capabilitiess of which you are ignorant. Can usse one ssuch capacity to causse huge explossion almosst insstantly, without sspeak-ing incantation. Sslay your new body, all sservantss, Sstone sscattered to who knowss where."

At his current level of practice Harry could Transfigure one cubic millimeter as fast as he could apply his will and magic.

One cubic millimeter of antimatter.

It wasn't a world-ending threat.

Voldemort could have been carved from stone. *"You bluff, ssomehow."*

"Not bluffing. Sspeaking in ssnaketalk, I tell you, I can do it almosst insstantly, before any sspell can be casst at me, I think. You know very little of sscience ass yet. Power I would command iss sstronger than processs that fuelss sstarss."

"Vow will sstop you," hissed Voldemort. "You cannot rissk world. Take no ris-skss, none, with clever ideass!"

"Would not rissk world. I esstimated ssize of explossion, nowhere near that large."

"You do NOT know, fool! Cannot be SURE!" Voldemort's hiss was climbing higher.

"I am reassonably certain. Vow will not sstop me."

There was an increasing fury in Voldemort's expression, and yet his hiss carried a tinge of fear. *"Isshall wreak pain beyond imagining on all you care for—"*

"Sshut up. I dissregard all ssuch threatss now, as theory of gamess ssayss I sshould. Only reasson you make threatss iss that you expect me to resspnd." That, too, Harry had truly understood in the last extremity. *"Offer me ssomething*

I want, teacher. For your new body, for your continued holding of Sstone, for livess of your sservantss."

Harry's mouth was running on automatic, his real attention elsewhere.

Beneath the moonlight glints a tiny fragment of silver, a fraction of a line...

From a tiny spot on the end of Harry's wand, a cubic millimeter of anchor, stretched out a thin line of Transfigured spider-silk. It would have broken at once, if tested; it would have gone unremarked, if any had noticed its glint. Less than a tenth of a millimeter in cross-section, the tiny shape represented by the extended line of spider-silk was something Harry could Transfigure swiftly, ten centimeters of length to a cubic millimeter of total volume; and Harry could Transfigure a cubic millimeter in a fraction of a second. He was forcing the Transfiguration outward, extending it through the air as fast as he could without risking the transformation.

The tracing line of spider-silk looped around a Death Eater's hood at neck level, returned to the pattern of threads.

Voldemort's face was now impassive. *"You musst not leave here alive. Ssenssible people called good would alssso agree, thiss I tell you in ssnake'ss speech. But all your friendss I will treat kindly and protect under my reign, if you agree to die now ass good persson ssshould."*

The last Death Eater was looped. The pattern of spider-silk was complete. The web had been drawn with loops around all the Death Eater's necks. The ends of those loops had been anchored to a central circle; and that central circle in turn had three threads stretching across its center. The entire pattern still touching the anchor-line stretching out of Harry's wand.

Over the next seconds, those near-invisible threads of reflected moonlight turned black.

Filaments narrower, stronger, and sharper than steel wire; braided carbon nanotubes, each individual tube all a single molecule.

Harry hissed, *"Want you to alssso promissse to treat nationss kindly under your rule. Will not accept lesss."*

Voldemort hovered still in the air, snake-face showing a dawning fury.

The last two threads stretched out from the dark pattern, black threads already in the form of nanotubes. They moved lightly through the air toward the Dark Lord himself, toward the sleeve just above Voldemort's left hand that held the gun, toward the sleeve above the right hand that held the yew wand, threads placed high at first to give them time to drift slowly downward through the air. The threads looped around, went over themselves, tied slippable knots. Began to tighten, coming closer to the sleeve, as Harry Transfigured them shorter—

Harry felt the tickle of Voldemort's power beginning to touch his own in the back of his mind; at the same time the Dark Lord's eyes widened, his mouth opened.

And Harry Transfigured the black threads stretching across the black pattern's center to a quarter their previous size, shrinking the circle, yanking hard on everything attached, tightening loops.

(Black robes, falling.)

Harry wasn't looking there, he didn't see the falling masks, the blood, in the back of his mind he felt some explosions of magic like he'd felt when Hermione died but he ignored them, Harry's eyes only saw the Dark Lord's hands and wand and gun dropping downward, and then Harry's wand was rising, pointing—

Harry screamed, "STUPORFY!"

The red bolt the color of the Stunning Hex winged toward Voldemort, blazing across the graveyard almost faster than the eye could see.

Without any hesitation despite his wounds the Dark Lord jerked down and right through the air.

And the red bolt from Professor Flitwick's secret Swerving Stunner turned in midair and slammed into Voldemort.

The pain that flashed through Harry's scar was searing, it made him cry out and a red haze appear across his vision, despite everything Harry dropped his wand in pain and sheer fatigue.

As Harry let go of his wand, the pain began to clear—

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SHUT UP AND DO THE IMPOSSIBLE, PART II

Something like a fugue state had come over Harry's mind. The absolute state had partially worn off him, partially stayed with him. Elements of his mind were numb, maybe deliberately numbed by some part that was smart enough to predict what would happen otherwise. What he'd just done—

The thought was shut off, making space for an awareness of other things.

Harry was standing in the middle of a haphazard graveyard, tombstones scattered without order.

By moonlight and starlight, it could be seen that black robes littered the ground, surrounded by textures that didn't match the surrounding graveyard earth, wetness tinged red in the moonlight. Some heads had come loose from the surrounding hoods of the robes, revealing hair that was long or short, dark or bright, which was all that could be seen beneath the moon. The silver masks stayed on, making all the hair originate in skulls instead of human faces—

The thought was shut off, making space for awareness of other things.

A girl in a red-trimmed Hogwarts uniform slept upon an altar. Near the altar, Harry's things lay in a heap.

Upon the ground lay a too-tall pale man of inhuman face, blood pouring from the stumps of his wrists.

As soon as the Dark Lord Voldemort awakens, he will destroy everything you love. Dumbledore is no longer there to stop him.

He cannot be imprisoned, for he can abandon his body at any time.

He cannot be killed permanently, not without destroying more than a hundred horcruxes, one of which is the Pioneer plaque.

Materials: One wand, you are allowed to point it and speak this time.

You have five minutes.

Solve.

Harry stumbled toward the altar, knelt at its side, and picked up his pouch.

He walked toward where Voldemort lay.

The sense of apprehension had diminished, after Voldemort had been hexed unconscious. Now, as Harry approached, it rose to a terrifying height, flaring also into pain in his scar.

Harry ignored the inner shriek. That had been the last memory of Tom Riddle seared into Harry's brain, the last cognitive pattern to be transferred over into the infant baby before Tom Riddle had exploded: a sense of mounting horror and dismay associated with the resonance that had spun out of control. Harry knew the meaning of it now, that sense of apprehension, and that made it easier to disregard. He'd guessed that the effect of the resonance mostly hit the caster, with power proportional to the caster's power, and the bet had paid off.

Harry looked upon Voldemort's body, and breathed deeply—through his mouth, because coppery smells Harry was not thinking about were coming in through his nose.

Harry knelt by Voldemort's side, took out his medical kit from his pouch, and placed a self-tightening tourniquet around the body's left wrist, then another tourniquet about the right.

It felt *wrong*, showing Voldemort that concern. Some part of Harry was aware, in the back of his mind, that some number of people had just had something extremely bad happen to them. What would have been balance, what would have been justice, was if Voldemort had suffered the same fate without an instant's more hesitation. What Harry was doing now felt like Batman showing more concern for the Joker than for the Joker's victims; it felt like a comic book where the writers wrung their hands endlessly about the morality of killing the Big Named Villains while innocents went on dying in the background. To show more solicitous-

ness for the head villain than his minions, to pay *more attention* to his fate than the fates of his lower-status followers, was a flaw in human nature.

So it felt wrong when Harry rose up from beside the body, the tourniquets having tightened upon Voldemort's wrists; it felt like Harry was doing something ethically monstrous.

Even though any sane strategic thinking said that Voldemort's body *must not* die. The soul he'd created for himself had to be anchored in this brain, it mustn't be allowed to float free.

Harry stepped back, back from Voldemort's unconscious body, breathing deeply through his mouth. He went to the pile of his things, to put on his robes and other items, starting with placing the Time-Turner around his throat once more, readying his own escape and return if that was required...

More than a hundred horcruxes.

That had been insane, there wasn't any other word for it, a sign of Voldemort's damaged thinking about death. A Muggle security expert would have called it fence-post security, like building a fence-post over a hundred metres high in the middle of the desert. Only a very obliging attacker would try to climb the fence-post. Anyone sensible would just walk around the fence-post, and making the fence-post even higher wouldn't stop that.

Once you forgot to be scared of how impossible the problem was supposed to be, it wasn't even difficult, not by comparison to the last one.

Neville's parents, for example, had been Crucioed into permanent insanity. Two hundred advanced horcruxes wouldn't prevent that insanity, they would all just echo the same damaged mind.

It would be an ethically justified use of the Cruciatus Curse, if that were the only way to stop Voldemort permanently. It would be justice, balance, it would show that the Joker's life wasn't worth more than his meanest henchman...

All Harry needed to do was cast the Patronus Charm, send it to... Alastor Moody?... and tell him to come here. Well, no, it was a pretty good guess the Patronus Charm wouldn't work if it was cast with *that* intent. Maybe just resolve to tell Moody that, and use his Time-Turner once he was out of range of Voldemort's wards.

And then Voldemort could be Crucioed into permanent insanity.

It wasn't even the least merciful fate. That would have been throwing Voldemort's wand into the pit at Azkaban, if the wand stayed connected to Voldemort's life and magic no matter where his ghost tried to flee.

Harry turned to face where Voldemort lay. He walked forward, and continued to control his breathing, ignoring the burning feeling in his throat. Some part of him knew that Voldemort was *also* Professor Quirrell, even though his body now was different. Even though the shift of personality had been perfect and that meant that Professor Quirrell had been just another mask...

Though Voldemort hadn't planned to kill Harry painfully. Hadn't thought to strike Harry with his followers' Cruciatu*s*, when Harry was being annoying before. That meant something, when your opponent was Voldemort. Maybe he'd had some remaining shred of fellow-feeling for the other Tom Riddle after all.

...it would be wrong to take that into account.

Wouldn't it?

Harry looked back up at the stars. Here below the atmosphere the stars twinkled, they were embedded in the false dome of the night sky, stretched out across the wash of the Milky Way that glowed like a long ribbon, as if they were all close enough that you could fly up to them on a broomstick and touch them.

What would they want him to do now at this juncture, the children's children's children?

The answer to that also felt obvious, if it wasn't just the part of Harry that still cared about Professor Quirrell doing the real talking.

Harry had needed to do the thing he'd done, it *had* prevented greater evils, Harry couldn't have stopped Voldemort if the Death Eaters had fired first. But that thing Harry had done wasn't something that could be balanced by a not-necessary tragedy happening to one more sentient being, even if that being was Voldemort. It would just be one more element of the sorrows of ancient Earth so long ago.

The past was past. You did what you had to do, and you didn't do one scrap of harm more than that. Not even to balance things out, and make it all symmetrical.

The children's children's children wouldn't want Voldemort to die, even if his minions had. They wouldn't want Voldemort to hurt, if it didn't accomplish anything compared to him not hurting.

Harry breathed deeply, and let go of—not his hate—not quite his hate—he hadn't been able to hate his creator even at the very end—but even so, Harry let go of *something*. Of the sense that he *ought* to hate Voldemort, that it was a hate he was obligated to feel, for the endless list of crimes that Voldemort had committed for no good reason, not even his own happiness...

It's all right, the stars whispered down at him. It's all right not to hate him. It doesn't make you a bad person.

In the end, there was only one option he would take, and since Harry already knew that, there was no point agonizing about it. Whether it was the best option, only time would tell.

Harry breathed deeply, building up the magic inside himself. The spell he was going to cast didn't need to be *precise*, but it was still one of the most powerful spells he'd mastered.

Harry thought again of how unjust it was that Voldemort could not die with his followers, felt the slight trace of coldness in his blood that came with thoughts of ruthlessness. And then Harry let it go, let it all drain away beneath the starlight, because his dark side had never been anything except an inherited pattern of cognition, just one more bad habit of thinking to break.

Instead Harry looked at Hermione's breathing form atop the altar, and let the tears finally start from his eyes. What would become of Hermione now, what path she would choose after this, Harry couldn't guess; but she would be *there* to have a choice, their friendship wouldn't have destroyed her existence. He hadn't realised how shaky his hope had been, until he'd noticed how surprised he'd been after the hope had come true. Sometimes things did go better than expected.

And Harry took that thought, too, and put it into the magic he was building.

The power he was storing up was vibrating in him, like his whole body was part of his wand, either Harry's eyes were blurring or there was a luminous white quiver running over the holly. And Harry thought the

shape of the spell he would cast, he didn't have much fine control but the pattern he needed was simple, it just needed to include—

Everything, forget everything, Tom Riddle, Professor Quirrell, forget your whole life, forget your entire episodic memory, forget the disappointment and the bitterness and the wrong decisions, forget Voldemort—

And at the last moment before Harry cast the spell, he had one final thought, a note of grace—

But if you ever had any truly happy memories, not hurting people or laughing at their pain, but the warm feeling of helping someone or being helped, there won't be many, maybe just when you were a child, but if you had any truly happy memories then keep only those—

Something bright in him unfolded at the decision, knowing he'd made the right choice, and Harry pushed that too into his wand—

"OBLIViate!"

And it all poured out of Harry into the spell.

Harry fell over on his side, dropping his wand, gritted screams coming from his throat, his hands going helplessly to his scar, even as the sudden blast of pain in his head began to fade. Only dimly did his eyes see that the air was filled with glowing snowflakes, drifting motes of silver light like tiny specks of Patronus Charm.

Only a moment the silver light lasted, and then it was gone.

Professor Quirrell was gone.

Nothing left but a remnant.

And that spirit, what remained of it, wouldn't be so different now from Harry's own.

The Prophecy was complete.

They had each remade the other in their own image.

Harry started sobbing, then, from where he was curled up in the dirt.

He cried for a while.

And then eventually Harry staggered to his feet and picked up his wand again, because this day's work wasn't quite done.

Harry laid his wand directly on Voldemort's wrist-stump; it made his scar throb with an ongoing pain, but neither of them exploded.

And Harry began a Transfiguration.

Slowly—though faster than Harry had been able to Transfigure Hermione's body, last time—the stunned form of the snake-man changed, reshaped itself. As the Transfiguration progressed, especially as the snake-man's head began to turn glassy and shrunken, the pain in Harry's scar faded.

It would be a spell to maintain whether Harry was waking or sleeping; and later, when Harry was older and more powerful and maybe had some help, he would un-Transfigure the mindwiped Tom Riddle and heal his body with the power of the Stone. *After* future-Harry had figured out what to do with an almost-completely-amnesiac wizard who still had some bad habits of thought and some highly negative emotional patterns—a dark side, as 'twere—plus a great deal of declarative and procedural knowledge about powerful magic. Harry had tried his best *not* to Obliviate that part, because he might need it, someday.

And meanwhile, just like magic hadn't defined a Transfigured unicorn as dead for purposes of setting off wards, Voldemort's horcruxes wouldn't define a Transfigured Voldemort as dead and try to bring him back.

That was the hope, anyway.

Harry's scar twinged one last time when the steel ring went on his pinky finger, holding the tiny green emerald in contact with his skin. Then his scar subsided, and did not hurt again.

An upthrust rock served Harry for a chair, when he staggered over it and sat down motionless, resting after a fashion, shoving back the exhaustion that threatened the corners of his mind. *It was not done, there was more to do.*

Harry took another deep breath, still inhaling through his mouth, said "*Lumos*," and looked around the graveyard.

Black robes and severed skull masks, surrounded by pools of blood—Hermione Granger, asleep on an altar.

Voldemort's empty robes and bloody hands, lying where the Dark Lord had fallen.

Quirinus Quirrell with his shredded robes, fallen in a heap where the Killing Curse had stricken him.

Harry imagined someone else looking at this scene, trying to understand it, and shook his head, because that wouldn't do, it wouldn't do at all.

Then Harry shoved himself up from his rock, grimacing as his mind, if not body, protested. He hadn't been bloodied or beaten much today, but somehow Harry's body was managing to feel like all the stress had hit it directly.

Harry staggered over toward where Voldemort had fallen, and picked up Voldemort's left hand from where it lay upon the ground.

Even in just the left hand, you could see the faint trace of snake's scales; it was very distinctively Voldemort. That was good.

Harry went to the altar where the sleeping Hermione lay, and gently placed the detached hand around Hermione's neck, carefully moving the fingers to clutch at her throat. It was hard to do, Hermione seemed so peaceful and innocent when she was sleeping, and Voldemort's severed hand seemed so ugly; Harry bluntly overrode whatever part of his mind was thinking that, since it made no sense in context.

A few weak Severing Charms served to mess up the almost perfectly fine cut the nanofiber had made, which was critical; it would not do to have the hand-stump look like the neck-stumps. The multiple *Diffindos* scattered small bits of Voldemort-wrist all over Hermione's shirt, which, Harry had to remind himself, was also part of the plan.

Harry repeated this with the right hand, arranging it symmetrically with the left.

Harry used *Inflammaré* to singe Voldemort's robes where they lay, and then arranged the singed clothing around Hermione.

Voldemort's gun, and his wand, went into Harry's pouch. Harry placed the Stone of Permanency in an ordinary pocket, he wasn't sure what the Stone might do to his pouch.

The heap of things from inside Quirrell's robe, also near the altar, yielded the wand that the Defense Professor had used when he was being Quirrell. Harry went to where Quirrell lay, and straightened out the body

as best he could, and put Quirrell's wand into his hand. Tears predictably came to Harry's eyes, and Harry wiped them away on his sleeve.

Harry took another deep breath, still inhaling through his mouth, said "*Lumos*" again, and once more looked around the graveyard.

Black robes, severed skull masks, and Hermione Granger lying on an altar with Voldemort's severed hands clutched around her throat, and Voldemort's singed clothing scattered around her. Quirinus Quirrell lay dead with his clothes torn and shredded, his wand in his right hand.

That would do.

There remained the problem of calling attention to it.

Harry was very nearly out of magic at this point. But he still had enough left to Transfigure a leaf into the deflated form of a three-meter weather balloon.

Harry's pouch produced a bottle of oxyacetelene, and a stick of dynamite, and a spool of fuse-cord. *Be prepared, that's the Boy Scout's marching song, be prepared for a life that includes mountain trolls and who knows what else...*

Harry inflated the weather balloon with the oxyacetelene. That would produce a very sharp overpressure when it detonated, maybe as loud as a sonic boom.

He attached the stick of dynamite—it was overkill, for detonation, but it would do.

He attached a 60-second fuse to the stick of dynamite, but did not light it yet.

Harry put on his Cloak of Invisibility, that had been among the piles by the sacrificial altar.

He obtained his broomstick from his pouch, and mounted it.

Harry cast a Quieting Charm around Hermione Granger—it wouldn't stop *all* the noise, not even close, and it wasn't like she'd be permanently hurt if her eardrums burst, but it still seemed polite.

And then that was it. The Quieting Charm had done it. Harry was drained of magic for at least the next hour.

Harry mounted the broomstick, slowly rising into the air, lifting the weather balloon filled with oxyacetelene with him. The castle Hogwarts came into view, distantly gleaming in moonlight a few kilometers away,

as Harry rose above the trees; and Harry did his best to figure the distance, and the angle as it would be seen from Hogwarts.

When he had risen high above the forest, Harry used a lighter to ignite the fuse on the dynamite attached to the weather balloon full of oxy-acetelene. Then Harry spun the broomstick and darted away—though not directly toward the castle, that might take him too close to the route past-Harry and Professor Quirrell had traversed, it wouldn't do to have the Professor sense another Harry—

Harry felt a leaden stab of sadness, and refused it.

Thirty-one one-thousand, thirty-two one-thousand, thirty-three one-thousand...

When Harry reached forty, not wanting to take chances with his own eardrums, he glanced at his wristwatch, noting the exact time, and spun his Time-Turner once.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AFTERMATH, SOMETHING TO PROTECT, PART 2

At first Anna had been gratified to see the final Quidditch Cup go on so long—as a Gryffindor she was a bystander at the House Cup thing, it wasn't like Gryffindor ever won. In contrast, last year's World Cup of Quidditch, to which her family had bought some very expensive tickets, had been over in *ten minutes* which was *awful*. Modern Quidditch games had become too short, the Snitch caught much too quickly. It was a widely-talked problem among aficionados: broomstick enchantments had advanced, while the Snitch stayed the same regulation speed, with the result that Quidditch games had become shorter and shorter. At professional levels the sport of Quidditch had been reduced to a contest of who had the deepest pockets for their Seeker's experimental racing broom, and the rest of the players might as well have been watching from the stands.

Everyone knew something had to be done, the situation had been getting worse for *centuries* and now it was *intolerable*. But the International Confederation of Wizards' Quidditch Committee was mired in all the usual acrimony of the I.C.W., screaming disputes between Germans and Bulgarians, and somehow nobody could agree on *exactly* how to fix the rules. To Anna the correct course seemed obvious, just make the Snitch fast enough to restore the four-hour or five-hour games of the early nineteenth century and the Golden Age of Quidditch. Except the Belgians thought the duration of a professional game should be two hours like in *La Belle Époque* when Belgium had dominated Quidditch, and the lunatic

Italians wanted to go back to the week-long Quidditch games of the fourteenth century, and Britain's even crazier blood purists kept on talking up the occasional day-long Quidditch match as proof that broomsticks couldn't *really* have improved since everything was better in the old days *which was not how the Interdict of Merlin worked*.

She was one hundred percent on the side of Harry Potter that it was time for Hogwarts to give up on those gibbering slowpokes and just change the rules, starting here and now. But not by *eliminating the Snitch*, that was going all the way back to *eleventh century Kwidditch*. It didn't matter if Headmistress Hufflepuff had first introduced the innovation because one of her students had wanted to play the game but not been suited to the usual roles. Snitches had caught on internationally because it was more exciting when the game could always end in the next minute.

Anna had been arguing this viewpoint at the top of her lungs for the last thirty minutes, quite forgetting to pay attention to the game. Thanks to a lucky coincidence of seating she'd been near the Boy-Who-Lived and his sign, and hence she'd managed to stake out her position right from the start.

She was aware, in the back of her mind, that if the Quidditch rules really *did* change starting here and now, then this was the *most important thing she'd ever do*. She could almost *feel* the pressure of Time twisting around her as though the fate of Quidditch Itself were being settled this very day, and she was standing close to the center of it... though she hadn't gotten high-enough scores in Divination to actually sense anything like that, of course.

She hardly noticed when at one point the Boy-Who-Lived stood up to go to the bathroom.

The Boy-Who-Lived did catch her eye when he trudged back; Harry Potter looked a bit tired and wobbly, though his uniform appeared as trim as if he'd just changed into a new one.

She noticed half an hour later on, when Harry Potter seemed to sway a bit, and then hunch over, his hands going to cover up his forehead; it looked like he was prodding at his forehead scar. The thought made her slightly worried; everyone knew there was *something going on* with Harry Potter, and if Potter's scar was hurting him then it was possible that a

sealed horror was about to burst out of his forehead and eat everyone. She dismissed that thought, though, and continued to explain Quidditch facts to the historically ignorant at the top of her lungs.

She definitely noticed when Harry Potter stood up, hands still on his forehead, and dropped his hands to reveal that his famous lightning-bolt scar was now blazing red and inflamed. It was *bleeding*, with the blood dripping down Potter's nose.

She stopped talking mid-sentence. Other people turned to look at what she was staring at.

"Professor McGonagall?" Harry Potter said in a wavering voice. There were tears in the corners of his eyes, which shocked her; the Boy-Who-Lived did *not* seem like the sort of person who would burst into tears. Harry Potter raised his voice further, as though it were hard for him to speak. "Um, Professor McGonagall?"

Professor McGonagall turned away from where she was arguing with the Hufflepuff Quidditch team. The Head of Gryffindor's eyes widened in shock, and then she was moving people out of her way, almost running. "Harry!" she said. "Your *scar*!"

Silence was spreading, in a widening circle.

"I think," Harry said, his voice still wavering but louder, "I think he's back. I think I'm seeing—through Voldemort's mind—"

Anna took a step back at You-Know-Who's name and nearly fell over a bleacher. An older boy standing next to her gave a cry of dismay, and then the Boy-Who-Lived shrieked even louder.

"HE'S KILLING THEM!" screamed Harry Potter.

Half the Quidditch stadium turned to look at him.

"The ritual!" cried Harry Potter. "Blood of his servants! The blood, the life! He summoned them, he took their heads, their blood, the life, to renew his own—*THE DARK LORD RISES, VOLDEMORT IS RETURNED!*"

Madam Hooch blew a shrill whistle, and the Quidditch brooms that hadn't already stopped in midair began to slow. For herself she wasn't sure if this was a joke; if it was, Boy-Who-Lived or not, he was in more trouble than she could even imagine.

Professor McGonagall raised her wand into position for a Quieting Charm and Harry Potter caught her hand.

“Wait—” Harry Potter gasped, his voice lower, but still loud enough that she and the people near her could hear clearly. “He can be stopped—I see his mind, his mistake—he can be stopped *now*—*THE WAY IS STILL OPEN! SHE’S FOLLOWING HIM! SHE WHO VOLDEMORT SLEW!*” Harry’s voice rose further, as Anna’s own mouth fell open in sudden confusion. “*RETURN! RETURN, RETURN, REVIVE AND STOP HIM! STOP HIM, HERMIONE!*”

And then Harry Potter fell silent. He looked around at the people staring at him.

She’d just about decided that this had to all be a prank in *unbelievably* poor taste, when a distant but sharp CRACK filled the air.

Harry Potter swayed, and fell to his knees, even as her heart jumped into her throat. An explosion of excited babble rose around them.

She could still hear the words from Harry Potter’s mouth, as Professor McGonagall knelt next to him. “It worked,” Harry Potter gasped aloud, “she got him, he’s gone.”

“What?” cried Professor McGonagall, then glanced around. “*Quiet! Quiet, all of you!* Harry, what happened?”

Harry Potter was speaking rapidly but loudly. “Voldemort—tried to revive—he summoned Death Eaters *and he killed them*, stole their blood and life—Hermione’s body was there, I don’t know why, maybe Voldemort was planning to use it for something—Voldemort came back, he resurrected himself, but Hermione *followed him back* and she *destroyed him*, he’s gone, it’s over. It happened in a graveyard near Hogwarts, it’s,” Harry Potter rose to his feet, still swaying, “I think it’s in that direction.” Harry Potter pointed in the rough direction the CRACK had come from, “I’m not sure how far. The sound from there took twenty seconds to get here, so maybe two minutes on a broomstick—”

With a motion so smooth it looked unconscious, Professor McGonagall shifted into a stance and said “*Expecto Patronum.*” She addressed the glowing cat that then appeared. “Go to Albus, tell him he must come at once—”

“Dumbledore’s gone!” cried Harry Potter. “The Headmaster is gone, Professor McGonagall! The Dark Lord trapped him, he reversed some

kind of trap the Headmaster planned and Dumbledore was caught outside Time, he's gone!"

The horrified babble around them rose in pitch.

"Go to Albus!" Professor McGonagall said to her Patronus.

The moonlit cat only looked at McGonagall sadly, and Anna sucked in her breath in sudden horror, feeling like someone had punched her in the stomach. It was real, it was all real, this wasn't a joke.

"Professor McGonagall, Hermione is *alive*!" Harry Potter raised his voice again. "She's really alive and not an Inferius or anything, and she's still there in the graveyard!"

"A broomstick!" Professor McGonagall shouted. She turned to the players hovering motionless over the Quidditch field. "I need a broomstick. NOW!"

Despite everything, Anna raised a hand in mute protest, then caught herself, even as the Ravenclaw and Slytherin Seekers came zooming over (with excellent strategic sense, since they weren't actually doing anything).

Harry Potter was already retrieving another broomstick from his pouch, a multi-person one.

Professor McGonagall saw this, and nodded firmly. "You stay here, Mr. Potter, unless there is some excellent reason you must be there. I will go at once."

"You mustn't!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, who'd shoved his tiny way through the crowd, occasionally running under someone's legs. His eyes were wide, he looked as though he wanted to faint. "You have to stay at Hogwarts, Minerva! You—you're the—" Professor Flitwick seemed to be having trouble speaking.

Professor McGonagall spun around to face Professor Flitwick, and then stopped, blood draining from her face.

Then she seized the broomstick from Harry Potter's hand, and presented it to the tiny half-goblin Professor. "Filius," she said crisply. All the incipient panic had disappeared from her voice, she now spoke in her crisp Scottish accent as though addressing lessons on Monday. "Look for the graveyard of which Mr. Potter spoke, find Miss Granger. Apparate her to St. Mungo's and then stay by her."

"I think—" Harry Potter said hoarsely. "I think Transfiguration might have been used in combat there—Professor Quirrell tried to fight Voldemort—take precautions—"

Filius Flitwick nodded without halting in getting on the broomstick.

"Professor Quirrell's dead!" wailed Harry Potter. The anguish in his voice carried clearly. "He's dead! The Dark Lord killed him! His body—" Harry Potter choked up. "It's there, in the graveyard."

She stumbled back again, feeling it like another punch in her gut. Professor Quirrell had been—one of her favorite Professors, *ever*, he'd made her rethink everything she'd believed about Slytherin, she'd known in some distant way that he was probably going to die very soon but to hear that he was really, truly dead...

The Boy-Who-Lived sat down on the bench, as if his legs couldn't support him anymore.

Professor McGonagall turned to the crowd, touching her wand to her throat. "QUIDDITCH IS OVER," her amplified voice boomed out. "GO BACK TO YOUR DORMITORIES—"

"Don't!" screamed Harry Potter.

Professor McGonagall turned to look at him.

Tears were leaking down the Boy-Who-Lived's cheeks, he looked like the interruption had surprised himself as much as it had surprised anyone else. "It was Professor Quirrell's last plot," Harry Potter said, his voice breaking. The Boy-Who-Lived looked at the Quidditch players who had now flown to nearby, as though speaking to them directly. "His last plot."

Harry Potter was floated off by Professor McGonagall to the infirmary. The other Professors ran off to oversee who-knew-what, leaving only Professors Sinistra and Hooch behind. At the stadium, rumors ran wild; Anna repeated everything she could remember hearing as best she could. Something had happened to Dumbledore, some Death Eaters had been summoned and killed (no, Harry Potter hadn't said which ones), Professor Quirrell had gone out to face the Dark Lord and died for it, You-Know-Who had returned and died again, Professor Quirrell was dead, he was dead.

In time most of the students wandered off back to their dormitories, to sleep if they could.

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AFTERMATH, SOMETHING TO PROTECT ○

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Anna stayed in the stadium, and watched the rest of the game, ignoring her body's need for sleep, and her eyes that often blurred with tears.

The Ravenclaw team put up a valiant fight.

But there was no Quidditch team anywhere that could've defeated the Slytherins that day.

Dawn was tinging the sky when the Slytherins won their final game, the Quidditch Cup, and the House Cup.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SOMETHING TO PROTECT: MINERVA MCGONAGALL

The morning after had come, and all the students had gathered silently around the four Tables of Hogwarts, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres among them. He had collapsed in exhaustion last night and been awoken in the infirmary next morning, still muzzy, with the Philosopher's Stone underneath his left sock.

The Head Table looked like a plague had swept it.

Dumbledore's throne was gone from the Head Table, without replacement, leaving the center of the Head Table empty.

Severus Snape was sitting in a floating seat, the magical equivalent of a wheelchair.

Professor Sprout was missing. According to what Harry had been told last night, a court Legilimens would examine her to see if any further compulsions remained, but probably no charges would be filed. Harry had emphasized to Professor McGonagall and the Aurors, as hard as he could, that Professor Sprout was probably just a victim. The Boy-Who-Lived had pronounced that he'd seen no evidence of Sprout's intentional guilt in Voldemort's mind.

Professor Flitwick was missing, presumably still staying by Hermione's side.

Professor Sinistra was missing and Harry didn't know why or where.

The numbness that surrounded Harry's mind was like a Mylar blanket, protective if not comforting. There were scenes in his mind of black

robes falling and blood spilling, appearing for an instant before being shoved back. He'd process it later, not now. Some other time would be better, future-Harry would have a comparative advantage at coping.

Somewhere inside Harry was the fear that it *wouldn't* hurt, that there would be no price to be paid. But that fear also could be put off into the future.

No breakfast had appeared on the tables. The students sitting near Harry were waiting in frightened silence. Owls had been prohibited from entering or leaving Hogwarts since early last night.

The doors of the Great Hall opened once more, and forth came Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall. She wore robes of formal black, and her head was bare, denuded of its usual witch's hat. Her grey-brown-blond hair was done up in a coiled braid, as if in preparation for a hat to be placed later; but for now Harry saw her head bare for the first time.

Minerva McGonagall came to the lectern that stood before the Head Table.

All eyes were upon her.

"I am afraid that I have much news," Minerva said. Her voice was sad, within its Scottish precision. "And most of it is terrible. First. The reason I am the one to speak to you is that the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus," her voice stopped, "Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, has been lost. You-Know-Who trapped him outside Time, and we do not know if he ever can be brought back to us. We, we have lost, what may have been, the greatest Headmaster, that Hogwarts has ever had."

A susurrant of horror arose across the tables, no audible gasps or moans, just the sound of many intaken breaths; most from Gryffindor, and some from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw as well. The ill news had already been known, but now it had also been said by authority.

"Second. You-Know-Who returned briefly, but is once again dead. All that remained of him was his hands clutched around Miss Granger's throat. There is no more threat from him, or so we think." Minerva McGonagall drew in another breath. "Third. Professor Quirrell died with his wand in his hand, facing You-Know-Who. He was found not far from where You-Know-Who perished again, a victim of You-Know-

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SOMETHING TO PROTECT: MINERVA MCGONAGALL

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Who's Killing Curse." Another susurrantion of verified horror, now from all four tables.

Minerva drew another breath. "Last night we also lost what may have been the greatest Defense Professor in the history of Hogwarts. His scholastic merits alone... Our Defense Professor has gone by many names, but his true name was David Monroe. As he was the last of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Monroe, his funeral—his second funeral, and the true one—will be held before the Most Ancient Hall of the Wizengamot, in two days. Yet a wake shall also be held for the Defense Professor of Hogwarts, for our own Professor Quirrell, in this castle. That man also died a Hogwarts teacher, as nobly as a Hogwarts teacher ever did."

Harry listened in silence, shoving down the tears that again rose to his eyes. It wasn't even *true*, let alone unexpected; and yet hearing it still hurt. From where he sat beside, Anthony Goldstein put a comforting hand over Harry's hand, and Harry left it there.

"Fourth. One piece of exceedingly unexpected and happy news. Hermione Granger is alive and in full health, sound of body and mind. Miss Granger is being observed at St. Mungo's to see if there are any unexpected aftereffects from whatever happened to her, but she appears to be doing astonishingly well considering her previous condition."

It should have produced wild cheers from Ravenclaw and Gryffindor, if the news had come as part of any other package, or if it had been more unexpected. As it stood, Harry saw a few smiles, but they were brief. Maybe they'd jumped for joy earlier, but at the moment there was only silence. Harry understood that. He wasn't cheering either, not right now.

"Finally—" Minerva McGonagall faltered, then raised her voice. "I fear that I have the gravest possible news to share with some of our students. It seems that You-Know-Who summoned those who were once his followers; and many of them obeyed, whether from terribly misguided loyalty, or out of fear for their families if they refused. A sacrifice was required, it seems, to complete You-Know-Who's resurrection; or perhaps You-Know-Who blamed his former followers for his defeat. Thirty-seven bodies were found, more followers outside Azkaban than You-Know-Who was thought to have. I am afraid—" Minerva McGonagall faltered

again. "I am afraid that among the deceased are the parents of many of our students—"

no no no no no no NO NO NO NO

As though by some terrible magnet, Harry's eyes were drawn to the picture of absolute horror that was Draco Malfoy's face, even as the comforting cotton wrap around Harry's thoughts was torn away like thin tissue.

How could he have not thought, how could he have not realised—

Somewhere in the background, someone was already screaming, and yet the room seemed very silent.

"Sheila, Flora, and Hestia Carrow. Lost both their parents last night. Students who have lost their fathers include Robert Jugson. Ethan Jugson. Sara Jugson. Michael MacNair. Riley and Randy Rookwood. Lily Lu. Sasha Sproch. Daniel Gibson. Jason Gross. Elsie Ambrose—"

Maybe Lucius realised, maybe he was smart enough to stay away, maybe he realised that Voldemort was the one who struck at Draco—

"—Theodore Nott. Vincent Crabbe. Gregory Goyle. Draco Malfoy. This concludes the list."

One student sitting at the Gryffindor table let out a single cheer, and was immediately slapped by the Gryffindor witch sitting nearby hard enough that a Muggle would have lost teeth.

"Thirty points from Gryffindor and detention for the first month of next year," Professor McGonagall said, her voice hard enough to break stone.

"*Lies!*" shrieked a tall Slytherin, who'd risen up from that table. "*Lies! Lies! The Dark Lord will return, and he'll, he'll teach you all the meaning of—*"

"Mr. Jugson," said Severus Snape's voice. It was also faltering, it didn't sound like the Potions Master at all, it wasn't loud and yet the Slytherin fell silent. "Robert. The Dark Lord killed your father."

Robert Jugson let out a scream of terrific fury and turned to run out of the room, and Draco Malfoy folded in on himself like a collapsing house and made sounds that nobody heard, because the babble was starting up now.

Harry rose six inches from the bench and then stopped.

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SOMETHING TO PROTECT: MINERVA
MCGONAGALL

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what would you say to Draco there is nothing you can say to Draco
you can't go over there now and pretend to be his friend

you want to make it right you want to make it better but you cannot
make it right there is no way you can make right what you have done to
him what you did to Vincent to Gregory what you did to Theodore

The world blurred around Harry, he barely saw Padma Patil rise up
and make her way toward the Slytherin table and Draco, or Seamus head-
ing towards Theodore.

And because Harry had read his father's science fiction and fantasy
collection, because he had already read this scene a dozen times over
when it happened to other protagonists, there was an image in Harry's
mind of Mad-Eye Moody, of the scarred man called Alastor. And Mad-
Eye's image was saying, in just the same voice he'd used to speak to Albus
Dumbledore in memory, that the Death Eaters had been pointing their
wands at Harry, that they had already chosen to take the Dark Mark, that
they had been guilty of sins beyond reckoning and maybe beyond Harry's
imagination, that they had foregone the deontological protection of good
people and made themselves targetable if there was a strong reason to
sacrifice them. That it had been necessary to save Harry's innocent par-
ents from torture and Azkaban, that it had been necessary to protect the
world from Voldemort. That plain old ordinary Aurors and judges had
to do much more morally questionable things than killing sworn and
blooded Death Eaters who were pointing wands at them, in the course of
carrying out ordinary justices that were less clear-cut but still necessary
to society. If it were not right to do what Harry had done, if it were not
right to do much *more* morally ambiguous things than what Harry had
done, then society as human beings knew it could not exist. Nobody with
common sense would blame Harry for doing it, Neville wouldn't blame
him, Professor McGonagall wouldn't blame him, Dumbledore wouldn't
blame him, even Hermione would tell him it had been the right thing to
do once she knew.

And all of this was true.

Just as it was also true that some part of Harry's mind had calculated
that wiping out the blood purist political elite would make it easier and
more convenient to rebuild magical Britain afterward. It hadn't been

an important consideration, but it had still been calculated in those instants of rapid thought, a check on the long-term consequences to see if they rated as catastrophic, and a decision that they actually rated as pretty much okay. And that check had forgotten that Death Eaters had children at Hogwarts or that one of them wore the face of Draco's father. It wouldn't have changed anything. It wouldn't have changed anything at all. But that was the truth of the calculation Harry's mind had performed, given only seconds to think.

At least Harry could, if the Death Eaters' survivors were in any sort of financial trouble, do something about that easily enough. Transfigure gold, and use the Stone to make it permanent—unless making that much gold would be troublesome to the wizard economy at large, or cause objections from goblins who didn't understand market monetarist economics—though it wasn't as though Harry didn't also have useful services to sell—

Other cotton wrap was also being torn off Harry's thoughts, now.

"It seems likely," Minerva said, her voice was not loud but it cut through all other sounds, "that some of our students will also have been stripped last night of those named as their guardians. Should you end up a ward of Hogwarts, please know that I will take the responsibilities of my position with extreme seriousness. You will be extended every courtesy. Your family's vault will be managed well and truly. As best I can, I will treat every one of you as I would my own children—and I will protect you as much as I would protect my own children, no more, no less. I hope that is clear to *EVERYONE AT HOGWARTS*."

Students nodded rapidly.

"Good," Minerva said. Her voice sank back. "Then there is one more thing that must be done."

With a sad, solemn air, Professor Sinistra emerged from a side entrance. She was wearing white robes instead of her usual brown, and instead of her customary witch's hat, she was wearing a many-tasseled square hat whose colors had faded into mostly gray.

In her hands, Professor Sinistra carried the Sorting Hat.

With the air of someone carrying out a ceremony that had not changed in centuries, Aurora Sinistra kneeled, on one knee, before

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SOMETHING TO PROTECT: MINERVA
MCGONAGALL

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Minerva McGonagall, presenting to her the Sorting Hat in both hands.

Minerva McGonagall took the Sorting Hat from Professor Sinistra's hands, and placed it on her own head.

There was a long silence.

"HEADMISTRESS!"

"As Albus Dumbledore is not dead," Minerva said, her voice so low that students strained to hear it, "but only taken from us, I accept this position in the capacity of Acting Headmistress only—until Dumbledore's return."

A piercing cry split the Great Hall, and Fawkes was there, overflying all Four Tables in a slow spiral arc. He passed over each of the tables, humming in his bird's voice, a hum of absolute loyalty that would outlast the death of merely physical fires. *Wait*, the hum seemed to say. *Wait until his return, and be true.*

Fawkes circled Minerva McGonagall three times, feathered wings brushing around her as the tears began to creep down her cheeks; then the bird flew out a window above the Hall, and was gone.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SOMETHING TO PROTECT: PROFESSOR QUIRRELL

The Sun shone down on the Scottish green, striking sparks of reflected white from every passing dewdrop or reflective leaf that happened to position itself correctly, a clear blue sky for a funeral.

Harry had declined to give the eulogy. He'd declined for the second time. Professor Flitwick had asked him about it weeks ago in May, to give Harry time to write his lines before it would become necessary to speak; and Harry had said no then, too.

So it fell to a sixth-year Gryffindor, Oliver Habryka, who had the fourth-highest total of Quirrell points among all the students, and who had been General of an army. The seventeen-year-old boy was tall and not especially handsome in solid black robes; instead of a red tie, he was wearing a purple tie such as Professor Quirrell had sometimes favored.

Speaking, under the circumstances, *ex tempore*. The previous eulogies, written well in advance, had been discarded; Oliver Habryka had a parchment in his left hand, but he wasn't looking at it at all.

"Professor Quirrell was very sick," the tall boy said, his wavering voice falling into a hush of students, occasionally broken by a muffled sob. "I think if Professor Quirrell had been able to fight in the fullness of his power, You-Know-Who couldn't have beat him easily, and maybe not at all. They say that David Monroe was the only one that You-Know-Who

was ever afraid of, in his day. But,” Oliver’s voice broke, “Professor Quirrell wasn’t in the fullness of his power. He was very sick. He had trouble walking by himself. And he went to face the Dark Lord, alone.”

There was a pause, then, while the students cried for a while.

Oliver wiped away his tears with his sleeve, and spoke again. “We don’t know exactly what happened,” said Oliver. “I imagine the Dark Lord laughed at him. Maybe made fun of the Professor, for challenging him when he couldn’t stand up. Well, *he’s not laughing now*, is he.”

There were fierce nods from the students; all of them that Harry could see, from Gryffindor to Slytherin.

“Maybe the Dark Lord knew some way of curing Professor Quirrell, You-Know-Who did come back from the dead after all. Maybe he offered Professor Quirrell his life if Professor Quirrell would serve him. Professor Quirrell smiled, and told the Dark Lord it was time for them to play a game called *Who’s The Most Dangerous Wizard In The World*.”

If you don’t know, don’t just make stuff up. But Harry didn’t say anything. It was what Lord Voldemort might have tried, it was what Professor Quirrell might have said back.

“And they aren’t telling us everything,” Oliver said, “but we can guess what happened next. We all know that Hermione Granger, who was one of the Professor’s best students, was killed by a troll earlier this year, it must have been the Dark Lord who made it happen, just like he framed her for the Blood-Cooling Charm. Professor Quirrell knew the Dark Lord was behind it, so he stole Miss Granger’s body and preserved it, kept it safe—”

Couldn’t blame him for that one.

“Then Professor Quirrell went out to face the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord killed Professor Quirrell. And Hermione Granger came back to life. They say she’s alive and whole now, and maybe something more. When the Dark Lord tried to seize her, all that was left of him afterward was his burned robes and his hands around Miss Granger’s throat. Just as Harry Potter was protected from the Killing Curse by his mother’s love and sacrifice, Professor Quirrell willingly going out, to face, the Dark Lord alone, must have called, Hermione Granger’s spirit, back from, from wherever, she was—” Oliver’s voice was breaking.

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SOMETHING TO PROTECT: PROFESSOR QUIRRELL

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“Not just like that,” Harry said from the front row of seats, his own voice hoarse. He *had* to say something at this point, before it got out of control. If it wasn’t already out of control. “David Monroe was a powerful wizard, more powerful than anyone knew except him and me. I don’t think you can bring someone back from the dead just by sacrificing yourself. No one should try doing it that way.”

Such a beautiful story. It should have been true. *It should have been true.*

“I don’t know very much about the person behind the Professor,” Oliver Habryka said, after he got himself under control again. “I know David Monroe wasn’t a happy man. He never could cast a Patronus Charm.”

Tears were gathering in Harry’s eyes again. It wasn’t right, it wasn’t fair, Voldemort had killed so many people, he should have died along with his followers, he didn’t deserve special treatment. But it hadn’t just been Harry’s weakness, it had been the horcruxes, Voldemort *couldn’t* have been killed outright. So Harry could admit it, he was glad, he was *glad* Professor Quirrell wasn’t all gone...

“But I, know,” said Oliver, tears glistening on his own cheeks, “Professor Quirrell, is happy, wherever, he is now.”

On Harry’s left hand, a tiny emerald glowed bright beneath the morning sun.

Not Heaven, not some faraway star, not a different place but a better person, I’ll show you, someday I’ll show you how to be happy—

The tall boy glanced down at a parchment he held in his other hand, the first time he’d consulted it. “Professor Quirrell,” Oliver said, his voice now fiercer and faster, “was, by far, the best Professor of Battle Magic that Hogwarts ever had. Salazar Slytherin couldn’t have been half as good a teacher, no matter what spells he knew. Professor Quirrell told us at the beginning of this year that what he taught us would always be our firm foundation in the arts of Defense. And it will be. Forever. We’ll teach it to the new students next year, no matter who we have for a professor. The older students will teach the younger ones. That’s the solution to the curse on the Defense position. We won’t sit around waiting for authority

to teach us. And we'll make sure that Professor Quirrell's teachings never die out of Hogwarts."

Harry looked at where Professor—no, Headmistress McGonagall—was sitting, and saw the Headmistress nodding silently, a look that was sad and stern and proud.

"They haven't let us see Miss Granger yet," Oliver said. His voice quavered. "The Girl-Who-Revived. But I'll always think of the Defense Professor when I see her. His sacrifice lives on in her, just as his teachings live on in us." Oliver glanced at where Harry sat, then looked down again at the parchment. "Here's to Professor Quirrell, then, the best Slytherin that ever was, what every Slytherin should be! Three cheers for him!"

"Huzzah! Huzzah! Huzzah!"

No one stayed silent this time, not a single student that Harry could see.

CHAPTER TWENTY

SOMETHING TO PROTECT: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

Harry stood now before the gargoyles that guarded the Headmaster's—no, the Headmistress's office. He had been summoned by Professor Sinistra, told that it was an emergency, but the gates were not opening for him.

Experiment had showed that the Stone made one Transfiguration permanent every three minutes and fifty-four seconds, irrespective of the size of object Transfigured. Just once, holding the Philosopher's Stone up to the light of Harry's most powerful flashlight in an otherwise darkened closet, Harry had thought he'd seen an array of tiny points inside the chunk of crimson glass; but Harry hadn't been able to see it again, and now suspected himself of having imagined it. The Stone had no other powers that Harry could detect, nor did it respond to any attempted mental commands.

Harry had given himself until noon tomorrow to figure out how to begin using the Stone without it being grabbed by someone else, trying not to think about what was still happening, what had always been happening, in the meanwhile.

Ten minutes late, Minerva McGonagall approached, moving in a swift stride. Her arms were full of papers, she was once again wearing the Sorting Hat.

The gargoyles, with a brief sound of grinding stone, bowed low before her.

"The new password is 'Impermanence'," Minerva said to the gargoyles, and they stepped aside. "I'm sorry, Mr. Potter, I was delayed—"

"Understood."

Minerva mounted the long spiral stairs, climbing instead of waiting to be carried, Harry following behind her.

"We are meeting with Amelia Bones, Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; with Alastor Moody, whom you have met; and with Bartemius Crouch, Director of the Department of International Magical Cooperation," Minerva said as she climbed. "They are Dumbledore's heirs as much as you or I."

"How—how's Hermione doing?" Harry hadn't had a chance to ask until now.

"Filius said she seemed rather in shock, which I suppose is not surprising. She asked where you were, was told you were at a Quidditch game, asked where you really were, and refused to speak with anyone about what happened until she was allowed to talk with you. She was taken to St. Mungo's, where," the Headmistress now sounded slightly perturbed, "a standard diagnostic Charm showed Miss Granger as a healthy unicorn in excellent physical condition except that her mane needs combing. Charms to detect active magic have each time detected her as being in the process of transforming into another shape. There was an Unspeakable who showed up before Filius, ah, removed him. He performed certain spells he probably ought not to have known, and declared that Hermione's soul was in healthy condition but at least a mile away from her body. At that point the senior healers gave up. She's currently alone in a cell with the rats and flies—"

"She's what?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Potter, that's Transfiguration jargon. Miss Granger is in an isolation chamber with a cage of tame rats, and a box of flies that will bear offspring in a single day. Logic suggests that whatever mystery underlies her resurrection, it left behind an emanation that is causing the healers' Charms to produce gibberish. But if nothing happens to the rats or to the flies' offspring, Miss Granger will be declared safe to return to Hogwarts after she wakes up again tomorrow morning."

Harry still wasn't sure... wasn't sure at *all*, what Hermione would think of having been resurrected, at least under these particular circumstances. He didn't actually think Hermione would yell at him for doing it wrong. That was just Harry's brain trying to imagine her as a stereotype. Harry had been legitimately exhausted and not thinking very straight when he'd come up with that cover story, and Hermione would probably understand that part. But he couldn't imagine what Hermione *would* think...

"I wonder how Miss Granger will feel about having also vanquished You-Know-Who," Minerva said reflectively, climbing the moving stairs fast enough that Harry felt out of breath trying to keep up. "And people believing the most interesting things about her."

"You mean, because she's always self-identified as a normal academic genius, and now a bunch of people think of her as the Girl-Who-Revived and everyone wants to shake her hand?" Harry said. *Even though she doesn't remember doing anything to earn it. Even though it was all someone else's work and other people's sacrifices, and she's getting the credit. Even though she doesn't feel like she's actually done anything worthy of the way other people treat her, and she's not sure if she can ever live up to the person they imagine.* "Gosh, I don't know, I can't imagine what that feels like."

Maybe I shouldn't have subjected her to it. But people had to be given something to believe or heaven knows what they'd have made up. Feeling guilty about this would be stupid. I think.

The two of them reached the top of the stairs, and came into the office filled with dozens of strange objects, all facing a great desk and a mighty throne behind it.

Minerva's hand passed over one of those objects, the one with golden wibblers, her eyes closing briefly. Then Minerva took off the Sorting Hat and put it on a hatrack that held three slippers for left feet. She transformed the mighty throne into a simple cushioned chair and the great desk into a round table, around which four other chairs rose up.

Harry watched it all with a strange pang in his throat. He knew, without either of them saying anything, that there should have been more ceremony for the changing of the chairs, the changing of the table. Much more ceremony, for the first time the Headmistress sat down in her new office. But for whatever reason, there wasn't time, and Minerva McGona-

gall was discarding all that for speed.

A wave of Minerva's wand lit the Floo-fire in the fireplace, even as Minerva sat down into the chair that had been Dumbledore's.

Harry quietly took one of the chairs around the table, sitting at Minerva's left.

Almost at once, the Floo-fire burned emeraldine and whirled out Alastor Moody, who spun around with his wand raised, taking in the whole room at a seeming glance, and then pointed his wand directly at Harry and said "Avada Kedavra."

It happened so fast, and took him so completely by surprise, that Harry's wand wasn't even half-raised by the time Alastor Moody finished the incantation.

"Just checking," Alastor said to the Headmistress, whose own wand was now pointed at Alastor, her mouth open as if to say words she couldn't find. "Voldie would've tried to dodge, if he'd taken over the boy's body last night. I'll still need to check the Granger girl, though." Alastor Moody went to Minerva's right and sat down.

Harry had thought, in that split second, to try producing a wordless silver Patronus glow from his wand; but his wand hadn't been in place to intercept in time, not even close.

Well, if I was feeling invincible before, that does for that. What a valuable life lesson, Mr. Moody.

Then the Floo-fire burned green again, and spat out the oldest, grimmest, toughest-looking witch Harry had ever seen, like beef jerky given human shape. The old witch did not have her wand in her hand, but she projected an air of authority that was stronger and stricter than Dumbledore's.

"This is Director Amelia Bones, Mr. Potter," said Headmistress McGonagall, who'd regained her poise. "We are still waiting on Director Crouch—"

"The corpse of Bartemius Crouch Jr. was identified among the dead Death Eaters," the old witch said without preamble, even as she continued toward the chairs. "It took us entirely by surprise, and I'm afraid Bartemius is in considerable grief about it, on both counts. He will not be with us today."

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Harry kept the flinch inward.

Amelia Bones sat down in a chair, sitting to Moody's own right.

"Headmistress McGonagall," said the elder witch, still without hesitation or delay, "The Line of Merlin Unbroken, which Dumbledore left to me in regency, is not responding to my hand. The Wizengamot must have a Chief Warlock who is trustworthy, *at once*; matters are in great flux in Britain. I must know what Dumbledore has done, immediately!"

"Crap," muttered Moody. His mad-eye was rolling wildly. "That's not good, not good at all."

"Yes, well," said Minerva McGonagall, who looked rather apprehensive. "I cannot say that for certain. Albus—well, he clearly had an intimation that he might not survive this war. But I do not think he was expecting Miss Granger to come back from the dead and kill Voldemort only hours later. I do not think Albus was expecting that at all. I am not quite sure what his legacies will make of that—"

Amelia Bones rose half out of her chair. "You mean to imply that the *Granger* girl may have inherited the Line of Merlin Unbroken? This is a *catastrophe*! She is twelve years old, untested—surely Albus would not be so irresponsible as to leave the Line to whoever happened to defeat Voldemort, without knowing *who*!"

"Well, putting it simply," Minerva said. Her fingers squared the paperwork she'd taken with her, now lying on the desk. "Albus *did* think he knew who would defeat Voldemort. There was a prophecy concerning it, a verified one, which now seems to be in abeyance, or—I don't know, Madam Bones! I have one letter for Mr. Potter that I am to give him in the event of Albus's death or other departure, and then another letter that Albus said Mr. Potter would be able to open only after he defeated Voldemort. I am not sure what will happen to it now. Perhaps Miss Granger will be able to open it, or perhaps it can never be opened—"

"Hold up," Mad-Eye Moody said. He reached into his robes, drew out a long, grey-knobbed wand that Harry recognized; it was Dumbledore's wand, of a form and style not like any other wand in Hogwarts. Moody laid the wand on the table. "Before we go any further, Albus left me an instruction or two of his own. Pick up this wand, boy."

Harry hesitated, thinking.

Albus Dumbledore sacrificed himself for me. He trusted Moody. This probably isn't a trap.

Then Harry began to reach for the wand.

It leaped up and flew across the table, into Harry's hand. And the moment that Harry's fingers grasped the handle it was like he heard a song, a paean of glory and battle that resonated in his mind. A wave of white fire ran up the handle and over the wood, magnifying as it moved, bursting from the end in a tremendous spray of sparks. Through the wood beneath his fingers ran a sense of strength and constrained danger, like a leashed wolf.

Harry was also receiving an impression of distinct skepticism, as if the wand had some level of awareness, and it was wondering how the hell it had ended up being held by a Hogwarts first-year.

"Right," said Mad-Eye Moody into the puzzled stares. "So it wasn't Miss Granger who defeated Voldie, then. Didn't think so."

"What." Amelia Bones spoke the word flatly.

Mad-Eye Moody gave her a respectful nod. "Albus said this wand goes to whoever defeats its previous master. Took it off old Grindie, he did. Then Voldie defeated Albus, yesterday. Do I need to spell it out, Amelia?"

Amelia Bones was staring at Harry, her mouth wide open.

"That might not be right," Harry said. He swallowed another pang of the awful guilt. "I mean, Voldemort used me as a hostage because I, I was stupid, and Dumbledore gave himself up to save me, maybe the wand thinks that counts as my defeating Dumbledore. Um, I did defeat Voldemort, though. Vanquished him. But I think it's better if nobody has any idea I was there."

Beep. Tick. Whirr. Ding. Poot.

"*That* must have taken *some* doing," Mad-Eye said. The scarred man inclined his head slowly, a gesture of profound respect. "Don't feel too guilty about losing Albus and David and Flamel, son, no matter how stupid you were. You won in the end. All of us put together never could. Just to check, son, you and David also destroyed Voldie's horcrux? And you're *certain* it was the real thing?"

Harry hesitated, weighing up the probable consequences of trust, the possible disasters of silence, and then shook his head to Moody in reply.

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He'd been planning to tell at least McGonagall about what was now inside her school, anyway. "Voldemort had... rather a lot of horcruxes, actually. So instead I Obliviated most of his memories, then Transfigured him into this." Harry raised his hand, and silently pointed to the emerald on his ring.

Splat. Boing. Splat. Splat.

"Huh," Moody said, leaning back in his chair. "Minerva and I will be putting some alarms and enchantments on that ring of yours, son, if you don't mind. Just in case you forget to sustain that Transfiguration one day. And don't go hunting any other Dark wizards, ever, just live a quiet and peaceful life." The scarred man took a handkerchief and wiped at the beads of sweat that had now appeared on his forehead. "But well done, lad, you and David both, may he rest in peace. This was his idea, I'm guessing? Well done, I say."

"Indeed," said Amelia Bones, who had now regained her composure. "We all owe the both of you a tremendous debt of gratitude. But I say again that there is urgent business regarding the Line of Merlin Unbroken."

"I believe," Minerva McGonagall said slowly, "that I had best give Albus's letters to Mr. Potter, right now." At the top of her stack of papers now lay a parchment envelope, and a rolled-up parchment scroll sealed with a grey ribbon.

The Headmistress gave Harry the parchment envelope, first, and Harry opened it.

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If you are reading this, Harry Potter, then I have fallen to Voldemort, and the quest now lies in your hands.

Though it may shock you to learn, this was the end that I wished in my heart would come to pass. For as I write this, it yet seems possible that Voldemort may fall by my own hand. And then, in time, I shall myself become the darkness you must overcome, to enter fully into your power. For it was said once that you might need to raise your hand against your mentor, the one who made you, who you loved; it was said that you might

be my downfall. If you are reading this, then that shall never come to pass, and I am glad of it.

Even so, Harry, I would spare you this, the lonely fight against Voldemort. I write this, vowing to shelter you as long as I can, no matter the final cost to myself. But if I have failed, then know that I am glad of it, in my own selfish way.

With my passing, there is none left to oppose Voldemort as an equal save you. His shadow will fall long and terrible over magical Britain, and many will suffer and die for it. That shadow will not lift until you destroy its source, until you cleanse the heart of the darkness. How you are to do this, I do not know. If Voldemort knows not the power you bear, then neither do I. You must find that power within yourself, you must learn to wield it, you must become Voldemort's final judge, and I beg you not to make the error of showing him mercy.

My wand, which I have left to you in Moody's keeping, you must not dare to wield against Voldemort. For when that wand's master is defeated, it passes to the victor in turn. When you have conquered my conqueror, then the wand will answer truly to your hand; but if you try to turn it against Voldemort before then, it will betray you for certain. Keep it out of Voldemort's grasp at all costs. I should advise you not to wield that wand at all, yet it is a device of great power, which you might need in some desperate case. But if you pick it up you must fear its treachery at all times.

In my absence, the Wizengamot will inevitably fall to Malfoy. The Line of Merlin Unbroken I have passed to you, with Amelia Bones as your regent, until you come of age or come into your power. But she cannot oppose Malfoy for long, not with myself gone and Voldemort returned to advise him. Soon, I think, the Ministry will fall, and Hogwarts will become the last fortress. To Minerva I have left Hogwarts's keys, but you alone are its prince, and she will help you however she can.

Alastor now leads the Order of the Phoenix. Heed his words well, both his advice and his confidences. It is one of my life's greatest regrets that I did not heed Alastor more and sooner.

That you will in the end defeat Voldemort, I have no doubt.

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For that will be only the beginning of your life's destiny. Of that, too, I am certain.

When you have vanquished Voldemort, when you have saved this country, then, I hope, you may embark upon the true meaning of your days.

Hurry then to begin.

Yours in death (or in whatever),

Dumbledore.

P.S. The passwords are 'phoenix's price', 'phoenix's fate', and 'phoenix's egg', spoken within my office. Minerva can move those rooms to where you can reach them more easily.

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Harry folded up the parchment and put its back into the envelope, frowning thoughtfully, then took the grey-ribboned scroll from the Headmistress. When the long grey wand in Harry's hand touched the ribbon, it fell away at once; and Harry unrolled the scroll, and read it.

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Dear Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres:

If you are reading this, you have defeated Voldemort.

Congratulations on that.

I hope you had some time in which to celebrate before you opened this scroll, because the news in it is not cheerful.

During the First Wizarding War, there came a time when I realised that Voldemort was winning, that he would soon hold all within his hand.

In that extremity, I went into the Department of Mysteries and I invoked a password which had never been spoken in the history of the Line of Merlin Unbroken, did a thing forbidden and yet not utterly forbidden.

I listened to every prophecy that had ever been recorded.

And so I learned that my troubles were far worse than Voldemort.

From certain seers and diviners have come an increasing chorus of foretellings that this world is doomed to destruction.

And you, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, are one of those foretold to destroy it.

By rights I should have ended your line of possibility, stopped you from ever being born, as I did my best to end all the other possibilities I discovered on that day of terrible awakening.

Yet in your case, Harry, and in your case alone, the prophecies of your apocalypse have loopholes, though those loopholes be ever so slight.

Always 'he will end the world', not 'he will end life'.

Even when it was said that you would tear apart the very stars in heaven, it was not said that you would tear apart the people.

And so, it being clear that this world is not meant to last, I have gambled literally everything upon you, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres. There were no prophecies of how the world might be saved, so I found the prophecies that offered loopholes in the destruction; and I brought about the strange and complex conditions for those prophecies to come to pass. I ensured that Voldemort discovered a certain one of those prophecies, and so (even as I had feared) condemned your parents to death and made you what you are. I wrote a strange hint in your mother's Potions textbook, having no idea why I must; and this proved to show Lily how to help her sister, and ensured you would gain Petunia Evans's heartfelt love. I snuck invisibly into your bedroom in Oxford and administered the potion that is given to students with Time-Turners, to extend your day's cycle by two hours. When you were six years old I smashed a rock that was on your windowsill, and to this day I cannot imagine why.

All in the desperate hope that you can pass us through the eye of the storm, somehow end this world and yet bring out its people alive.

Now that you have passed the preliminary test of defeating Voldemort, I place my all in your hands, all the tools I can possibly give you. The Line of Merlin Unbroken, the command of the Order of the Phoenix, all my wealth and all my treasures, the Elder Wand out of the Deathly Hallows, the loyalty of such of my friends as may heed me. I have left Hogwarts in Minerva's care, for I do not think you will have time for it, but even that is yours if you demand it from her.

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One thing I do not give you, and that is the prophecies. Upon the moment of my departure, they will be destroyed, and no future ones will be recorded, for it was said that you must not look upon them. If you think this frustrating, believe me when I say that even your wit cannot comprehend what frustration you have been spared. I will die, or be lost by you, or in some other way be taken from you—the prophecies are unclear, naturally—without ever once knowing what the future truly holds, or why I must do what I do. It is all cryptic madness and you are well rid of it.

There can only be one king upon the chessboard.

There can only be one piece whose value is beyond price.

That piece is not the world, it is the world's peoples, wizard and Muggle alike, goblins and house-elves and all.

While survives any remnant of our kind, that piece is yet in play, though the stars should die in heaven.

And if that piece be lost, the game ends.

Know the value of all your other pieces, and play to win.

—Albus

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Harry held the parchment scroll for a long time, staring at nothing.

So.

There were times when the phrase “That explains it” didn’t really seem to cover it, but nonetheless, that explained it.

Absently Harry rolled up the parchment scroll in his fist, still staring at nothing.

“What does it say?” said Amelia Bones.

“It’s a confession letter,” Harry said. “Turns out Dumbledore’s the one who killed my pet rock.”

“This is not a time for jokes!” cried the elder witch. “Are you the true holder of the Line of Merlin Unbroken?”

“Yes,” Harry said absently, his mind occupied with thoughts that were, by any objective quantification, overwhelmingly more important.

The old witch was sitting very still in her chair. She turned her head, and locked eyes with Minerva McGonagall.

Meanwhile Harry's brain, which was juggling way too many possibilities over way too many time horizons, some of them involving literally billions of years and stellar disassembly procedures, declared cognitive bankruptcy and started over. *All right, what's the first thing I have to do to save the world... no, make it even more local, what do I have to do today... besides figuring out what to do, that is, and I'd better not delay before looking at whatever Dumbledore left me in the Phoenix's Egg room...*

Harry raised his eyes from the rolled-up parchment and looked at Professor—at Headmistress McGonagall, at Mad-Eye Moody, and at the leathery-looking old witch, as though seeing them for the first time. Though he was in fact seeing Amelia Bones for mostly the first time.

Amelia Bones, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, whom Albus Dumbledore had thought worthy to lead the Wizengamot at least temporarily. Her cooperation would be invaluable, maybe *necessary*, for... for whatever was headed Harry's way. Dumbledore had chosen her, and he'd read prophecies Harry hadn't seen.

Amelia Bones, who had thought she'd been appointed regent over the Line of Merlin Unbroken and made the next Chief Warlock, only to find that instead the position had gone to, apparently, an eleven-year-old boy.

You will now, said the voice of Hufflepuff inside his head, you will now be polite. You will not be your usual brand of bloody idiot. Because the fate of the world might just depend on it. Or not. We don't even know.

"I'm terribly sorry about all this," Harry Potter said, then paused to see what effect, if any, this polite statement had produced.

"Minerva seems to think," the old witch said, "that you will not take offense to honest words."

Harry nodded. His Ravenclaw part wanted to include the disclaimer about that being different from people blatantly trying to push you down while crying that you were intolerant of criticism, but Hufflepuff vetoed. Whatever she had to say, Harry would hear.

"I do not wish to speak ill of the departed," the old witch said. "But since time immemorial, the Line of Merlin Unbroken has passed to those who have *thoroughly* demonstrated themselves to be, not only good peo-

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ple, but wise enough to distinguish successors who are themselves both good and wise. A single break, anywhere along the chain, and the succession might go astray and never return! It was a mad act for Dumbledore to pass the Line to you at such a young age, even having made it conditional upon your defeat of You-Know-Who. A tarnish upon Dumbledore's legacy, that is how it will be seen." The old witch hesitated, her eyes still watching Harry. "I think it best that nobody outside this room ever learn of it."

"Um," Harry said. "You... don't think very much of Dumbledore, I take it?"

"I thought..." said the old witch. "Well. Albus Dumbledore was a better wizard than I, a better *person* than I, in more ways than I can easily count. But the man had his faults."

"Because, um. I mean. Dumbledore *knew* everything you just said. About my being young and how the Line works. You're acting like you think Dumbledore was unaware of those facts, or just ignoring them, when he made his decision. It's true that sometimes stupid people, like me, make decisions that crazy. But not Dumbledore. He was *not* mad." Harry swallowed, forcing a sudden moisture away from his eyes. "I think... I'm beginning to realize... Dumbledore was the only sane person, in all of this, all along. The *only* one who was doing the right things for anything like the right reasons..."

Madam Bones was cursing under her breath, low dire imprecations that were making Minerva McGonagall twitch.

"I'm sorry," Harry said helplessly.

Mad-Eye was grinning, the scarred face twisting up in a smile. "Always knew Albus was up to *something* he never told the rest of us. Lad, you have no idea how hard it is for me not to use my Eye on that scroll."

Harry quickly shoved the scroll into his mokeskin pouch.

"Alastor," Amelia said. The old witch's voice was rising. "You are a man of sense, you cannot think the lad is able to fill Dumbledore's socks! Not *today*!"

"Dumbledore," Harry said, the name tasting strange on his tongue, "did make one wrong assumption, when he made his decisions. He thought we'd be fighting Voldemort for years, all of us together. He

didn't know I'd vanquish Voldemort immediately. It was the right thing for me to do, it saved a lot of lives compared to fighting a long battle. But Dumbledore thought you would have years to learn me, trust me... and instead it was all over in an evening." Harry inhaled. "Can't you just *pretend* we've been fighting Voldemort for years and I earned your trust and everything? So that I'm not penalised for winning more quickly than Dumbledore expected?"

"You are still a first-year in Hogwarts!" the old witch said. "You *cannot* take Dumbledore's place, whatever his intentions!"

"Right, that whole 'looking like an eleven-year-old' thing." Harry's hand came up, rubbed at his nose where his glasses lay. *I suppose I could just use the Stone, change myself to look like ninety...*

"I am not a fool," the old witch said. "I know you are no ordinary child. I have seen you speak to Lucius Malfoy, watched you frighten off a Dementor, and witnessed Fawkes grant your plea. Anyone with wisdom who saw you before the Wizengamot—by which I mean myself and at most two others—could guess that you had absorbed some portion of You-Know-Who's shredded soul on the night of his undeath, but subdued it and turned his knowledge to good ends."

There was a slight pause in the room.

"Well, yes, of course," said Minerva McGonagall. She sighed, slumped a bit in the Headmistress's chair. "As Albus clearly knew *from the very beginning*, but thoughtfully declined to warn me about *in any way whatsoever*."

"Right," Moody said. "I knew that. Yep. Perfectly obvious. Wasn't confused at all."

"I guess that's close enough to the truth," said Harry. "So, um. What's the problem, exactly?"

"The problem," Amelia Bones said, her voice perfectly even, "is that you are a bubbling, unstable blend of a Hogwarts first-year and You-Know-Who." She paused, as though waiting for something.

"I'm getting better about that," Harry said, since she seemed to be waiting on his reply. "Quite rapidly, in fact. More importantly, it's not something Dumbledore didn't know."

The old witch continued. "Giving away your fortune and going in debt to Lucius Malfoy to keep your best friend out of Azkaban, as much as it

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demonstrates your upstanding moral character, also demonstrates that you cannot corral the Wizengamot. I can see now that you did the right thing for yourself, the thing you had to do to maintain your lease on sanity and hold back your inner darkness. But you also did a thing that Merlin's heir must not do. A sentimental leader can be far worse than a selfish one. Albus, master and servant of a phoenix, was barely survivable—and even he opposed you that day.” Amelia gestured in the direction of Mad-Eye Moody. “Alastor has hardness. He has cunning. He still does not have the talent for government. You, Harry Potter, do not yet have the sternness, the capacity for sacrifice, to direct even the Order of the Phoenix. And being what you are, you *must not try* to become that person. Not now, not at your age. Align and fuse your divided soul in your own time, if you possibly can. Do not try to be Chief Warlock while you are doing it. If Albus thought that was a good idea, he was crafting a nicer story at the expense of real-world practicality. I do think the man had a problem with that.”

Harry's eyes were a bit wide, listening to all this. “Um... what exactly do you think is going on in here?” Harry tapped his head just above his ear.

“I imagine that inside you is the soul of a boy who remains honest and true, gathering his will to force down the fragment of Voldemort's spirit that tries to consume him, even as it howls at him that he is sentimental and weak—did you just giggle?”

“Sorry. But seriously, it wasn't ever *that* bad. More like having a lot of bad habits I needed to break.”

“Ahem,” said Headmistress McGonagall. “Mr. Potter, I think at the start of this year it *was* that bad.”

“Bad habits that chained into and triggered each other. Yes, those are a bit more of a problem.” Harry sighed. “And you, Madam Bones... er. Sorry if I'm wrong about this. But my guess is that you're feeling a bit upset that the Line went to an eleven-year-old?”

“Not the way you are thinking,” the old witch said calmly. “Though it is natural for you to suspect me. The position of Chief Warlock is not one I will find pleasant, even compared to the horrors of Magical Law Enforcement. Albus persuaded me on the matter, and I would say that

I took some convincing, but the truth is that I did not waste his time in an argument I expected to lose. I knew I would hate the task, and I knew I would do it anyway. Minerva says you have some amount of common sense, especially when others remind you of it. Can you really see yourself standing upon the Wizengamot's high dais? Are you sure it is not some remnant of You-Know-Who that imagines himself suited to the position, or even desires it at all?"

Harry took off his glasses and massaged his forehead. His scar still ached a bit, from the damage he'd done by picking at it yesterday until it bled in a suitably dramatic fashion. "I do have some common sense, and yes, being Chief Warlock sounds like a huge amount of aggravation and a job that, in reality, does not fit me the tiniest bit. The trouble is. Um. I'm not sure the Line of Merlin is just about being Chief Warlock. There's, um. I suspect... that there's weird other stuff that goes along with it. And that Dumbledore meant me to take responsibility for the... other stuff. And that the other stuff is... possibly quite *amazingly* important."

"Crap," Moody said. Then Alastor Moody repeated, "Crap. Kid, should you even be saying this to us?"

"I don't know," Harry said. "If there's a user manual, I haven't looked at it yet."

"Crap."

"And if these other matters require sternness and sacrifice?" Amelia Bones said, still calmly. "If they test you as you were tested before the Wizengamot? I am old, Harry Potter, and I am not without knowledge of mysteries. You have seen how I was able to perceive your own nature at nearly a glance."

"Amelia," Mad-Eye Moody said. "What would have happened if you'd had to fight You-Know-Who last night?"

The old witch shrugged. "I would have died, I expect."

"You'd have *lost*," said Alastor Moody. "And the Boy-Who-Lived didn't just take out Voldie, he set it up so that his good friend Hermione Granger came *back from the dead* at the same time Voldie resurrected himself. There's no way in hell or double hell that was an accident, and I don't think it was David's idea either. Amy, the truth is, none of us know what the

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keeper of Merlin's legacy has to *do*. But we're not the right kind of crazy for this crap."

Amelia Bones frowned. "Alastor, you know I've dealt with strange things before. Dealt with them quite well, in my opinion."

"Yeah. You *dealt with* the crap so you could go back to real life. You're not the kind of crazy that builds a castle out of the crap and lives there." Moody sighed. "Amy, on some level you know exactly why Albus had to leave who-knows-what-job to the poor kid."

The old witch's fists clenched on the table. "Do you have any idea of the *disaster* it would be for Britain? Call me sane, but I cannot accept that outcome! I have worked too long toward this day to see it fall apart now, *now* of all times!"

"Excuse me," Headmistress McGonagall said, sounding quite precise and Scottish. "Is there any reason why Mr. Potter cannot simply instruct the Line that Madam Bones is his regent for the position of Chief Warlock, but not anything having to do with the Department of Mysteries, until he comes of age? If Albus could tell the Line to appoint a regent only until Voldemort's defeat, it is clearly capable of following complex orders."

Slowly, this unexpected hammer-blow of common sense was absorbed by everyone present.

Harry opened his mouth to agree to appoint Amelia Bones his regent for Wizengamot-related matters, and then hesitated again.

"Um," Harry said. "Um. Madam Bones, I would much prefer if you took charge of handling the Wizengamot instead of me."

"In that we are agreed," said the old witch. "Shall we let it be done?"

"But—"

There was a sort of frustrated dropping-back of the others. "What is the problem, Mr. Potter?" said the Headmistress, in a voice that indicated she hoped it was nothing serious.

"Um. I think there's a couple of things I might have to do very soon that could... prove politically controversial, and in exchange for handing over the Line's political power to Madam Bones I'm going to want her... um, cooperation on some things."

Amelia Bones exchanged another long stare with Minerva McGonagall. Then she looked back at Harry Potter.

"I am indignant at your request!" Amelia Bones said. "Your hesitancy has told me that you are weak and unused to bargaining, and will probably fold if I push back."

Harry closed his eyes.

Slightly dark-tinged Harry opened them.

"All right," Harry said, "let me rephrase. I don't mean to interfere with your work on a day-to-day or even month-to-month basis, but I can't just toss off the final responsibility that Dumbledore left me. I'm not going to owl you bizarre parchments out of nowhere, there can be discussions first, but at some point I may have to give you an order. If you refuse the order I might have to take back the Line's Wizengamot functions and assume direct control. Can you handle that?"

"And if I say no?" said the old witch.

Slight, slight the dark tinge... "I don't have an alternative to you lined up. I could start by asking Augusta Longbottom who she thought might be suitable and work from there. But it may be important that we keep to Dumbledore's plan as much as possible, since I don't know exactly why he did the things he did, and he thought Amelia Bones should be Chief Warlock for a time. I'm not going to pull Merlin's name on you, but... no, strike that, I *am* going to pull Merlin's name on you, this might or might not be insanely important."

The old witch thought for a time, her eyes going from person to person around the table. "I am not satisfied with this," she said after a time. "But the Wizengamot must be called to order soon. It will do for now."

Slowly the old witch reached into her robes, and took out a short rod of stone, dark stone.

She placed the rod on the table before Harry. "Take what is yours," she said. "And then do please give it back."

Harry reached out his hand to take it.

In the moment that Harry's fingers first touched the dark stone—
—nothing happened.

Well, perhaps Merlin hadn't been given to melodrama. That could explain why his final legacy looked like a small, unassuming dark rod. If that was all that was needed for its function, that would be all that was there.

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Harry took up the Line, frowning at it. "I'd like to appoint Amelia Bones as my regent for Wizengamot-related functions." Then, the thought occurring to him that he needed to specify a stopping point to define a regency, Harry added, "Until I say that I've taken it back."

Then Harry made a face. He'd been hoping for more from the Line, but it was just a key to places in the Department of Mysteries where interesting things were kept, or to seals where Merlin and his successors had stashed things that shouldn't be destroyed but ought to be kept from general circulation. Aside from that, the Line didn't do much.

The Line didn't let you bypass the Interdict of Merlin either. No, not even if the fate of the galaxy was at stake. Not even if the person seemed sane, had taken an Unbreakable Vow, and honestly believed the world was about to be destroyed otherwise.

Merlin had dreamed of a long run, a world that would last for eons and not just centuries. The world had no reason not to last *forever*, if the truly dangerous powers were removed and kept gone. Conversely, a single loophole in the safeguards made the world's destruction only a matter of time. Someday Merlin's Line would pass to the wrong person. It could reject the obviously unworthy, but eventually it would pass into hands too subtly flawed for the Line to detect. This was inevitable, when dealing with human beings, and Harry needed to keep that in mind before he sealed something where future Line-holders could retrieve it—the disaster of its inevitable misuse *someday* needed to be outweighed by its benefits over the next few thousand years.

Harry let out a sad small sigh, under his breath. *Merlin, you idiot...*

Thinking that didn't unlock any final safeguards.

There wasn't anything currently on fire in the Department of Mysteries, so Harry carefully placed the Line back on the table.

"Thank you," the old witch said. She picked up the rod of dark stone. "Do you know how I am to use it to call the Wizengamot to order, or—never mind, I shall just try striking the podium. That seems obvious enough. To the rest of the country, of course, I am the Chief Warlock so far as anyone knows except us four."

Harry hesitated. Then he imagined the owls he would receive if anyone knew he was allowed to second-guess the Chief Warlock, and what

that would do to Amelia's negotiating power. "Fine."

Amelia tucked the rod back into her robes. "I will not say it was a pleasure doing business with you, Boy-Who-Lived, but it could have been much worse. Thank you kindly for that."

Harry was already feeling worried about the exact balance of power here, from the way Madam Bones was acting. The others had, quite logically, deduced that it had been mostly David Monroe who'd planned the way to defeating Voldemort, which meant they were still underestimating him. It might take a crisis of some type, with Harry figuring it out successfully for once instead of screwing up, before Amelia Bones started to respect his authority. Or believe in it at all, actually... "So," Harry said. "Any weirdness for me that you would have brought to Dumbledore while he was around?"

Amelia looked thoughtful. "Since you ask... I can think of three things, indeed. First, we don't have the faintest notion what ritual was used to sacrifice the Death Eaters and resurrect You-Know-Who. It corresponds to no known legend, and the magic traces from the ritual have been eradicated. So far as my Aurors can tell, everyone's heads fell off their necks due to natural causes. Except for Walden MacNair, who was killed by magical fire after firing a Killing Curse from his wand. A very mysterious ritual indeed." She was giving Harry Potter a rather *precise* look.

Harry considered this, choosing his words carefully. Voldemort had said he'd put up wards, so Harry had been confident of not being observed by Time-Turned Aurors, but still... "I think this is a matter you don't need to investigate too hard, Madam Bones."

The old witch grinned slightly. "We can't be seen to go easy on the investigation of so many Noble deaths, Harry Potter. When I heard retold your particular account of David's last stand, I made certain to send investigators whom I considered *reliable* in the usual quality of their work. Auror Nobbs and Auror Colon, in fact, who are widely respected outside my Department. I found their report to be quite fascinating reading." Amelia paused. "There's a possibility that Augustus Rookwood left a ghost—"

"Exorcise it before anyone talks to it," Harry said, conscious of the sudden hammering of his heart.

"Yes, sir," the old witch said dryly. "I shall disrupt the soul's anchoring

a little, and none shall be the wiser when it fails to materialize. The second matter is that there was a still-living human arm found among the Dark Lord's things—"

"Bellatrix," Harry said. His mind had leaped back, made the connection that ongoing trauma had blurred. "I think that's Bellatrix Black's arm." *Lesath Lestrange hadn't been named as someone who'd lost a parent.* "Oh, bloody hell. She's still out there, isn't she. Can you use her arm to track her down somehow?"

Amelia Bones had acquired a sour look. "I see. As I was saying, a still-living human arm was found among the Dark Lord's things, but it proved to be easily incinerated."

"What *idiot*—" Harry stopped himself. "No, *not* an idiot. Because immediately destroying Dark objects is Department policy. Because of past experiences with rings that really should've been dropped into volcanos immediately. Right?"

Moody and Amelia nodded in unison. "Good guess, son," said Moody.

It might seem literarily inevitable that Harry's past stupidity was going to come back and haunt him in some horrible fashion later, but that was no reason not to try subverting the plot. "I expect you've thought of this already," Harry said, "but the obvious next step is to put out your equivalent of an international bulletin for a thin witch missing her left arm. Oh, and add twenty-five thousand Galleons pledged from me—Headmistress, it's fine, please trust me on this—to whatever reward is being offered."

"Well said." The old witch leaned forward slightly. "The third and final matter... there was one truly puzzling element to last night's events, and I am curious to see what you make of it, Harry Potter. Found among the corpses was the head and the body of Sirius Black."

"What?" yelled Moody, starting half from his chair. "*I thought he was in Azkaban!*"

"So he is," said Madam Bones. "We checked that at once. The Azkaban guards reported that Sirius Black was still in his cell. Black's head and body have been transported to the St. Mungo's morgue, and show the same cause of death as the other Death Eaters, that is to say, his head spontaneously fell off. I am also told that Sirius Black is, as of this morn-

ing, sitting in the corner of his cell rocking back and forth with his head between his hands. No other duplicate Death Eaters have been found. Yet.”

There was a pause filled with ticking and whooping things, as people considered this.

“Ah...” said Minerva. “That’s not possible even by You-Know-Who’s standards of possibility. Is it?”

“I would have thought so too when I was your age, dear,” said Amelia. “It is the sixth strangest thing I have ever seen.”

“You see, son?” said Moody. “This sort of thing is why nobody, even me, can ever be paranoid enough.” The scarred man tilted his head, looking thoughtful, as his bright blue eye kept ever-roving. “Twin brother, concealed from the rest of the world? Walpurga Black gave birth to twins, couldn’t bear to kill one, knew old Pollux would demand it... nah, ain’t buyin’ it.”

“Any ideas, Mr. Potter?” said Amelia Bones. “Or is this another matter into which my Department should not inquire too closely?”

Harry closed his eyes and thought.

Sirus Black had hunted down Peter Pettigrew, instead of fleeing the country as common sense would have suggested.

Black had been found in the middle of the street, surrounded by bodies, laughing.

Nothing left of Pettigrew except one finger.

Pettigrew had been a spy for the Light, not a double agent but somebody who snuck around and found things out.

One of the conspiracy theories about Pettigrew had been that he was an Animagus, since he’d been good at ferreting out secrets even in his Hogwarts years.

Dementors sapped all the magic in their vicinity.

Professor Quirrell had said something about a particular type of magic that rearranged flesh like a Muggle smith reshaping metal with hammer and tongs...

Harry opened his eyes again.

“Was Peter Pettigrew a secret Metamorphmagus?”

Amelia Bones's face changed. She made a single croaking noise and fell backward within her chair.

"Yes, in fact..." Minerva said slowly. "Why?"

"Sirius Black Confunded Peter Pettigrew," Harry's voice explained patiently, "to force him to change shape and pretend to be Black. By the time the Confundus wore off, Peter was in Azkaban and couldn't change back. The Aurors are used to people in Azkaban saying absolutely anything to get out, so they didn't listen while Peter Pettigrew was screaming about it over and over again until his voice wore out."

Even Mad-Eye Moody's face showed the horror, then.

"In retrospect," said Harry's voice, which seemed to be operating entirely on automatic, "you should have been suspicious when you managed to get that *one* Death Eater hauled off to Azkaban without a trial."

"We thought Malfoy was distracted," whispered the old witch. "That he was only trying to save himself. There were other Death Eaters we managed to get then, like Bellatrix—"

Harry nodded, feeling like his neck and head were moving on puppet strings. "The Dark Lord's most fanatic and devoted servant, a natural nucleus of opposition for anyone who contested Lucius's control of the Death Eaters. You thought Lucius was distracted."

"Get him out of there," said Minerva McGonagall. Her voice rose to a scream. "*Get him out of there!*"

Amelia Bones shoved herself up from the chair, whirled on the Floo—"Stop."

Everyone looked at Harry with astonishment, none more than Minerva McGonagall.

Something else seemed to have taken over Harry's voice. "There's four things we still need to discuss. An innocent man has been in Azkaban for ten years, eight months, and fourteen days. He can stay there a few minutes longer. That's how urgent those four things are."

"You—" whispered Amelia Bones. "You should not try to be this person, at your age—"

"First. I think I should look at the complete police records on every other Death Eater that went to Azkaban *while Lucius was distracted*. Can you compile that by tonight?"

"Within the hour," said Amelia Bones. She looked gray.

Harry nodded. "Second. Azkaban is over. You'll need to start preparations now to move the prisoners to Nurmengard or other secure non-Dementor prisons, and to provide treatment for their Dementor exposure."

"I," said Amelia. The old witch seemed bent, diminished. "I... do not think, that even with this... scandal, that the remainder of the Wizengamot will bend... and the Dementors must be fed, not so much as we have fed them, but they must be given some victims, or they will roam the world, prey on innocents..."

"It doesn't matter what the Wizengamot says," Harry said. "Because—" Harry's voice choked. "Because—" Harry took a deep breath, steadied himself. He thought he could see the shape now of the immediate future, could see it stretching out before him like a golden pathway lit with sunlight. *Was this also written, in the book of Time that I must not see?* "Because if I'm right about what comes next, then sometime very soon, Hermione Granger, the Girl-Who-Revived, is going to go to Azkaban and destroy all the Dementors there."

"Impossible!" spat Mad-Eye Moody.

"Merlin," whispered Amelia Bones. "Oh, dear Merlin. That's what happened to the Dementor that Dumbledore 'lost'. That's why they're afraid of you—and now her as well?" Her voice trembled. "What is this, what is all this?"

If Hermione believes that Death can be defeated—

Whether or not she could've believed that before, she'll believe it now.

"An authorized portkey to Azkaban would be appreciated—" Harry's voice broke again. Tears were streaming down his cheeks.

She can't die. I have her horcrux.

But Hermione doesn't need to know about that. Not for one more week.

If she's willing to risk her own life to end this—

"Though I think, she might make, her own way there..."

"Harry?" said Headmistress McGonagall.

Harry was crying now, huge ragged breaths bursting from him. But he didn't stop talking. Somewhere out there Peter Pettigrew was waiting while Harry cried.

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Somewhere out there, everyone was waiting while he cried.

"Third. Somewhere just inside the wards of Hogwarts. In a highly defensible position. But where emergency cases can be portkeyed in from just outside the wards. There's going to be a high-security h-h-hospital. With very powerful guards, that have taken Unbreakable Vows, I don't, I don't care how much gold it takes to pay for the Vows, it genuinely does not matter any more. And, and Alastor Moody is going to design the security architecture, and go completely overboard on paranoia without being constrained by a budget or sanity or common sense, only it has to open *soon*." Couldn't stop talking to cry.

"Harry," said the Headmistress, "both of them think you've gone mad, they don't know you well enough to know better. You need to slow down and explain."

Instead Harry reached into his pouch and signed letters with his fingers, and lifted out, his fingers straining, a five-kilo chunk of gold larger than his fist, from when he'd been experimenting this morning. It made a heavy thud as it landed on the table.

Moody reached over and tapped it with his wand, and then his throat made an incomprehensible sound.

"That's your starting budget, Alastor, if you need money right away. Nicholas Flamel didn't make the Philosopher's Stone, he stole it, Dumbledore didn't know the secret history but Monroe did. Once you know how it works, the Stone can do one complete restoration to full health and youth every two hundred and thirty-four seconds. Three hundred sixty people per day. One hundred and thirty-four thousand healings per year. That should be enough to stop, all the wizards everywhere, and all the goblins and house-elves and whoever, from dying. Of old age, or anything else." Harry was wiping away tears, over and over. "Flamel had more blood on his hands than a hundred Voldemorts, for all the people he could've saved and didn't. The whole time, Moody, the Philosopher's Stone could've healed all your scars and given you back your leg, any time Flamel felt like it. Dumbledore didn't know. I'm sure he didn't know." Harry smiled shakily. "I can't imagine you as a teenage witch, Madam Bones, but I bet it looks good on you. That'll give you more energy for trying to keep the Wizengamot from messing with me, because if they get

the idea that the Stone is something they can mess with in any way, tax, regulate, I don't care, Hogwarts is going to secede from Britain and become its own country. Headmistress, Hogwarts is no longer dependent on the Ministry for gold, or for that matter food. You may reform the educational curriculum at will. I'm thinking we may want to add some more advanced courses soon, especially in Muggle studies."

"Slow down!" said Minerva McGonagall.

"Fourth—" Harry said, and then stopped.

Fourth. Begin preparations for an orderly take-down of the Statute of Secrecy and to provide magical healing on a mass scale to the Muggle world. Those who oppose this agenda in any way may be denied services by the Stone...

Harry's lips couldn't move. Not wouldn't, *couldn't*.

With six billion Muggles thinking creatively about how to use magic...

Transfiguring antimatter was just one idea. It wasn't even the most destructive idea. There were also black holes and negatively charged strangelets. And if black holes couldn't be Transfigured because they didn't *already exist* as magic defined that to within some spatial radius, there was just Transfiguring lots and lots of nuclear weapons and Black Death plague that could reproduce before the Transfiguration wore off and Harry hadn't even thought about the problem for five minutes but it didn't matter because he'd already thought of enough. Someone would think of it, someone would talk, someone would try it. The probability was as close to certainty as made no difference.

What happened if you Transfigured a cubic millimeter of up quarks, just the up quarks without any down quarks to bind them? Harry didn't even know, and up quarks were certainly a kind of substance that already existed. All it might take was one single Muggleborn who knew the names of the six quarks deciding to try it. That could *be* the clock ticking down to the prophesied end of the world.

Harry would have tried to deny the thought, rationalize it away.

He couldn't do that either.

It wasn't a thing-Harry-Potter-would-do.

Like water flowing downhill, Harry Potter would take no chances when it came to not destroying the world.

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“Fourth?” said Amelia Bones, who was looking like she’d been hit repeatedly in the face with a planet. “*What comes fourth?*”

“Never mind,” said Harry. His voice did not break. He did not fold over sobbing. There were still lives he could save and those took precedence. “Never mind. Chief Warlock Bones, I’ve given the regency of the Wizengamot into your hands. Please use that position to announce internationally that the Stone’s healing power will soon be made available to all, and that meanwhile, all dying patients are to be kept alive at any cost, no matter what magic is required to do it. That announcement is your absolute priority. When you have done that you may rescue Peter Pettigrew and tell your old Department to begin preparations for shutting down Azkaban. Then please have someone prepare a full list of imprisoned Death Eaters and what was said at their trials and whether Lucius seemed strangely uninterested in defending them. Thank you. That’s all.”

Amelia Bones turned without another word, and dashed into the Floo like it was her own self that was on fire.

“And someone,” Harry said, his voice breaking again now that it was all set in motion, and crying wasn’t costing time, though the vast majority of total lives at stake had turned out not to be savable just yet, “someone has to, someone tell Remus Lupin.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SOMETHING TO PROTECT: DRACO MALFOY

The boy sat in an office near to where the once-Deputy Headmistress had held court. His tears had run dry hours ago. Now there was only the waiting to see what would become of him, the orphan ward of Hogwarts, whose life and happiness lay in the hands of his family's enemies. The boy had been called to this room, and he had come because there was nothing else to do and nowhere else to go. Vincent and Gregory had left his side, called back by their mothers for their fathers' hurried funerals. Perhaps the boy should have gone with them, but he could not bring himself to do so. He would not have been able to act the part of a Malfoy. The feeling of emptiness that filled him up was so profound that it left no room even for pretended courtesy.

Everyone was dead.

His father was dead, and his godfather Mr. MacNair, and his fallback godfather Mr. Avery. Even Sirius Black, his mother's cousin, had somehow managed to die, and the last remnant of House Black was no friend to any Malfoy.

Everyone was dead.

There came a knock upon the office's door; and then, when the boy made no reply, the door opened, revealing—

"Go away," Draco Malfoy said to the Boy-Who-Lived. He couldn't muster any force in the words.

"I will soon," Harry Potter said, as he stepped into the room. "But there's a decision to be made, and only you can make it."

Draco turned his head toward the wall, because just looking at Harry Potter took more energy than he had left in him.

"You have to decide," Harry said, "what happens to Draco Malfoy after this. I don't mean that in any ominous way. No matter what, you're still going to grow up to be the rich heir of a Noble and Most Ancient House. The thing is," Harry's voice was wavering now, "the thing is, there's a horrible truth you don't know, and I keep thinking that if you knew, you'd tell me not to be your friend anymore. And I don't want to stop being your friend. But to just—never tell you—and always maintain that lie so I can go on being your friend—I can't do that. It's also wrong. I don't... don't want this anymore, I don't want to be *manipulating* you. I've hurt you too much already."

Then stop trying to be my friend, you're no good at it anyway. The words rose up into Draco's consciousness, and were rejected from his lips. He felt like he'd mostly lost Harry already, from the games Harry had played with their friendship, the lies and manipulations; and yet the thought of going back to Slytherin alone, maybe without Vincent and Gregory if their mothers terminated the arrangement... Draco didn't want to do that, he didn't want to go back to Slytherin and live out his life among only people who'd agreed to be Sorted into Slytherin House. Draco was barely sensible enough to remember how many of his real friends were also friends with Harry, that Padma was a Ravenclaw and even Theodore was a Chaotic Lieutenant. All that remained of Malfoy House was a tradition, now; and that tradition said it wasn't clever to tell the war's victor to go away and stop trying to be friends with you.

"All right," Draco said emptily. "Tell me."

"That's what I'm going to do," Harry said. "And then the Headmistress will come in after I leave, and seal away your last half-hour of memory. But before then, knowing the whole truth, you'll get to decide whether you still want to be involved with me." Harry's voice was shaking. "Um. According to the records I was reading through before I came here, the story really began in 1926 with the birth of a half-blood wizard named Tom Morfin Riddle. His mother died in childbirth, and he grew up in a

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Muggle orphanage, until his Hogwarts letter was brought to him by Professor Dumbledore...”

The Boy-Who-Lived continued speaking, words that slammed into what was left of Draco’s mind like falling houses.

The Dark Lord had been a half-blood. He’d never believed in blood purity for a fraction of a second.

Tom Riddle had come up with the idea of Lord Voldemort as a bad joke.

The Death Eaters had been meant to lose to David Monroe, so Monroe could take over.

After giving up on that, Tom Riddle had gone on playing Voldemort instead of actually trying to win, because he’d liked bossing the Death Eaters around.

Voldemort used me to try to frame Father for my attempted murder, then used me again to go after the Philosopher’s Stone. Draco couldn’t remember that part, but he’d already been told that he’d been used as a pawn alongside Professor Sprout, and that no charges would be filed.

And then the last horror.

“You—” whispered Draco Malfoy. “You—”

“I’m the one who killed your father and all the other Death Eaters last night. They’d been told to open fire on me the moment I did anything, so I had to kill them in order to have a chance at dealing with Voldemort, who was a danger to the entire world.” Harry Potter’s voice was strained. “I didn’t think about you and Theodore and Vincent and Gregory, but if I had, I’d have done it anyway. My mind managed not to realise until afterwards that Mr. White was Lucius, but if I’d realised, I still wouldn’t have risked leaving him alive, in case he knew wandless magic. The thought occurred to me long before that it would be pretty convenient, in terms of the political landscape, for all the Death Eaters to suddenly die. I always thought that the Death Eaters were horrible people, much more strongly than I ever let on to you, since the first day we met. But if your father hadn’t been there, and I’d had a button that could kill him remotely, I wouldn’t have pressed the button just for political reasons. The way I feel about what I’ve done, and whether there’s remorse... well, there’s a part of me that’s screaming in generic horror about having killed anyone. And another part that says that from a moral standpoint, the Death Eaters signed away their lives on the day they signed up with Voldemort. They

pointed their wands at me first, blah blah and so on. But right now I just feel sick about what I've done to you. Again. I feel like," Harry Potter's voice wobbled a bit, "everything I do only hurts you, for all my *good intentions*, that you've only ever lost things from being around me, so if you tell me to stay away entirely from Draco Malfoy after this, then I will. And if you want me to try to be your friend for real this time, without ever trying to manipulate you again, without ever using you again or risking hurting you again, then I will, I swear I will."

The next Lord Malfoy was crying, openly in front of his enemy, decorum and composure abandoned, because he didn't have anyone left for whose sake he could keep it.

A lie.

A lie.

Everything had been a lie, it was all lies piled on top of lies, lies lies lies—

"*You* should die," Draco forced out. "You should die for having killed Father." The words only filled him with more emptiness, but they had to be said.

Harry Potter just shook his head. "And if that's not an option?"

"You should *hurt*."

Harry only shook his head again.

The Boy-Who-Lived pressed the Lord Malfoy for his decision.

The Lord Malfoy refused to give it. He couldn't say it, couldn't bring himself to say it, either way. He didn't want the war's victor and their mutual friends to abandon him, and he wasn't going to give Harry the absolution he wanted, either.

So Draco Malfoy refused to answer, and then the time of that self's memory ended.

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The boy sat in an office near to where the once-Deputy Headmistress had held court. His tears had run dry hours ago. Now there was only the waiting to see what would become of him, the orphan ward of Hogwarts, whose life and happiness lay in the hands of his family's enemies. The boy

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SOMETHING TO PROTECT: DRACO MALFOY

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had been called to this room, and he had come, because there was nothing else to do, and nowhere else to go. Vincent and Gregory had left his side, called back by their mothers for their fathers' hurried funerals. Perhaps the boy should have gone with them, but he could not bring himself to do so. He would not have been able to act the part of a Malfoy. The feeling of emptiness that filled him up was so profound that it left no room even for lies.

Everyone was dead.

Everyone was dead, and it had all been futile from the beginning.

There was a knock upon the office door, and then, after a polite pause, it opened to reveal Headmistress McGonagall, dressed much as she had dressed when she was a Professor. "Mr. Malfoy?" his family's victorious enemy said. "Please come with me."

Listlessly, Draco rose up, and followed her out of the office. Seeing Harry Potter waiting beside her gave him some pause, but then his mind simply shut it out.

"Here's the last thing," Harry Potter said. "I found it in a folded parchment whose outside said that it was the last weapon to be used against House Malfoy, telling me not to read any further until the whole war hung in the balance. I didn't want to tell it to you before because I thought it might prejudice your decision unfairly. If you were a good person who never killed or lied, but you had to do one or the other, which would be worse?"

Draco ignored him and continued in Headmistress McGonagall's company, leaving Harry behind looking sadly after.

They came to the Headmistress's old office, where she lit her Floo-fire with a wave of her wand, said to the green flame "Gringotts travel office" and stepped through after a firm glance in his direction.

For lack of any other option, Draco Malfoy followed.

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She lay in bed, feeling more listless than usual that morning, awoken too early with the Sun just beginning to rise—though the direct sunlight

was blocked by the skyscrapers that shadowed her house. A faint tinge of hangover gnawed at her temples, dried her mouth; she tried to be sparing with the drink (though she didn't know why she bothered) but yesterday she'd felt... even more depressed than usual, like she'd lost something, somehow. Not for the first time, not for the hundredth time, she thought about moving—to Adelaide, to Perth, maybe to Perth Amboy if that was what it took. She always had the sense there was somewhere else she ought to be; but while she could live a comfortable life on the payments the insurance company made to her, she couldn't afford luxuries. She couldn't pay to go gallivanting around the world looking for someplace that fit her unsatisfied sense of belonging. She'd watched the TV for long enough, she'd rented enough travelogues, to know that nowhere the VCR showed her gave her any more sense of rightness than Sydney.

She'd felt frozen, stopped in time, ever since the traffic accident that had stolen her memories—not just of a dead family that meant nothing to her now, but memories like how a stove worked. She suspected, no, she *knew*, that whatever her heart was waiting for, whatever key needed to turn inside her to make her life begin moving again, it was one more thing she'd lost to that runaway minivan. She thought about that almost every morning, trying to guess what she was missing, missing, missing from her life and mind.

Somebody rang her doorbell.

She groaned, turning her head far enough to look at the LED alarm clock at the side of her bed. 6:31, it said, with the AM dot lit. *Seriously?* Well, that idiot could wait while she staggered out of bed at her own pace, then.

Stagger out of bed she did, ignoring the doorbell as it rang again, as she ducked into the bathroom and dressed herself.

She clambered down the stairs, ignoring the ever-nagging sense that someone else ought to be answering her door for her. "Who's there?" she called to the closed door; the door had a peephole, but it was fogged over.

"Are you Nancy Manson?" came a woman's voice, speaking in a precise Scottish accent.

"Yes," she said cautiously.

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SOMETHING TO PROTECT: DRACO MALFOY

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“*Eunoe*,” spoke the Scottish voice, and Nancy leapt back in shock as a flash of light came from the door and *hit* her and...

Nancy swayed, putting a hand to her forehead. Flashes of light just going through doors and hitting people, that was... that was... that wasn’t particularly surprising...

“Would you please open the door?” said the Scottish woman’s voice. “The war is over and your memories should be returning shortly. There’s someone here who ought to see you.”

My memories—

Nancy’s head was already feeling clogged, like she was about to start hacking something out of her brain, but she managed to reach out and yank the door open.

There in front of her was a woman dressed as a (*perfectly normal*) witch, from black robes to tall pointed hat—

—and standing beside her a boy, with short white-blonde hair and wearing (*perfectly normal*) dark robes trimmed in green, staring at her with his jaw dropped and eyes wide and beginning to fill with tears.

Green-trimmed robes and white-blonde hair...

Something warm stirred in her memory. She felt her heart rising into her throat as she realized that the thing that she’d been looking for these past ten years might be right in front of her this very instant. Somewhere deep inside her, ice was cracking around her heart, the piece of her that had been stopped for so long preparing to move once more.

The boy was staring at her, his mouth working soundlessly.

A mysterious name came into her mind, rose to her lips.

“Lucius?” she whispered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SOMETHING TO PROTECT: SEVERUS SNAPE

A somber mood pervaded the Headmistress's office. Minerva had returned after dropping off Draco and Narcissa/Nancy at St. Mungo's, where the Lady Malfoy was being examined to see if a decade living as a Muggle had done any damage to her health; and Harry had come up to the Headmistress's office again and then... not been able to think of priorities. There was so *much* to do, so many things, that even Headmistress McGonagall didn't seem to know where to start, and certainly not Harry. Right now Minerva was repeatedly writing words on parchment and then erasing them with a handwave, and Harry had closed his eyes for clarity. Was there any *next* first thing that needed to happen...

There came a knock upon the great oaken door that had been Dumbledore's, and the Headmistress opened it with a word.

The man who entered the Headmistress's office appeared worn, he had discarded his wheelchair but still walked with a limp. He wore black robes that were simple, yet clean and unstained. Over his left shoulder was slung a knapsack, of sturdy gray leather set with silver filigree that held four green pearl-like stones. It looked like a thoroughly enchanted knapsack, one that could contain the contents of a Muggle house.

One look at him, and Harry knew.

Headmistress McGonagall sat frozen behind her new desk.

Severus Snape inclined his head to her.

"What is the meaning of this?" said the Headmistress, sounding... heart-sick, like she'd known, upon a glance, just like Harry had.

"I resign my position as the Potions Master of Hogwarts," the man said simply. "I will not stay to draw my last month's salary. If there are students who have been particularly harmed by me, you may use the money for their benefit."

He knows. The thought came to Harry, and he couldn't have said in words just *what* the Potions Master now knew; except that it was clear that Severus knew it.

"Severus..." Headmistress McGonagall began. Her voice sounded hollow. "Professor Severus Snape, you may not realize how difficult it is to find Potions Masters who can safely teach Muggleborns, or Professors sharp enough to keep Slytherin House in any semblance of order..."

Again the man inclined his head. "I think it need not be said to you, Headmistress, but I recommend in the strongest possible terms that the next Head of Slytherin be nothing like me."

"Severus, you only did as Albus told you to do! You could stay on and act differently!"

"Headmistress," Harry said. His own voice seemed also hollow, and Harry wondered at it, for he hadn't known Severus Snape that well. "If he wants to go, I think you should let him go."

Dumbledore was using him. Maybe not exactly the way Professor Quirrell thought, maybe it was prophecy rather than sabotaging Slytherin, but Dumbledore was still using him. There were things that could have been said long ago to Severus, to free him. It's clear why Dumbledore didn't risk that, but still, Severus wasn't being used kindly. Even his blindness and grief were being used, the way he didn't grasp the consequences of his actions as Potions Master...

"It is well to find you here, Mr. Potter," Severus said. "There is unfinished business between us."

Harry didn't know what to say, so he just nodded.

Severus seemed to be having some difficulty speaking, as he stood before the two of them with the grey knapsack on his shoulder. Finally he seemed to find the words he'd come to speak. "Your mother. Lily. She was—"

"I know," Harry said, through the thickness of his throat. "You don't have to say it."

"Lily was a fine upstanding witch, Mr. Potter. I would not have you think otherwise from any words I said to you."

"Severus?" said Minerva McGonagall, looking as shocked as if she'd been bitten by her own shoes.

The former Potions Master kept his eyes on Harry. "More than one bar lay between myself and Lily, most notably my ill-advised attempts to curry favor with the purebloods of my house. If I made it sound like one mistake upon a muddy field ended it all, if I pretended that she had no reason but shallowness not to love me, I hope your books have also told you why fools may say such things."

"They did," Harry said. He was looking at the fine gray knapsack on Severus Snape's left shoulder, unable to meet the Potions Master's eyes. "They did."

"However," the former Potions Master continued, "I'm afraid I have nothing more to say about your father than what I've already told you."

"Severus!"

The former Potions Master seemed to have eyes only for Harry. "The Dark Mark upon my arm is not dead, nor is the prophecy fulfilled by that story you recounted before the crowd. How did you destroy all but a remnant of the Dark Lord?"

Harry hesitated. "I Obliviated most of his memories and... sealed him, I guess is how wizards say it. Even if the seal breaks, he won't come back as himself."

Severus frowned briefly and then shrugged. "I suppose that is acceptable."

"Professor Snape," Harry said, because this too was now his responsibility, "the Order of the Phoenix owes you for services rendered. I'm in an excellent position to repay it, both financially and magically. Just in case you want to start your next life in a position of wealth, or with better hair, or something."

"Strange words to say to such as me," the former Potions Master said in a soft drawl. "I went to the Dark Lord intending to sell him the prophecy in exchange for Lily's love becoming mine, by whatever darkness was required to achieve it. That is hardly something to be forgiven lightly. And then, in the years after when I was a Potions Master... that

you experienced yourself. Do you think my service to the Order of the Phoenix has repaid all my sins?"

"People are always broken," Harry said, though the words stuck in his throat. "They always make mistakes. At least you tried to repay them."

"Perhaps," said the former Potions Master. "My final duty was to fail in guarding the Stone, to be struck down. This I have done, and I survived it, which I never expected to do." Severus was leaning against the door through which he'd entered, taking his weight off his left leg. "I would not have thought to ask for your forgiveness, but since you offer it so freely, I will accept with thanks. From this day on I wish to take less unkindly ways, and I think that is best done by starting over."

Tears glistened on Minerva McGonagall's nose and cheeks, when she spoke her voice was without hope. "Surely you could start over inside Hogwarts."

Severus shook his head. "Too many students would remember me as the evil Potions Master. No, Minerva. I will go someplace new, and take a new name, and find someone new to love."

"Severus Snape," Harry said, because it was his responsibility to say it, "has all your will been done?"

"Lily's killer is vanquished," the man said. "I am content."

The Headmistress lowered her head. "Be well, Severus," she whispered.

"I do have one last piece of advice," Harry said. "If you want it."

"What is it?" said Severus Snape.

"Ruminating about the past can contribute to depression. You have my blanket permission to just never think about your past, ever. You shouldn't think that it's your responsibility to Lily to bear your guilt for her, or anything like that. Just keep your mind on your future and whatever new people you meet."

"I shall take your wisdom into consideration," Severus said neutrally.

"Also, try a different brand of hair shampoo."

A wry grin crossed Severus's face, and Harry thought it might have been, for the first time, that man's true smile. "Drop dead, Potter."

Harry laughed.

Severus laughed.

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SOMETHING TO PROTECT: SEVERUS SNAPE

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Minerva was sobbing.

Without saying anything else, the free man took a pinch of Floo powder, and cast it into the office's fireplace, and strode into the green flame whispering something that nobody caught; and that was the last that anyone ever heard of Severus Snape.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

SOMETHING TO PROTECT: HERMIONE GRANGER

And it was evening and it was morning, the last day. June 15th, 1992. The beginning light of morning, the pre-dawn before sunrise, was barely brightening the sky. To the east of Hogwarts, where the Sun would rise, that faintest tinge of grey made barely visible the hilly horizon beyond the Quidditch stands.

The stone terrace-platform where Harry now sat would be high enough to see the dawn beyond the hills below; he'd asked for that, when he was describing his new office.

Harry was currently sitting cross-legged on a cushion, chilly pre-morning breezes stirring over his exposed hands and face. He'd ordered the house-elves to bring up the hand-glittered throne from his previous office as General Chaos... and then he'd told the elves to put it back, once it had occurred to Harry to start worrying about where his taste in decorations had come from and whether Voldemort had once possessed a similar throne. Which, itself, wasn't a knockdown argument—it wasn't like sitting on a glittery throne to survey the lands below Hogwarts was *unethical* in any way Harry's moral philosophy could make out—but Harry had decided that he needed to take time and think it through. Meanwhile, simple cushions would do well enough.

In the room below, connected to the rooftop by a simple wooden ladder, was Harry's new office inside Hogwarts. A wide room, surrounded

by full-wall windows on four sides for sunlight; currently bare of furnishings but for four chairs and a desk. Harry had told Headmistress McGonagall what he was looking for, and Headmistress McGonagall had put on the Sorting Hat and then told Harry the series of twists and turns that would take him where he wanted to be. High enough in Hogwarts that the castle shouldn't have been that tall, high enough in Hogwarts that nobody looking from the outside would see a piece of castle corresponding to where Harry now sat. It seemed like an elementary precaution against snipers that there was no reason *not* to take.

Though, on the flip side, Harry had no idea where he currently *was* in any real sense. If his office couldn't be seen from the lands below, then how was Harry seeing the lands, how were photons making it from the landscape to him? On the western side of the horizon, stars still glittered, clear in the pre-dawn air. Were those photons the actual photons that had been emitted by huge plasma furnaces in the unimaginable distance? Or did Harry now sit within some dreaming vision of the Hogwarts castle? Or was it all, without any further explanation, 'just magic'? He needed to get electricity to work better around magic so he could experiment with shining lasers downward and upward.

And yes, Harry had his own office on Hogwarts now. He didn't have any official title yet, but the Boy-Who-Lived was now a true fixture of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the soon-to-be-home of the Philosopher's Stone and the world's only wizarding institution of genuinely higher education. It wasn't fully secured, but Professor Vector had put up some preliminary Charms and Runes to screen the office and its rooftop against eavesdropping.

Harry sat on his cushion, near the edge of his office's roof, and gazed down upon trees and lakes and flowering grass. Far below, carriages sat motionlessly, not yet harnessed to skeletal horses. Small boats littered the shore, prepared to ferry younger students across the lake when the time came. The Hogwarts Express had arrived overnight, and now the train cars and the huge old-fashioned engine awaited on the other side of the southern lake. All was ready to take the students home after the Leave-Taking Feast in the morning.

Harry stared across the lake, at the great old-fashioned locomotive he

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SOMETHING TO PROTECT: HERMIONE GRANGER

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wouldn't be riding home this time. Again. There was a strange sadness and worry to that thought, like Harry was already starting to miss out on the bonding experiences with *the other students his age*—if you could say that at all, when a significant part of Harry had been born in 1926. It had felt to Harry, last night in the Ravenclaw common room, like the gap between him and the other students had, yes, widened even further. Though that might only have been from the questions Padma Patil and Anthony Goldstein had excitedly asked each other about the Girl-Who-Revived, the rapid-fire speculations shooting through the air from Ravenclaw to Ravenclaw. Harry had known the answers, he'd known all the answers, and he hadn't been able to say them.

There was a part of Harry that was tempted to go on the Hogwarts Express and then come back to Hogwarts by Floo. But when Harry imagined finding five other students for his compartment, and then spending the next eight hours keeping secrets from Neville or Padma or Dean or Tracey or Lavender... it didn't seem like an attractive prospect. Harry felt like he ought to do it for reasons of Socializing with the Other Children, but he did not *want* to do it. He could meet with everyone again at the start of the next school year, when there would be other topics of which he could speak more freely.

Harry stared south across the lake, at the huge old locomotive, and thought about the rest of his life.

About the Future.

The prophecy Dumbledore's letter had mentioned about him tearing apart the stars in heaven... well, *that* sounded optimistic. That part had an obvious interpretation to anyone who'd grown up with the right sort of upbringing. It described a future where humanity had won, more or less. It wasn't what Harry usually thought about when he gazed at the stars, but from a truly *adult* perspective, the stars were enormous heaps of valuable raw materials that had unfortunately caught fire and needed to be scattered and put out. If you were tapping the huge hydrogen-helium reservoirs for raw materials, that meant your species had successfully grown up.

Unless the prophecy had been referring to something else entirely. Dumbledore might have been misinterpreting some seer's words... but

his message to Harry had been phrased as if there'd been a prophecy about Harry *personally* tearing apart stars, in the foreseeable future. Which seemed potentially more worrisome, though by no means certain to be true, or a bad thing if it was true...

Harry vented a sigh. He'd begun to understand, in the long hours before sleep had taken him last night, just what Dumbledore's last message implied.

Looking back on the events of the 1991-1992 Hogwarts school year was nothing short of bone-freezingly terrifying, now that Harry understood what he was seeing.

It wasn't just that Harry had kept the frequent company of his good friend Lord Voldemort. It wasn't even *mostly* that.

It was the vision of a narrow line of Time that Albus Dumbledore had steered through fate's narrow keyhole, a hair-thin strand of possibility threaded through a needle's eye.

The prophecies had instructed Dumbledore to have Tom Riddle's intelligence copied onto the brain of a wizarding infant who would then grow up learning Muggle science. What did it say about the likely shape of the Future, if *that* was the first or best strategy the seers could find that *didn't* lead to catastrophe?

Harry could look back now on the Unbreakable Vow that he'd made, and guess that if not for that Vow, disaster might have already been set in motion yesterday when Harry had wanted to tear down the International Statute of Secrecy. Which in turn strongly suggested that the many prophecies Dumbledore had read and whose instructions he'd followed, had somehow ensured that Harry and Voldemort would collide in *exactly the right* way to cause Voldemort to force Harry to make that Unbreakable Vow. That the Unbreakable Vow had been part of Time's narrow keyhole, one of the improbable preconditions for allowing the Earth's peoples to survive.

A Vow whose sole purpose was to protect everyone from Harry's current *stupidity*.

It was like watching a videotape of an almost-traffic-accident that had happened to you, where you remembered another car missing you by centimeters, and the video showing that somebody had *also* thrown a pebble

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SOMETHING TO PROTECT: HERMIONE GRANGER

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in exactly the right way to cause an enormous lorry to miss that near-collision, and if they hadn't thrown that pebble then you and all your family in the automobile and your *entire planet* would have been hit by the lorry, which, in the metaphor, represented your own *sheer obliviousness*.

Harry had been *warned*, he'd *known* on some level or the Vow wouldn't have stopped him, and yet he'd *still* almost made the wrong choice and destroyed the world. Harry could look back now and see that, yes, the alternate-Harry with no Vow would've had trouble accepting the reasoning that said you couldn't get magical healing to Muggles as fast as possible. If the alternate-Harry had acknowledged the danger at all, he would have rationalized it, tried to figure out some clever way around the problem and refused to accept *taking a few years longer to do it*, and so the world would have ended. Even after all the warnings Harry had received, it *still* wouldn't have worked without the Unbreakable Vow.

One tiny strand of Time, being threaded through a needle's eye.

Harry didn't know how to handle this revelation. It wasn't a sort of situation that human beings had evolved emotions to handle. All Harry could do was stare at how close he had come to disaster, might come *again* to disaster if that Vow was fated to trigger more than once, and think...

Think...

'I don't want that to happen again' didn't seem like the right thought. He'd never *wanted* to destroy the world in the first place. Harry hadn't lacked for protective feelings about Earth's sapient population, those protective feelings had been the *problem* in a way. What Harry had lacked was some element of clear vision, of being willing to consciously acknowledge what he'd already known deep down.

And the whole thing with Harry having spent the last year cozying up to the Defense Professor didn't speak highly of his intellect either. It seemed to point to the same problem, even. There were things Harry had known or strongly suspected on some level, but never promoted to conscious attention. And so he had failed and nearly died.

I need to raise the level of my game.

That was the thought Harry was looking for. He had to do better than this, become a less stupid person than this.

I need to raise the level of my game, or fail.

Dumbledore had destroyed the recordings in the Hall of Prophecy and arranged for no further recordings to be made. There'd apparently been a prophecy that said Harry mustn't look upon those prophecies. And the obvious next thought, which might or might not be true, was that saving the world was *beyond the reach of prophetic instruction*. That winning would take plans that were too complex for seers' messages, or that Divination couldn't see somehow. If there'd been some way for Dumbledore to save the world himself, then prophecy would probably have told Dumbledore how to do that. Instead the prophecies had told Dumbledore how to create the preconditions for a particular sort of person existing; a person, maybe, who could unravel a challenge more difficult than prophecy could solve directly. That was why Harry had been placed on his own, to think without prophetic guidance. If all Harry did was follow mysterious orders from prophecies, then he wouldn't mature into a person who could perform that unknown task.

And right now, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres was still a walking catastrophe who'd needed to be constrained by an Unbreakable Vow to prevent him from *immediately* setting the Earth on an inevitable course toward destruction *when he'd already been warned against it*. That had happened *literally yesterday*, just one day after he'd helped Voldemort almost take over the planet.

A certain line from Tolkien kept running through Harry's mind, the part where Frodo upon Mount Doom put on the ring, and Sauron suddenly realized what a *complete idiot* he'd been. 'And the magnitude of his own folly was at last laid bare', or however that had gone.

There was a huge gap between who Harry needed to become, and who he was right now.

And Harry didn't think that time, life experience, and puberty would take care of that automatically, though they might help. Though if Harry could grow into an adult that was to *this* self what a normal adult was to a normal eleven-year-old, maybe *that* would be enough to steer through Time's narrow keyhole...

He had to grow up, somehow, and there was no traditional path laid out before him for accomplishing that.

The thought came then to Harry of another work of fiction, more ob-

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SOMETHING TO PROTECT: HERMIONE GRANGER

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scure than Tolkien:

You can only arrive at mastery by practicing the techniques you have learned, facing challenges and apprehending them, using to the fullest the tools you have been taught, until they shatter in your hands and you are left in the midst of wreckage absolute... I cannot create masters. I have never known how to create masters. Go, then, and fail... You have been shaped into something that may emerge from the wreckage, determined to remake your Art. I cannot create masters, but if you had not been taught, your chances would be less. The higher road begins after the Art seems to fail you; though the reality will be that it was you who failed your Art.

It wasn't that Harry had gone down the *wrong* path, it wasn't that the road to sanity lay somewhere outside of science. But reading science papers hadn't been *enough*. All the cognitive psychology papers about known bugs in the human brain and so on had *helped*, but they hadn't been *sufficient*. He'd failed to reach what Harry was starting to realise was a *shockingly* high standard of being so incredibly, unbelievably rational that you actually started to *get things right*, as opposed to having a handy language in which to describe afterwards everything you'd just done wrong. Harry could look back now and apply ideas like 'motivated cognition' to see where he'd gone astray over the last year. That counted for something, when it came to being saner in the future. That was better than having no idea what he'd done wrong. But that wasn't yet being the person who could pass through Time's narrow keyhole, the adult form whose *possibility* Dumbledore had been instructed by seers to create.

I need to think faster, grow up faster... How alone am I, how alone will I be? Am I making the same mistake I made during Professor Quirrell's first battle, when I didn't realise Hermione had captains? The mistake I made when I didn't tell Dumbledore about the sense of doom, once I realised Dumbledore probably wasn't mad or evil?

It would help if Muggles had classes for this sort of thing, but they didn't. Maybe Harry could recruit Daniel Kahneman, fake his death, rejuvenate him with the Stone, and put him in charge of inventing better training methods...

Harry took the Elder Wand out of his robes, gazed again at the dark-grey wood that Dumbledore had passed down to him. Harry had *tried* to think faster this time, he'd tried to complete the pattern implied by the

Cloak of Invisibility and the Resurrection Stone. The Cloak of Invisibility had possessed the legendary power of hiding the wearer, and the hidden power of allowing the wearer to hide from Death itself in the form of Dementors. The Resurrection Stone had the legendary power of summoning an image of the dead, and then Voldemort had incorporated it into his horcrux system to allow his spirit to move freely. The second Deathly Hallow was a potential component of a system of true immortality that Cadmus Peverell had never completed, maybe due to his having ethics.

And then there was the third Deathly Hallow, the Elder Wand of Antioch Peverell, that legend said passed from wizard to stronger wizard, and made its holder invincible against ordinary attacks; that was the known and overt characteristic...

The Elder Wand that had belonged to Dumbledore, who'd been trying to prevent the Death of the world itself.

The purpose of the Elder Wand always going to the victor might be to find the strongest living wizard and empower them still further, in case there was any threat to their entire species; it could secretly be a tool to defeat Death in its form as the destroyer of worlds.

But if there was some higher power locked within the Elder Wand, it had not presented itself to Harry based on that guess. Harry had raised up the Elder Wand and spoken to it, named himself a descendant of Peverell who accepted his family's quest; he'd promised the Elder Wand that he would do his best to save the world from Death, and take up Dumbledore's duty. And the Elder Wand had answered no more strongly to his hand than before, refusing his attempt to jump ahead in the story. Maybe Harry needed to strike his first true blow against the Death of worlds before the Elder Wand would acknowledge him; as the heir of Ignotus Peverell had already defeated Death's shadow, and the heir of Cadmus Peverell had already survived the Death of his body, when their respective Deathly Hallows had revealed their secrets.

At least Harry had managed to guess that, contrary to legend, the Elder Wand didn't contain a core of 'Thestral hair'. Harry had seen Thestrals, and they were skeletal horses with smooth skin and no visible mane on their skull-like heads, nor tufts on their bony tails. But what core was truly inside the Elder Wand, Harry hadn't yet felt himself knowing; nor

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had he been able to find, anywhere on the Elder Wand, the circle-triangle-line of the Deathly Hallows that should have been present.

"I don't suppose," Harry murmured to the Elder Wand, "you could just tell me?"

There came back no answer from the globe-knobbed wand; only a sense of glory and contained power, watching him skeptically.

Harry sighed, and put the most powerful wand in the world back into his school robes. He'd get it eventually, and hopefully in time.

Maybe faster, if there was someone to help him do the research.

Harry was aware on some level—no, he needed to stop being aware of things *on some level* and start just being aware of them—Harry was explicitly and consciously aware that he was ruminating about the Future mostly to distract himself from the imminent arrival of Hermione Granger. Who would receive a clear bill of health from St. Mungo's, when she woke up very early this morning, and who would then Floo with Professor Flitwick back to Hogwarts. Whereupon she'd tell Professor Flitwick that she needed to speak with Harry Potter immediately. There'd been a note from Harry to himself about that, when Harry had woken up later this morning with the sun already risen in the Ravenclaw dorm. He'd read the note, and then Time-Turned back to before the dawn hour when Hermione Granger would arrive.

She won't actually be angry with me.

...

Seriously. Hermione isn't that kind of person. Maybe she was at the start of the year but she's too self-aware to fall for that one now.

...

What do you mean, '...'? If you have something to say, inner voice, just say it! We're trying to be more aware of our own thought processes, remember?

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The sky had gone full blue-gray, dawn barely short of sunrise, by the time that Harry heard the sound of footsteps coming from the ladder that opened into his new office. Hastily Harry stood up and began to brush

off his robes; and then, realising what he was doing, stopped the nervous motions. He'd just defeated Voldemort, damn it, he ought not to be this nervous.

The young witch's head and chestnut curls appeared in the opening and peered around. Then she rose up higher, seemed almost to run up the ladder steps, like she was walking along an ordinary sidewalk but vertically; Harry could have blinked and missed it, how her one shoe came down on the top rung of the ladder and then she leaped lightly onto the roof an instant later.

Hermione. Harry's lips moved around the word, but made no sound.

There'd been something Harry had meant to say, but it had gone right out of his mind.

Maybe a quarter of the minute passed, on the rooftop, before Hermione Granger spoke. She was wearing a blue-edged uniform now, and the blue-bronze-striped tie of her proper House.

"Harry," said Hermione Granger, a terribly familiar voice that almost brought tears to Harry's eyes, "before I ask you all the questions, I'd like to start by saying thank you very much for, um, whatever it is you did. I mean it, really. Thank you."

"Hermione," Harry said, and swallowed. The phrase *may I have permission to hug you*, which Harry had imagined using for his opening line, seemed impossible to say. "Welcome back. Hold on while I put up some privacy spells." Harry took the Elder Wand out of his robes, got a book from his pouch that he opened to a bookmark, and then carefully pronounced "*Homenum Revelio*," along with two other recently-acquired security Charms that Harry had found himself barely able to cast if he wielded the Elder Wand. It wasn't much, but it was marginally better security than just relying on Professor Vector.

"You have Dumbledore's wand," Hermione said. Her voice was hushed, and sounded as loud as an avalanche in the still dawn air. "And you can use it to cast fourth-year spells?"

Harry nodded, making a mental note to be more careful who else saw him do that. "Is it okay if I hug you?"

Hermione moved lightly over to him; her movements were peculiarly swift, more graceful than they'd been before. Her motions seemed to ra-

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diate an air of something pure and untouched, reminding Harry again of how peaceful Hermione had looked when she was sleeping on Voldemort's altar—

Realization hit Harry like a ton of bricks, or at least a kilogram of brick.

And Harry hugged Hermione, feeling how very *alive* she seemed. He felt like crying, and suppressed it, because he didn't know whether that was just her aura affecting him or not.

Hermione's arms around him were gentle, exceedingly light in their pressure, as if she were being deliberately careful not to snap his body in half like a used toothpick.

"So," Hermione said, once Harry had let go of her. Her young face looked very serious, as well as pure and innocent. "I didn't tell the Aurors you were there, or that it was Professor Quirrell and not You-Know-Who who killed all the Death Eaters. Professor Flitwick only let them give me one drop of Veritaserum, so I didn't have to say. I just told them the troll was the last thing I remembered."

"Ah," Harry said. He had somehow found himself staring at Hermione's nose instead of her eyes. "What do you think happened, exactly?"

"Well," Hermione Granger said consideringly, "I got eaten by a troll, which I'd frankly rather not do again, and then there was a really loud *bang* and my legs were back, and I was lying on a stone altar in the middle of a graveyard in a dark moonlit forest I'd never seen before, with somebody's severed hands clutched around my throat. So you see, Mr. Potter, finding myself in a situation that weird and dark and scary, I wasn't going to make the same mistake I did last time with Tracey. I knew *right away* that it was you."

Harry nodded. "Good call."

"I said your name, but you didn't answer," said Hermione. "I sat up and one of the bloody hands slid down over my shirt, leaving little bits of flesh behind. I didn't scream though, even when I looked around and saw all the heads and bodies and realized what the smell was." Hermione stopped, took another deep breath. "I saw the skull masks and realized that the dead people had been Death Eaters. I knew right away that the Defense Professor had been there with you and killed them all, but

I didn't notice Professor Quirrell's body was also there. I didn't realize it was him even when I saw Professor Flitwick checking the body. He looked... different, when he was dead." Hermione's voice became quieter. She looked humbled somehow, in a way Harry couldn't often remember seeing. "They said David Monroe sacrificed his life to bring me back, the same way your mother sacrificed herself for you, so that the Dark Lord would explode again when he tried to touch me. I'm *pretty* sure that's not the whole truth, but... I've thought a lot of nasty things about our Defense Professor that I never should've thought."

"Um," Harry said.

Hermione nodded solemnly, her hands clasped in front of her as though in penitence. "I know you're probably too nice to say the things to me that you have a right to say now, so I'll say them for you, Harry. You were right about Professor Quirrell, and I was wrong. You told me so. David Monroe was a little bit Dark and a whole lot Slytherin, and it was childish of me to think that was the same thing as being evil."

"Ah..." Harry said. This was very hard to say. "Actually, the rest of the world doesn't know this part, not even the Headmistress. But in point of fact you were one hundred and twelve percent correct about him being evil, and I'll remember for future reference that although 'Dark' and 'evil' may not technically be the same thing, there's a great big statistical correlation."

"Oh," said Hermione, and fell silent again.

"You're not saying that you told me so?" said Harry. His mental model of Hermione was yelling: I TOLD YOU SO! DIDN'T I TELL YOU SO, MR. POTTER? DIDN'T I TELL YOU? PROFESSOR QUIRRELL IS EEEEEVIIIIL, I SAID, BUT YOU DIDN'T LISTEN TO ME!

The actual Hermione just shook her head. "I know you cared about him a lot," she said softly. "Since I was right after all... I knew you'd probably be hurting a lot after Professor Quirrell turned out to be evil, and that it wouldn't be a good time to say I told you so. I mean, that's what I decided when I was thinking that part through several months earlier."

Thank you, Miss Granger. Harry was glad she'd said that much, though, it just wouldn't have felt like Hermione otherwise.

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"So, Mr. Potter," said Hermione Granger, tapping her fingers on her robe at around thigh level. "After the medi-witch drew my blood, it stopped hurting right away, and when I brushed away the little bit of blood on my arm, I couldn't find where the needle had poked me. I bent some of the metal in my bedframe without trying hard, and though I haven't had a chance to test it yet, I feel like I should be able to run really *fast*. My fingernails are pearly-white and shiny even though I don't remember painting them. And my teeth look like that too, which, being the daughter of dentists, makes me nervous. So it's not that I'm ungrateful, but just what exactly did you do?"

"Um," Harry said. "And I'm expecting you're also wondering why you're radiating an aura of purity and innocence?"

"I'm WHAT?"

"That part wasn't my idea. Honestly." Harry's voice went small. "Please don't kill me."

Hermione Granger raised her hands in front of her face, staring somewhat cross-eyed at her fingers. "Harry, are you saying... I mean, my radiating innocence and being all fast and graceful and my teeth being pearly white... is it *alicorn* my fingernails are made of?"

"Alicorn?"

"It's the term for unicorn horn, Mr. Potter." Hermione Granger seemed to be trying to nibble her fingernails, and not having much luck. "So, I guess if you bring a girl back from the dead she ends up as, what did Daphne call it, a Sparkling Unicorn Princess?"

"That's not exactly what happened," Harry said, though it was frighteningly close.

Hermione took her finger out of her mouth, frowning at it. "I can't bite through it either. Mr. Potter, did you consider the problems now that it's literally impossible for me to trim my fingernails and toenails?"

"The Weasley twins have a magical sword that should work," Harry volunteered.

"I think," Hermione Granger said firmly, "that I would like to know the whole story behind all this, Mr. Potter. Because knowing you and knowing Professor Quirrell, there was some sort of *plan* going on."

Harry took a deep breath. Then he exhaled. "Sorry, it's... classified. I could tell you if you studied Occlumency, but... do you want to?"

"Do I want to study Occlumency?" Hermione said, looking slightly surprised. "That's at least a sixth-year thing, isn't it?"

"I learned it," Harry said. "I started with an unusual boost, but I doubt that really mattered in the long run. I mean, I'm sure you could learn calculus if you studied hard, regardless of what age Muggles usually learn it. The question is, um." Harry was having to control his breathing. "The question is, do you still want to do... that kind of stuff."

Hermione turned, and looked at where the sky was lightening in the east. "You mean," she said quietly, "do I still want to be a hero now that it's earned me a horrible death that one time."

Harry nodded, then said "Yes" because Hermione wasn't turning toward him, though the word felt blocked in his throat.

"I've been thinking about that," Hermione said. "It was, in fact, an exceptionally gruesome and painful death."

"I, um. I did set some things up *just in case* you still wanted to be a hero. There were some short windows of opportunity where I didn't have time to consult you, I couldn't let you see me because I expected you to be given Veritaserum later. But if you don't like it, I can undo most of what I did and you can just ignore the rest."

Hermione nodded distantly. "Like making everyone think that I... Harry, *did* I actually do anything to You-Know-Who?"

"No, that was all me, though please don't tell anyone that. Just so you know, that time the Boy-Who-Lived supposedly defeated Voldemort, on the night of Halloween in 1981, that was Dumbledore's victory and he let everyone think it was me. So now I've defeated a Dark Lord once, and gotten credit for it once. It all balances out eventually, I guess."

Hermione went on gazing to the east. "I'm not really comfortable with this," she said after a while. "People thinking I defeated the Dark Lord Voldemort, when I haven't done anything at all... oh, that's the same thing you went through, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Sorry about inflicting that on you. I was... well, I was trying to create a separate identity for you in people's minds, I guess. There was just the one opportunity and everything was sort of *rushed* and... I real-

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ized afterwards that maybe I shouldn't have, but it was too late." Harry cleared his throat. "Though, um. If you're feeling like you want to do something that's actually worthy of the way people think about the Girl-Who-Revived, um. I might have an idea for what you can do. Very soon, if you want."

Hermione Granger was giving him a *look*.

"But you don't *have* to!" Harry said hastily. "You can just ignore this whole thing and be the best student in Ravenclaw! If that's what you prefer."

"Are you trying to use reverse psychology on me, Mr. Potter?"

"No! Honestly!" Harry took a deep breath. "I'm *trying* not to decide your life for you. I thought I saw, yesterday, I thought I saw what might come next for you—but then I remembered how much of this year I'd spent being a total idiot. I thought of some things Dumbledore said to me. I realized it genuinely wasn't my place to say. That you could do anything you wanted with your life, and that above all, the choice had to be your own. Maybe you *don't* want to be a hero after this, maybe you want to become a great magical researcher because that's who Hermione Granger really was all along, never mind what your fingernails are made out of now. Or you could go to the Salem Witches' Institute in America instead of Hogwarts. I won't lie and say I'd like that, but it really is up to you." Harry turned to the horizon and swept his hand wide, as though to indicate all the world that lay beyond Hogwarts. "You can go *anywhere* from here. You can do *anything* with your life. If you want to be a wealthy sixty-year-old merman, I can make it happen. I'm serious."

Hermione nodded slowly. "I'm curious about how you'd do that exactly, but what I want isn't to have things done *for* me."

Harry sighed. "I understand. Um..." Harry hesitated. "I think... if it helps you to know... in my case, things were being arranged for me a *lot*. By Dumbledore, mostly, though Professor Quirrell too. Maybe the power to earn your own way in life is itself something you have to earn."

"Why, that sounds very wise," Hermione said. "Like having my parents pay for me to go to university, so I can someday get my own job. Professor Quirrell bringing me back to life as a Sparkling Unicorn Princess

and you telling everyone that I offed the Dark Lord Voldemort is just like that, really.”

“I *am* sorry,” Harry said. “I know I should’ve done it differently, but... I didn’t have much time to plan and I was exhausted and not really thinking straight—”

“I’m grateful, Harry,” Hermione said, her voice softer now. “You’re being too harsh on yourself, even. Please don’t take it so seriously when I’m snarky at you. I don’t want to be the sort of girl who comes back from the dead, and then starts complaining about which superpowers she got and that her alicorn fingernails are the wrong shade of pearly white.” Hermione had turned, was again gazing off at the east. “But, Mr. Potter... if I *do* decide that dying a horrible death isn’t enough to make me rethink my life choices... not that I’m saying that just yet... then what happens next?”

“I do my best to support you in your life choices,” Harry said firmly. “Whatever they are.”

“You have a quest already lined up for me, I’m guessing. A nice safe quest where there’s no chance of my getting hurt again.”

Harry rubbed his eyes, feeling tired inside. It was like he could hear the voice of Albus Dumbledore inside his head. *Forgive me, Hermione Granger...* “I’m sorry, Hermione. If you go down that path I’m going to have to Dumbledore you, and not tell you some things. Manipulate you, if only for a short while. I do believe there’s something you might be able to do now, something real, something worthy of the way people are thinking about the Girl-Who-Revived... that you might have a destiny, even... but in the end that’s just a guess, I know a lot less than Dumbledore did. Are you willing to risk the life you just got back?”

Hermione turned to look at him, her eyes widening in surprise. “*Risk my life?*”

Harry didn’t nod, because that would have been outright lying. “Are you willing to do that?” Harry said instead. “The quest that I think might be your destiny—and no, I don’t know any specific prophecies, it’s just a guess—involves literal descent-into-Hell type stuff.”

“I thought...” Hermione said. She sounded uncertain. “I thought for sure that after this, you and Professor McGonagall wouldn’t... you know... let me do anything the least bit dangerous ever again.”

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Harry said nothing, feeling guilty about the false relationship credit he was getting. It was in fact the case that Hermione was modeling him with tremendous accuracy, and that if not for Hermione having a horcrux, the surface of the planet Venus would have dropped to fractional-Kelvin temperatures before Harry tried this.

"On a scale of zero to a hundred, *how* literal a descent into Hell are we talking about here?" said Hermione. The girl now looked a bit worried.

Harry mentally calibrated his scales, remembering Azkaban. "I'd say maybe eighty-seven?"

"This sounds like something I should do when I'm *older*, Harry. There's a difference between being a hero and being a complete lunatic."

Harry shook his head. "I don't think the risk would change much," Harry said, leaving aside the question of how much risk that really was, "and it's the sort of thing that's better done sooner, if someone does it at all."

"And my parents don't get a vote," Hermione said. "Or do they?"

Harry shrugged. "We both know how they'd vote, and you can take that into account if you like. Um, I said for Dr. and Dr. Granger not to be told yet that you're alive. They'll find out after you come back from your mission, if you choose to accept it. That seems a bit... kinder on your parents' nerves, they just get the one pleasant surprise, instead of having to worry about, um, stuff."

"Why, that's very thoughtful of you," Hermione said. "It's nice that you're so concerned about their feelings. May I think about this for a few minutes, please?"

Harry gestured toward the cushion he'd set down opposite his own, and Hermione moved over with fluid grace, and sat down to look out over the castle-edge, still radiating peacefulness all over the place. They'd really need to do something about that, maybe pay someone to invent an Anti-Purity Potion.

"Do I have to decide without knowing what the mission is?" Hermione asked.

"Oh *hell* no," Harry said, thinking of a similar conversation before his own trip to Azkaban. "This is the sort of thing you have to choose freely if you do it at all. I mean that's an actual mission requirement. If you say

that you still want to be a hero, I'll tell you afterwards about the mission—after you've had some time to eat and talk to people and recover a bit—and you'll decide then if it's something you want to do. And we'll test in advance whether returning from death has allowed you to cast the spell that normal wizards think is impossible, *before* you go out."

Hermione nodded, and fell back into silence.

The sky had lightened further by the time Hermione spoke again.

"I'm afraid," Hermione said, almost in a whisper. "Not of dying again, or not *just* that. I'm afraid I won't be good enough. I had my chance to defeat a troll, and instead I just died—"

"That was a troll empowered by Voldemort as a weapon, plus he sabotaged all your magic items, just so you know."

"I died. And you killed the troll, somehow, I think I remember that part, it didn't even slow you down." Hermione wasn't crying, no tears glistened on her cheeks, she simply gazed off at the lightening sky where the Sun would rise. "And then you brought me back from the dead as a Sparkling Unicorn Princess. I *know* I couldn't have done that. I'm afraid I'll *never* be able to do that, no matter what people think about me."

"This situation is where your journey begins, I think—" Harry paused. "Excuse me, I shouldn't be trying to influence your decision."

"No," Hermione whispered, still gazing at the hills below her. She raised her voice. "No, Harry, I want to hear this."

"Okay. Um. I think this is where you *start*. Everything that's happened up until now... it places you in the same place I started out in September, when I'd thought of myself as just being a child prodigy before, and then I found something new I needed to live up to. If you weren't comparing yourself to me and my," *adult cognitive patterns copied off Tom Riddle*, "dark side... then you'd be the brightest star of Ravenclaw, who organized her own company to fight school bullies and kept her sanity under assault by Voldemort, all while she was only twelve years old. I looked it up, you got better grades than Dumbledore did in *his* first year." *Leaving aside the Defense grade, because that was just Voldemort being Voldemort*. "Now you have some powers, and a reputation to live up to, and the world is about to hand you some difficult tasks. That's where it all *begins* for you, the same as it began for me. Don't sell yourself short." And then Harry shut

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his mouth hard, because he was *talking Hermione into it* and that wasn't right. He'd at least managed to stop before the part where he asked, if *she* couldn't be a hero with all that going for her, who exactly she thought was going to do it.

"You know," Hermione said to the horizon, still not looking at Harry, "I had a conversation like this with Professor Quirrell, once, about being a hero. He was taking the other side, of course. But apart from that, this is feeling like when he argued with me, somehow."

Harry kept his lips pressed shut. Letting people make their own decisions was hard, because it meant they were allowed to make the *wrong* ones, but it still had to be done.

Hermione spoke carefully, the blue fringes of her Hogwarts uniform now seeming brighter against her black robes as the sky all around them became illuminated; there were no more stars in the west. "Professor Quirrell told me, he said he'd been a hero once. But people weren't helping him enough, so he gave up and went off to do something more interesting. I told Professor Quirrell that it hadn't been right for him to do that—what I actually said was 'that's horrible'. Professor Quirrell said that, yes, maybe he was an awful person, but then what about all the other people who'd never tried to be heroes at all? Were they even worse than him? And I didn't know what to say back. I mean, it's wrong to say that only Gryffindor-style heroes are good people—though I think from Professor Quirrell's perspective it was more like only people with big ambitions had a right to breathe. And I didn't believe that. But it also seemed wrong to *stop* being a hero, to walk away like he'd done. So I just stood there looking silly. But now I know what I should've told him back then."

Harry controlled his breathing.

Hermione stood up from her cushion, and turned to face Harry. "I'm done with trying to be a heroine," said Hermione Granger with the eastern sky brightening around her. "I shouldn't ever have gone along with that entire line of thinking. There are just people who do what they can, whatever they can. And there are also people who don't even try to do what they can, and yes, those people are doing something wrong. I'm not ever going to try to be a hero again. I'm not going to *think* in heroic terms if I can help it. But I won't do any less than I can—or not a lot less, I

mean, I'm only human." Harry had never understood what was supposed to be mysterious about the Mona Lisa, but if he could have taken a picture of Hermione's resigned/joyous smile just then, he had the sense that he could have looked at it for hours without understanding, and that Dumbledore could have read through it at a glance. "I won't learn my lesson. I *will* be that stupid. I'll go on trying to do most of what I can, or at least *some* of what I can—oh, you know what I mean. Even if it means risking my life again, so long as it's worth the risk and isn't being, you know, *actually* stupid. That's my answer." Hermione took a deep breath, her face resolute. "So, is there something I can do?"

Harry's throat was choked. He reached into his pouch, and signed C-L-O-A-K since he couldn't speak, and drew forth the fuliginous spill of the Cloak of Invisibility, offering it to Hermione for the last time. Harry had to force the words from his throat. "This is the True Cloak of Invisibility," Harry said in almost a whisper, "the Deathly Hallow passed down from Ignotus Peverell to his heirs, the Potters. And now to you—"

"Harry!" Hermione said. Her hands flew up across her chest, as though to protect herself from the attacking gift. "You don't have to do this!"

"I *do* have to do this. I've left the part of the path that lets me be a hero, I can't risk myself adventuring, ever. And you... can." Harry reached up the hand that wasn't holding the Cloak, and wiped at his eyes. "This was made for you, I think. For the person you're going to become." *A weapon to fight Death, in its form as the shadow of despair that falls on human minds and drains away their hope for the future; you will fight that, I expect, in more forms than just Dementors...* "I do not loan you, my Cloak, but give you, unto Hermione Jean Granger. Protect her well forevermore."

Slowly, Hermione reached out, and took hold of the Cloak, looking like she was trying not to cry herself. "Thank you," she whispered. "I think... even though I'm done with the notion of heroing... I think that you always were, from the day I met you, my mysterious old wizard."

"And I think," Harry said, his own throat half-closed, "even if you deny that way of thinking now, I think that you were always destined to become, from the very beginning of the story, the hero." *Who must Hermione Granger become, what adult form must she take when she grows up, to pass*

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through Time's narrow keyhole? I don't know the answer to that either, any more than I can imagine my own adult self. But her next few steps ahead seem clearer than mine...

Harry let the Cloak go, and it passed from his hands to hers.

"It sings," Hermione said. "It's singing to me." She reached up, and wiped at her own eyes. "I can't believe you did that, Harry."

Harry's other hand came out of his pouch, now bearing a long golden chain, at the end of which dangled a closed golden shell. "And this is your personal time machine."

There was a pause, during which the planet Earth rotated a bit further in its orbit.

"What?" said Hermione.

"A Time-Turner, they call it. Hogwarts has a stock they give out to some students, I got one at the start of the year to treat my sleep disorder. It lets the user go backwards in time, in up to six one-hour increments, which I used to get six extra hours per day to study. And to vanish out of Potions class and so on. Don't worry, a Time-Turner can't change history or generate paradoxes that destroy the universe."

"You were keeping up with me in lessons by studying six extra hours per day using a *time machine*." Hermione Granger seemed to be having trouble with this concept for some unaccountable reason.

Harry made his face look puzzled. "Is there something odd about that?"

Hermione reached out and took the golden necklace. "I guess *not by wizard standards*," she said. For some reason her voice sounded rather sharp. She arranged the chain around her neck, placing the hourglass inside her shirt. "I do feel better now about keeping up with you, though, so thank you for that."

Harry cleared his throat. "Also, since Voldemort wiped out the House of Monroe and then, so far as everyone believes, you avenged them by killing Voldemort, I got Amelia Bones to railroad a bill through what's left of the Wizengamot, saying that Granger is now a Noble House of Britain."

"Excuse me?" said Hermione.

"That also makes you the only scion of a Noble House, which means that to get your legal majority you just need to pass your Ordinary Wiz-

arding Levels, which I've set us up to do at the end of the summer so we'll have some time to study first. If you're okay with that, I mean."

Hermione Granger was making some sort of high-pitched noise that would, in a less organic device, have indicated an engine malfunction. "I have two months to study for my O.W.L.S?"

"Hermione, it's a test designed so that most fifteen-year-olds can pass. Ordinary fifteen year-olds. We can get a passing grade with a low third-year's power level if we learn the right set of spells, and that's all we need for our majorities. Though you'll need to come to terms with getting Acceptable scores instead of your usual Outstandings."

The high-pitched noises coming from Hermione Granger rose in pitch.

"Here's your wand back." Harry took it from his pouch. "And your mokeskin pouch, I made sure they put back everything that was there when you died." That pouch Harry withdrew from a normal pocket of his robes, since he was reluctant to put a *bag of holding* inside a *bag of holding* no matter what was supposed to be harmless so long as both devices had been crafted observing all safety precautions.

Hermione took her wand back, and then her pouch, the motions somehow managing to look graceful even though her fingers were a bit shaky.

"Let's see, what else... the oath you swore before to House Potter only said you had to serve until 'the day you die', so you're now free and clear. And right after your death I got the Malfoys to publicly declare that you were innocent of all charges in Draco's attempted murder."

"Why, thank you again, Harry," said Hermione Granger. "That was very nice of you, and them too, I guess." She was repeatedly running her fingers through her chestnut curls, as though, by organizing her hair, she could restore sanity to her life.

"Last but not least, I had the goblins start the process of building a vault in Gringotts for House Granger," Harry said. "I didn't put any money into it, because that was something where I could wait and ask you first. But if you're going to be a superhero who goes around righting certain kinds of wrongs, it will help a lot if people consider you to be part of the upper social strata and, um, I think it may help if they know

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you can afford lawyers. I can put in as much gold into your vault as you want, since after Voldemort killed Nicholas Flamel, I ended up holding the Philosopher's Stone."

"I feel like I ought to be fainting," Hermione said in a high-pitched voice, "only I can't because of my superpowers and *why* do I have those again?"

"If it's all right with you, your Occlumency lessons will start on Wednesday with Mr. Bester, he can work with you once per day. Until then, I think it might be better for the true origin of your powers not to become known just because a Legilimens looks you in the eyes. I mean, obviously there's a normal magical explanation, nothing *super*-supernatural, but people do tend to worship their own ignorance and, well, I think the Girl-Who-Revived will be more effective if you remain mysterious. Once you can keep out Mr. Bester and beat Veritaserum, I'll tell you the entire backstory, I promise, including all the secrets you can never tell anyone else."

"That sounds lovely," said Hermione Granger. "I'm quite looking forward to it."

"Though you'll need to take an Unbreakable Vow to not do anything that might destroy the world before I can tell you the more dangerous parts of the story. I mean, I literally can't tell you otherwise, because I took an Unbreakable Vow myself. Is that okay?"

"Sure," said Hermione. "Why shouldn't it be okay? I wouldn't want to destroy the world anyhow."

"Do you need to sit down again?" Harry said, feeling alarmed by the way Hermione was swaying slightly, as though in rhythm with the words being spoken.

Hermione Granger took several deep breaths. "No, I'm perfectly peachy," she said. "Is there anything else I should know about?"

"That was it. I'm finished, at least for now." Harry paused. "I do understand that you want to do things for yourself, not just have them done for you. It's just... you're going to be a more serious kind of hero, and the only sane choice is for me to give you all the advantages I can manage—"

"I understand that quite well," Hermione said. "Now that I've actually lost a fight and died. I didn't used to understand, but now I do." A breeze

ruffled Hermione's chestnut hair and stirred her robes, making her look even more peaceful in the dawn air, as she raised one hand and carefully clenched it into a fist. "If I'm going to do this, I'm going to do it *right*. We need to measure how hard I can punch, and how high I can jump, and figure out a safe way to test if my fingernails can kill Lethifolds like a real unicorn's horn, and I should practice using my speed to dodge spells I can't let hit me and... and it sounds like you could maybe arrange for me to get Auror training, like from whoever taught Susan Bones." Hermione was smiling again now, a strange light in her eyes that would've puzzled Dumbledore for hours and that Harry understood immediately, not without a twinge of apprehension. "Oh! And I want to start carrying Muggle weapons, maybe hidden so nobody knows I have them. I thought of incendiary grenades when I was fighting the troll, but I knew I couldn't Transfigure them fast enough, even after I stopped caring about obeying the rules."

"I have the feeling," Harry said, imitating Professor McGonagall's Scottish accent as best he could, "that I ought to be doing something about this."

"Oh, it's much, much, MUCH too late for that, Mr. Potter. Say, can you get me a bazooka? The rocket launcher, I mean, not the chewing gum? I bet they won't be expecting *that* from a young girl, especially if I'm radiating an aura of innocence and purity."

"All right," Harry said calmly, "*now* you're starting to scare me."

Hermione paused from where she was experimenting with balancing on the tip of her left shoe, her arm reaching in one direction and her right leg stretched in the other, like a ballet dancer. "Am I? I was just thinking that I didn't see what I could do that a Ministry squad of Hit Wizards couldn't. They have broomsticks for mobility and spells that hit harder than I possibly could." She gracefully lowered her leg back down. "I mean, now that I can try a few things without worrying about who's watching, I'm starting to think that I really really *really* like having superpowers. But I still don't see how I could win a fight that Professor Flitwick couldn't, not unless it involves me taking a Dark Wizard by surprise."

You can take risks other people shouldn't, and try again with the knowledge of what killed you. You can experiment with new spells, more than anyone else

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could try without dying for sure. But Harry couldn't say any of that yet, so instead he said, "I think it's okay to think more about the future, not just what you can do this very minute."

Hermione jumped high in the air, clicked her heels together three times on the way down, and landed on her tiptoes, perfectly posed. "But you said there was something I could do right away. Or were you just testing?"

"*That* part is a special case," Harry said, feeling the chill of the dawn air against his skin. He was increasingly not looking forward to telling super-Hermione that her Ordeal would involve facing her literal worst nightmare, under conditions where all her newfound physical strength would be useless.

Hermione nodded, then glanced to the east. At once she went to the side of the roof and sat down, her feet dangling over the rooftop ledge. Harry went to her side and sat down too, sitting crosslegged and further back of the roof-edge.

In the distance, a brilliant tinge of red was rising above the hills to the east of Hogwarts.

Watching the tip of the sunrise made Harry feel better, somehow. So long as the Sun was in the sky, things were still all right on some level, like his having not yet destroyed the Sun.

"So," Hermione said. Her voice rose a bit. "Speaking of the future, Harry. I had time to think about a lot of things while I was waiting in St. Mungo's, and... maybe it's silly of me, but there's a question I still want to know the answer to. Do you remember the last thing we talked about together? Before, I mean?"

"What?" Harry said blankly.

"Oh..." Hermione said. "It was two months ago for you... I guess you don't recall, then."

And Harry remembered.

"Don't panic!" Hermione said, as a sort of strangled half-gurgle came from Harry's throat. "I promise no matter what you say, I won't burst into tears and run away and get eaten by a troll again! I know it's been less than two days for me, but I think that dying has made a lot of things I

used to fret about seem much less important compared to what I've been through!"

"Oh," Harry said, his own voice now high-pitched. "That's a good use of a major trauma, I guess?"

"Only, see, I *was* still wondering about it, Harry, because for me it hasn't been very long at all since our last conversation, and we didn't finish talking which was admittedly all my own fault for losing control of my emotions and then being eaten by a troll which I am definitely not going to do again. I've been thinking I ought to reassure you that's not going to happen every time you say the wrong thing to a girl." Hermione was fidgeting, leaning from one side to the other where she sat, slightly back and forth. "But, well, even most people who *are* in love don't do literally one hundredth of what you've done for me. So, Mr. Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, if it's not love, I want to know exactly what I am to you. You never said."

"That's a good question," Harry said, controlling the rising panic. "Do you mind if I think about it?"

Bit by bit, more of the searingly brilliant circle became visible beyond the hills.

"Hermione," Harry said when the Sun was halfway above the horizon, "did you ever invent any hypotheses to explain my mysterious dark side?"

"Just the obvious one," Hermione said, kicking her legs slightly over the rooftop's edge. "I thought maybe when You-Know-Who died right next to you, he happened to give off the burst of magic that makes a ghost, and some of it imprinted on your brain instead of the floor. But that never felt right to me, like it was just a clever explanation that wasn't actually *true*, and it makes even less sense if You-Know-Who didn't really die that night."

"Good enough," Harry said. "Let's imagine that scenario for now." His inner rationalist was looking back and facepalming *again* at how he'd managed to not-think-about hypotheses like that one. It wasn't true but it was *reasonable* and Harry had never thought of any causal model that concrete, just vaguely suspected a connection.

Hermione nodded. "You probably know this already, but I just thought I'd say it to be sure: You're not Voldemort, Harry."

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"I know. And *that's* what you mean to me." Harry took a breath, finding it still painful to say aloud. "Voldemort... he wasn't a happy person. I don't know if he was ever happy, a single day in his life." *He never could cast the Patronus Charm.* "That's one reason his cognitive patterns didn't take me over, my dark side didn't feel like a good place to be, it didn't get positively reinforced. Being friends with you means that my life doesn't have to go the way Voldemort's did. And I was pretty lonely before Hogwarts, although I didn't realise it then, so... yeah. I might've been slightly more desperate to bring you back from the dead than the average boy my age would've been. Though I also maintain that my decision was strictly normative moral reasoning, and if other people care less about their friends, that's their problem, not mine."

"I see," Hermione said softly. She hesitated. "Harry, don't take this the wrong way, but I'm not one hundred percent comfortable with that. It's a big responsibility that I didn't choose, and I don't think it's healthy for you to lay it on just one person."

Harry nodded. "I know. But there's more to the point I'm trying to make. There was a prophecy about my vanquishing Voldemort—"

"A prophecy? There was a prophecy about you? Seriously, Harry?"

"Yeah, I know. Anyway, part of it went, 'And the Dark Lord shall mark him as his equal, but he shall have power the Dark Lord knows not.' What would you guess that meant?"

"Hmmm," Hermione said. Her fingers tapped thoughtfully on the roof's stone. "Your mysterious dark side is You-Know-Who's mark on you that made you his equal. The power he knew not... was the scientific method, right?"

Harry shook his head. "That's what I thought too at first—that it was going to be Muggle science, or the methods of rationality. But..." Harry exhaled. The Sun had now fully risen above the hills. This felt embarrassing to say, but he was going to say it anyway. "Professor Snape, who originally heard the prophecy—yes, that's also a thing that happened—Professor Snape said he didn't think it could just be science, that the 'power the Dark Lord knows not' needed to be something more alien to Voldemort than just that. Even if I think of it in terms of rationality, well, it turns out that the person Voldemort really was," *why, Professor Quirrell, why, the*

thought still stabbing sickness at Harry's heart, "he'd have been able to learn the methods of rationality too, if he read the same science papers I did. Except, maybe, for one last thing..." Harry drew a breath. "At the end of all of it, during my final showdown with Voldemort, he threatened to put my parents, and my friends, into Azkaban. Unless I came up with interesting secrets to tell him, one person saved per secret. But I knew I couldn't find enough secrets to save everyone. And in the moment that I saw no way at all left to save everyone... that's when I actually started thinking. Maybe for the first time in my life, I started thinking. I thought faster than Voldemort, even though he was older than me and smarter, because... because I had a *reason to think*. Voldemort had a drive to be immortal, he strongly preferred not to die, but that wasn't a positive desire, it was *fear*, and Voldemort made mistakes because of that fear. I think the power that Voldemort knew not... was that I had something to protect."

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said gently. She hesitated. "Is that what I am to you, then? The thing that you protect?"

"No, I mean, the whole reason I'm telling you this, is that Voldemort wasn't threatening to put *you* in Azkaban. Even if he'd taken over the whole world, you'd have been fine. He'd already made a binding promise not to harm you, because of, um, because of reasons. So in my moment of ultimate crisis, when I reached deep down and found the power Voldemort knew not, I did it to protect everyone except you."

Hermione considered this, a slow smile spreading over her face. "Why, Harry," she said. "That's the least romantic thing I've ever heard."

"You're welcome."

"No, really, it *does* help," Hermione said. "I mean, it makes the whole thing much less stalker-y."

"I know, right?"

The two of them shared a companionable nod, both of them looking more relaxed now, and watched the sunrise together.

"I've been thinking," Harry said, his own voice going soft, "about the alternate Harry Potter, the person I might have been if Voldemort hadn't attacked my parents." *If Tom Riddle hadn't tried to copy himself onto me.* "That other Harry Potter wouldn't have been as smart, I guess. He probably wouldn't have studied much Muggle science, even if his mother was a

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Muggleborn. But that other Harry Potter would've had... the capacity for warmth, that he inherited from James Potter and Lily Evans, he would've cared about other people and tried to save his friends, I know that would have been true, because that's something that Lord Voldemort never did, you see..." Harry's eyes were watering. "So that part must be, the remnant."

The Sun was well above the horizon now, the golden light illuminating both of them, casting long shadows off the other side of the rooftop platform.

"I think you're just fine the way you are," Hermione said. "I mean, that other Harry Potter might've been a nice boy, maybe, but it sounds like I would've had to do all his thinking for him."

"Going by heredity, alter-Harry would have been in Gryffindor like his parents, and the two of you wouldn't have become friends. Though James Potter and Lily Evans were the Head Boy and Head Girl of Hogwarts back in their day, so he wouldn't have been *that* bad."

"I can just imagine it," Hermione said. "Harry James Potter, Sorted into Gryffindor, aspiring Quidditch player—"

"No. Just no."

"Remembered by history as the sidekick of Hermione Jean Granger, who'd send out Mr. Potter to get into trouble for her, and then solve the mystery from the library by reading books and using her incredible memory."

"You're really enjoying this alternate universe, aren't you."

"Maybe he'd be best mates with Ron Weasley, the *smartest* boy in Gryffindor, and they'd fight side by side in my army in Defense class, and afterwards help each other with their homework—"

"Okay, enough, this is starting to creep me out."

"Sorry," Hermione said, though she was still smiling to herself, appearing rapt in some private vision.

"Apology accepted," Harry said dryly.

The Sun rose a little further in the sky.

After a while, Hermione spoke. "Do you suppose we'll fall in love with each other later on?"

"I don't know any better than you do, Hermione. But why does it have to be about that? Seriously, why does it always have to be about that? Maybe when we're older we'll fall in love, and maybe we won't. Maybe we'll stay in love, and maybe we won't." Harry turned his head slightly, the Sun was hot on his cheek and he wasn't wearing sunscreen. "No matter how it goes, we shouldn't try to force our lives into a pattern. I think when people try to *force* patterns onto this sort of thing, that's when they end up unhappy."

"No forced patterns?" Hermione said. Her eyes had taken on a mischievous look. "That sounds like a more complicated way of saying *no rules*. Which I guess seems a lot more reasonable to me than it would've at the start of this year. If I'm going to be a Sparkling Unicorn Princess and have my own time machine, I might as well give up on rules, I suppose."

"I'm not saying that rules are always bad, especially when they actually fit people, instead of them being blindly imitated like Quidditch. But weren't you the one who rejected the 'hero' pattern in favor of just doing the things she could?"

"I suppose so." Hermione turned her head again to gaze down at the grounds below Hogwarts, for the Sun was too bright to look at now—though, Harry thought, Hermione's retinas would always heal now, it was safe for her alone to look directly into the light. "You said, Harry, that you thought I was always destined to be the hero. I've been considering, and I suspect you're completely wrong. If this had been *meant* to be, things would've been a lot easier all round. Just doing the things you can do—you have to *make* that happen, you have to choose it, over and over again."

"That might not conflict with your being a destined hero," Harry said, thinking of compatibilist theories of free will, and prophecies that he must not look upon in order to fulfill. "But we can talk about that later."

"You have to choose it," Hermione repeated. She pushed herself up on her hands, then popped herself backwards and onto the rooftop, rising to her feet in a smooth motion. "Just like I'm choosing to do this."

"No kissing!" Harry said, scrambling to his feet and preparing to dodge; though the realization came to him that the Girl-Who-Revived would be much, much faster.

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"I won't try to kiss you again, Mr. Potter. Not until you ask me, if you ever do. But there are all these warm feelings bubbling up inside me and I feel like I might burst if I don't do *something*, though it does now occur to me that it's unhealthy if girls don't know any way of expressing gratitude to boys besides kissing them." Hermione took out her wand and offered it crosswise, in the position she'd used to swear her oath of fealty to House Potter before the Wizengamot.

"Oh *hell* no," Harry said. "Do you realise what it took to get you out of that oath *last* time—"

"Don't go jumping to conclusions, you. I wasn't about to swear fealty to your House again. You've got to start trusting me to be sensible if you're going to be my mysterious young wizard. Now please hold out your wand."

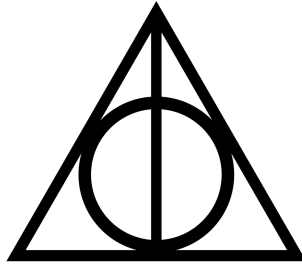
Slowly, Harry took out the Elder Wand and crossed it with Hermione's ten-and-three-quarter-inches of vinewood, forcing down a last worry about her choosing the wrong thing. "Can you at least not say anything about 'until death takes me', because did I mention I have the Philosopher's Stone now? Or anything about 'the end of the world and its magic'? I'm a lot more nervous around phrases like that than I used to be."

Upon a roof floored in square stony tiles, the brilliant morning Sun blazes down upon two not-really-children-anymore, both in blue-fringed black robes, facing each other across crossed wands. One has brown eyes beneath chaotic chestnut curls, and radiates an aura of strength and beauty that is not magic only; the other has green eyes under glasses, with messy black hair above a recently inflamed scar. Below, a stone tower nobody remembers seeing from ground level stretches downwards into the broad base of the castle Hogwarts. Far beneath them are visible the green hills, and the lake. In the distance a huge red-and-black line of railcars and an engine, appearing tiny from this height, a train neither Muggle nor fully magical. The sky is nearly unclouded, but for faint tinges of orange-white where wisps of moisture reflect the sunlight. A light breeze carries the crisp chill of dawn, and the dampness of morning; but the huge blazing golden globe is now risen high above the

horizon, and its incandescence casts warmth on everything it touches.

“Well, maybe after this you’ll be less nervous,” the hero says to her enigmatic wizard. She knows she doesn’t know the whole story, but the fragment of truth that she does hold shines bright like sunlight within her, casting warmth on her insides the way the Sun warms her face. “I *do* choose this, now.”

*Upon my life and magic I swear friendship to Harry Potter,
To help him and trust in him,
To stand with him and, um, stand by him,
And sometimes go where he can’t go,
’Till the day that death takes me for real, if it ever does, I mean,
And if the world or its magic ends, we’ll deal with that together.*



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