

HARRY POTTER

AND THE METHODS OF RATIONALITY



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Chapter 65 – 85

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CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

CONTAGIOUS LIES

Hermione Granger had read somewhere once, that one of the keys to staying thin was to pay attention to the food you ate, to notice yourself eating it, so that you were satisfied with the meal. This morning she'd made herself toast, and put butter on the toast, and cinnamon on the butter, and it really should've been enough to get her to *notice*, this time, the goodness that was in front of her...

Without noticing the cinnamon or the butter, without noticing the food or that she was eating, Hermione swallowed another bite of toast, and said, "Can you try explaining that again? I'm still completely flabbergasted."

"It's pretty straightforward, if you think like a Light-Side Slytherin," said the boy that everyone else in school, excepting only the two of them, now believed to be her true love. Harry Potter's spoon absentmindedly stirred his breakfast cereal; he hadn't taken many bites of it this morning, not that Hermione had seen. "Every good thing in the world brings its own opposition into existence. Phoenixes are no exception."

Hermione took another unnoticed bite out of her buttered and cinnamon toast, and said, "How can anyone *not understand* that Fawkes thinks you're a good enough person to ride around on your shoulder? He wouldn't do that with a Dark Wizard! He just wouldn't!"

And she hadn't yelled at anyone about Fawkes's touch on her *own* cheek, because she knew it wouldn't be right—that if a phoenix touched you, you weren't supposed to brag about it, that wasn't what a phoenix was *for*.

But she'd really *hoped* that it would squash the rumors about Harry Potter going evil and Hermione Granger following him down.

And it hadn't.

And she truly couldn't understand why not.

Harry ate another bite of his cereal, his eyes going distant now, no longer meeting her own. "Think of it this way: You skip school one day, and you lie and tell your teacher you were sick. The teacher tells you to bring a doctor's note, so you forge one. The teacher says she's going to call the doctor to check, so you have to give her a fake number for the doctor, and get a friend to pretend to be the doctor when she calls—"

"You did *what*?"

Harry looked up from his cereal then, and now he was smiling. "I'm not saying I really *did* that, Hermione..." Then his eyes abruptly dropped back down to his cereal. "No. Just an example. Lies propagate, that's what I'm saying. You've got to tell more lies to cover them up, lie about every fact that's connected to the first lie. And if you *kept on* lying, and you *kept on* trying to cover it up, sooner or later you'd even have to start lying about the general laws of thought. Like, someone is selling you some kind of alternative medicine that doesn't work, and any double-blind experimental study will confirm that it doesn't work. So if someone wants to *go on* defending the lie, they've got to get you to disbelieve in the experimental method. Like, the experimental method is just for merely *scientific* kinds of medicine, not amazing alternative medicine like theirs. Or a good and virtuous person should believe as strongly as they can, no matter what the evidence says. Or truth doesn't exist and there's no such thing as objective reality. A lot of common wisdom like that isn't just *mistaken*, it's anti-epistemology, it's *systematically* wrong. Every rule of rationality that tells you how to find the truth, there's someone out there who needs you to believe the opposite. If you once tell a lie, the truth is ever after your enemy; and there's a lot of people out there telling lies—" Harry's voice stopped.

"What does that have to do with Fawkes?" she said.

Harry withdrew his spoon from his cereal, and pointed in the direction of the Head Table. "The Headmaster has a phoenix, right? And he's Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot? So he's got political opponents, like Lucius. Now, d'you think that opposition is going to just roll over and surrender, because Dumbledore has a phoenix and they don't? Do you

think they'll admit that Fawkes is even *evidence* that Dumbledore's a good person? Of course not. They've got to invent *something* to say that makes Fawkes... *not important*. Like, phoenixes only follow people who charge straight at anyone they think is evil, so having a phoenix just means you're an idiot or a dangerous fanatic. Or, phoenixes just follow people who are pure Gryffindor, so Gryffindor they don't have the virtues of other Houses. Or it just shows how much courage a magical animal thinks you have, nothing else, and it wouldn't be fair to judge politicians based on that. They have to say *something* to deny the phoenix. I bet Lucius didn't even have to make up anything new. I bet it had all been said before, centuries ago, since the first time someone had a phoenix riding on his shoulder, and someone else wanted people not to take that into account as evidence. I bet by the time Fawkes came along it was already common wisdom, it would have just seemed *strange* to take into account who a phoenix liked or disliked. It would be like a Muggle newspaper testing political candidates to rate their level of scientific literacy. Every force for Good that exists in this universe, there's someone else who benefits from people discounting it, or fencing it into a narrow box where it can't get to them."

"But—" Hermione said. "Okay, I see why Lucius Malfoy doesn't want anyone to think that Fawkes matters, but why does anyone who *isn't* a bad guy *believe* it?"

Harry Potter gave a little shrug. His spoon dropped back into his cereal, and went on stirring without a pause. "Why does any kind of cynicism appeal to people? Because it seems like a mark of maturity, of sophistication, like you've seen everything and know better. Or because putting something down feels like pushing yourself up. Or they don't have a phoenix themselves, so their political instinct tells them there's no advantage to be gained from saying nice things about phoenixes. Or because being cynical feels like knowing a secret truth that common people don't know..." Harry Potter looked in the direction of the Head Table, and his voice dropped until it was almost a whisper. "I think maybe that's what *he's* getting wrong—that he's cynical about everything else, but not about cynicism itself."

Without thinking, Hermione looked in the direction of the Head Ta-

ble herself, but the Defense Professor's seat was still empty, as it had been on Monday and Tuesday; the Deputy Headmistress had pronounced, earlier, that Professor Quirrell's classes for today would be canceled.

Afterward, when Harry had eaten a few bites of treacle tart and then left the table, Hermione looked at Anthony and Padma, who had been coincidentally eating nearby but certainly not eavesdropping or anything.

Anthony and Padma looked back at her.

Padma said hesitantly, "Is it just me, or has Harry Potter started talking like a more *complicated* sort of book in the last few days? I mean, I haven't been listening to him very long—"

"It's not just you," said Anthony.

Hermione didn't say anything, but she was becoming increasingly worried. Whatever had happened to Harry Potter on the day of the phoenix, it had changed him; there was something new in him now. Not cold, but *hard*. Sometimes she caught him staring out a window at nothing visible, a look of grim determination on his face. In Herbology class on Monday, a Venus Fire Trap had gone out of control; and Harry had tackled Terry out of the way of a fireball even as Professor Sprout had shouted a Flame-Freezing Charm; and when Harry had risen from the floor he'd just gone back to his place like nothing interesting had happened. And when for once she'd gotten a better test score than Harry in their Transfiguration exam, later that same Monday, Harry had smiled at her as though to congratulate her, instead of gritting his teeth; and... that had bothered her *a lot*.

She was getting the sense that Harry...

...was pulling away from her...

"He seems a lot *older* all of a sudden," said Anthony. "Not like a real grownup, I can't imagine *Harry* as a grownup, but it's like he suddenly turned into a *fourth-year version* of... of *whatever* he is."

"Well," Padma said. She daintily dabbed a chocolate-flavored scone with some scone-flavored frosting. "I think Dragon and Sunshine had better ally during the next battle or Mr. Harry Potter is going to *smash* us. We were allied last time, and even then Chaos almost won—"

"Yeah," said Anthony. "You're right, Miss Patil. Tell the Dragon General that we want to meet with you—"

"No!" said Hermione. "We shouldn't *have* to gang up on General Potter just to stand a chance. That doesn't make sense, especially now that nobody can use Muggle things anymore. It's still twenty-four soldiers in every army."

Neither Padma or Anthony said anything to that.

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Knock-knock, knock-knock.

"Come in, Mr. Potter," she said.

The door creaked open, and Harry Potter slipped through the opening into her office; he pushed the door shut behind him with one hand, and wordlessly seated himself in the cushioned chair that now stood in front of her desk. She'd Transfigured that chair so often that it sometimes changed form to reflect her mood, without any wand movement or incantation or even conscious intent. Right now, that chair had become deeply cushioned, so that as Harry sat down he sank into it, as though the chair were hugging him.

Harry didn't seem to notice. There was an air of quiet determination about the boy; his eyes had locked steadily with hers, and not let up for a moment. "You called me?" said the boy.

"I did," said Professor McGonagall. "I have two pieces of good news for you, Mr. Potter. First—have you met Mr. Rubeus Hagrid, at all? The groundskeeper? He was an old friend of your parents."

Harry hesitated. Then, "Mr. Hagrid spoke to me a bit after I got here," Harry said. "I think it was on Tuesday of my first week of school. He didn't say he knew my parents, though. At the time I thought he just wanted to introduce himself to the Boy-Who-Lived... did he have some kind of hidden agenda? He didn't *seem* like the type..."

"Ah..." she said. It took her a moment to pull her thoughts together. "It's a long story, Mr. Potter, but Mr. Hagrid was falsely accused of murdering a student, five decades ago. Mr. Hagrid's wand was snapped, and he was expelled. Later, when Professor Dumbledore became Headmaster, he gave Mr. Hagrid a place here as Keeper of Grounds and Keys."

Harry's eyes watched her intently. "You said that five decades ago was the last time a student died in Hogwarts, and you were certain that five decades ago was the last time someone heard the Sorting Hat's secret message."

She felt a slight chill—even the Headmaster or Severus might not have made that connection that quickly—and said, "Yes, Mr. Potter. Someone opened the Chamber of Secrets, but this was not believed, and Mr. Hagrid was blamed for the resulting death. However, the Headmaster has located the additional enchantment on the Sorting Hat, and he has shown it to a special panel of the Wizengamot. As a result, Mr. Hagrid's sentence has been revoked—just this morning, in fact—and he will be allowed to acquire a new wand." She hesitated. "We... have not yet told Mr. Hagrid of this, Mr. Potter. We were waiting until the deed was done, so as not to give him false hope after so long. Mr. Potter... we were wondering if we could tell Mr. Hagrid that it was you who helped him...?"

She saw the weighing look in his eyes—

"I remember Mr. Hagrid holding you when you were a baby," she said. "I think he would be very happy to know."

She could see it, though, on Harry's face, the moment when he decided that Rubeus wouldn't be any use to him.

Harry shook his head. "Bad enough that someone might deduce there was a Parselmouth in this year's crop of students," Harry said. "I think it'd be more prudent to just keep it all as secret as possible."

She remembered James and Lily, who'd never hesitated to return the friendship the huge, bluff man had offered them, for all that James was the scion of a wealthy House or Lily a budding Charms Mistress, and Rubeus a mere half-giant whose wand had been snapped...

"Because you don't expect him to prove useful, Mr. Potter?"

There was silence. She hadn't intended to say that out loud.

Sadness crossed Harry's face. "Probably," Harry said quietly. "But I don't think he and I would get along, do you?"

Something seemed to be stuck in her throat.

"Speaking of making use of people," Harry said. "It seems I'm going to be thrown into a war with a Dark Lord sometime soon. So while I'm in your office, I'd like to ask that my sleep cycle be extended to thirty hours

per day. Neville Longbottom wants to start practicing dueling, there's an older Hufflepuff who offered to teach him, and they invited me to join. Plus there's other things I want to learn too—and if you or the Headmaster think I should study anything in particular, in order to become a powerful wizard when I grow up, let me know. Please direct Madam Pomfrey to administer the appropriate potion, or whatever it is that she needs to do—”

“Mr. Potter!”

Harry's eyes gazed directly into her own. “Yes, Minerva? I know it wasn't your idea, but I'd like to survive the use the Headmaster's making of me. Please don't be an obstacle to that.”

It almost broke her. “Harry,” she whispered in a bare voice, “children shouldn't have to *think* like that!”

“You're right, they shouldn't,” Harry said. “A *lot* of children have to grow up too early, though, not just me; and most children like that would probably trade places with me in five seconds. I'm not going to pity myself, Professor McGonagall, not when there are people out there in real trouble and I'm not one of them.”

She swallowed, hard, and said, “Mr. Potter, at thirty hours per day, you'll—get *older*, you'll age faster—” *Like Albus.*

“And in my fifth year I'll be around the same physiological age as Hermione,” said Harry. “Doesn't seem *that* terrible.” There was a wry smile now on Harry's face. “Honestly, I'd probably want this even if there *weren't* a Dark Lord. Wizards live for a while, and either wizards or Muggles will probably push that out even further over the next century. There's no reason *not* to pack as many hours into a day as I can. I've got things I plan to do, and 'twere well they were done quickly.”

There was a long pause.

“All right,” Minerva said. It came out as almost a whisper. She raised her voice. “All right, Mr. Potter, I shall ask the Headmaster, and if he agrees, it shall be done.”

Harry's eyes narrowed for a moment. “I see. Then please remind the Headmaster that Godric Gryffindor, in his last words, said that if it had been the right thing for him to do, then he wouldn't tell anyone else to choose wrongly, not even the youngest student in Hogwarts.”

And she knew with a hollow feeling that any chance of Albus stopping this, stopping any of this, had just Vanished into nothingness. That was what Albus had told her when she'd objected that Cameron Edward was too young, and then when she'd objected that Peter Pevensie was too young, and finally she'd given up objecting. "Who told you that, Mr. Potter?" *Not Albus—surely Albus would never say that to any student—*

"I've been doing a lot of reading lately," Harry said. His body started to rise from the enveloping chair, then halted. "Dare I ask about the second piece of good news?"

"Oh," she said. "Ah—Professor Quirrell has woken up and says that you may—"

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The Hogwarts infirmary was a brilliantly open space, skylit on all four sides despite seeming to be located squarely in the middle of the castle. White beds in long rows stretched out, only three of them occupied at the moment. One older boy and one older girl on opposite sides, both lying motionless with their eyes closed, probably unconscious and spell-bound while some healing Charm or Potion reconfigured their bodies in uncomfortable ways; and the third occupant had the curtain drawn around their bed, which was presumably a good thing. Madam Pomfrey had pushed him along with a hard shove and told him not to gawk, and Harry had needed to remind himself sharply that some people still didn't know who the Boy-Who-Lived was—either that, or Madam Pomfrey's identity was bound up with her absolute dominance of her own hospital, etcetera, whatever.

Behind the rows of beds were five doors, leading into the private rooms where they stored the patients who would be staying for days instead of hours, but whose condition didn't warrant a transfer to St. Mungos.

Windowless, skyless, unlit but for a single smokeless torch on one of the solid stone walls; that was the room behind the middle door. Harry had wondered whether professors could ask Hogwarts to change itself;

or if the infirmary always had a room like that available, for people who didn't enjoy the light.

In the center of the room, between two equal bedstands that looked to have been carved from the same grey marble as the walls, rested a white hospital bed, looking vaguely orangish in the unsmoking torchlight; and within that bed, a white sheet pulled up about his thighs and wearing a hospital gown, sat Professor Quirrell with his back slightly propped up against the headboard of the bed.

There was something frightening about seeing Professor Quirrell in one of Madam Pomfrey's beds, even if the Defense Professor appeared uninjured. Even knowing that Professor Quirrell had deliberately arranged his own apparent defeat at Severus's hands, to give himself an excuse to recover his strength from Azkaban. Harry had never *actually* watched anyone dying in a hospital bed, but he'd seen too many movies. It was an intimation of mortality, and the Defense Professor was *not* supposed to be mortal.

Madam Pomfrey had told Harry that he was absolutely forbidden to pester her patient.

Harry had said, "I understand," which technically did not say anything about obedience.

The stern old healer had then turned, and started to say to Professor Quirrell that he was absolutely not to overexert himself or... upset himself...

Madam Pomfrey had trailed off, hurriedly turned around, and fled the room.

"Not bad," Harry observed, after the door had shut behind the escaping medical matron. "I've got to learn how to do that, sometime."

Professor Quirrell smiled a smile with absolutely no humor content, and said, his voice sounding a good deal dryer than its usual dryness, "Thank you for your artistic critique, Mr. Potter."

Harry stared into the pale blue eyes, and thought that Professor Quirrell looked...

...older.

It was subtle, it might have just been Harry's imagination, it might have been the poor lighting. But the hair above Quirinus Quirrell's fore-

head might have receded a bit, what remained might have thinned and greyed, an advancing of the baldness that had already been visible on the back of his head. The face might have grown a little sunken.

The pale blue eyes had stayed sharp and intense.

"I am glad," Harry said quietly, "to see you in what appears to be good health."

"Appearances can be deceiving, of course," said Professor Quirrell. He gave a flick of his fingers, and when his hand finished the gesture he was holding his wand. "Would you believe that woman thinks she has confiscated this from me?"

Six incantations the Defense Professor spoke then; six of the thirty that he had used to safeguard their important conversations in Mary's Room.

Harry raised his eyebrows, silently quizzical.

"That is all I can manage for now," said the Defense Professor. "I expect it shall prove sufficient. Still, there is a proverb: If you do not wish a thing heard, do not say it. Consider it to apply in full measure. I am told that you were trying to see me?"

"Yes," Harry said. He paused, gathered his thoughts. "Did the Headmaster, or anyone, tell you that we can't go to lunch any more?"

"Something along those lines," said the Defense Professor. And without changing expression, "Of course I was terribly sorry to hear it."

"It's more extreme than that, actually," said Harry. "I'm confined to Hogwarts and its grounds indefinitely. I can't leave without a guard and a good reason. I'm not going home for summer, and maybe not ever again. I was hoping... to speak with you, about that."

There was a pause.

The Defense Professor exhaled a breath like a brief sigh, and said, "We shall just have to rely on the known fact that the Deputy Headmistress will personally murder anyone who tries to report me. Mr. Potter, I intend to keep this conversation on track so that we may conclude it quickly, is that understood?"

Harry nodded, and—

In the light of the single torch, shaded toward the reddish end of the optical spectrum, the snake's green scales were not very reflective, and

the blue-and-white banding hardly more so. Dark seemed the snake, in that light. The eyes, which had seemed like gray pits before, now reflected the torchlight, and seemed brighter than the rest of the snake.

"Sso," hissed the venomous creature. "What did you wissh to ssay?"

And Harry hissed, *"Sschoolmasster thinkss that woman'ss former Lord iss the one who sstole her from prisson."*

Harry *had* thought about it this time, and carefully, before he had decided that he would reveal to Professor Quirrell *only* that the Headmaster believed that; and *not* say anything about the prophecy which had set Voldemort on Harry's parents, nor that the Headmaster was reconstituting the Order of the Phoenix... it was a risk, a significant risk, but Harry needed an ally in this.

"He believess that one iss alive?" the snake finally said. The divided, two-pronged tongue flickered rapidly from side to side, sardonic snakish laughter. *"Ssomehow I am not ssurprised."*

"Yess," Harry hissed dryly, *"very amussing, I am ssure. Except now am sstuck in Hogwartss for next ssix years, for ssafety! I have decided that I will, indeed, sseek power; and confinement iss not helpful for that. Musst convince sschoolmasster that Dark Lord iss not yet awakened, that esscape was work of ssome other power—"*

Again the rapid flickering of the snake's tongue; the snakish laughter was stronger, dryer, this time. *"Amateur foolisshnesss."*

"Pardon?" hissed Harry.

"You ssee misstake, think of undoing, ssetting time back to sstart. Yet not even with hourglassss can time be undone. Musst move forward insstead. You think of convincing otherss they are mistaken. Far eassier to convince them they are right. Sso conssider, boy: what new happensstance would make schoolmasster decide you were ssafe once more, ssimultaneoussly advance your other agendass?"

Harry stared at the snake, puzzled. His mind tried to comprehend and unravel the riddle—

"Iss it not obviouss?" hissed the snake. Again the tongue flickered sardonic laughter. *"To free yoursself, to gain power in Britain, you musst again be sseen to defeat the Dark Lord."*

In reddish-orange flickering torchlight, a green snake swayed above a white hospital bed, as the boy stared into the embers of its eyes.

"Sso," Harry said finally. "Let uss be clear on what iss propossed. You ssuggests that we sset up imposstor to imperssonate Dark Lord."

"Ssomething like that. Woman we resscued will cooperate, sshould be mosst convincing when sshe issseen at hiss sside." More sardonic tongue-flickering. "You are kidnapped from Hogwartss to public location, many witnessess, wardss keep out protectorss. Dark Lord announcess that he hass at long lasst regained physical form, after wandering as sspirit for yearss; ssayss that he hass gained sstill greater power, not even you can sstop him now. Offerss to let you duel. You casst guardian Charm, Dark Lord laughss at you, ssayss he iss not life-eater. Casstss Killing Cursse at you, you block, watcherss ssee Dark Lord explode—"

"Casst Killing Cursse?" Harry hissed in incredulity. "At me? Again? Ssecond time? Nobody will believe Dark Lord could possibibly be that sstupid—"

"You and I are only two people in country who would notice that," hissed the snake. "Trusst me on thiss, boy."

"What if there iss third, ssomeday?"

The snake swayed thoughtfully. *"Could write different sscrip for play, if you wissh. Whatever ssenario, sshould leave open possibility Dark Lord might return yet again—nation musst think they are sstill dependent on you to protect them."*

Harry stared into the red-flickering pits of the snake's eyes.

"Well?" hissed the swaying form.

The obvious thought was that going along with the Defense Professor's plots and deceptions a *second* time, spinning an even *more* complicated lie to cover up the first mistake, and creating *another* fatal vulnerability if anyone ever discovered the truth, would be *exactly* the same sort of stupidity as the putative Dark Lord using the Killing Curse again. It didn't even take his Hufflepuff side to point that out, Harry thought it in his very own mental voice.

But there was also a certain question as to whether the appropriate moral to learn from the last experience was to always say *no* immediately to the Defense Professor, or...

"Will think about it," hissed Harry. "Will not ansswer right away, thiss time, will enumerate risskss and benefitss firsst—"

"Undersstood," hissed the snake. "But remember thiss, boy, other eventss proceed without you. Hessitation iss always eassy, rarely usseful."

*
*

The boy emerged from the private room into the main infirmary, running nervous fingers through his messy black hair as he walked past the white beds, occupied and unoccupied.

Shortly afterward, the boy emerged from the Hogwarts infirmary entirely, passing Madam Pomfrey on the way out with a distracted nod.

The boy walked out into a hallway, then into a larger corridor, and then stopped and leaned against the wall.

The thing was...

...he really *didn't* want to be stuck in Hogwarts for the next six years; and when you thought about it...

... the Incident with Rescuing Bellatrix From Azkaban wasn't *just* imposing costs on Harry. Other people would be worrying, living in fear of the Dark Lord's return, expending unknown resources to take unknown precautions. Harry could demand that they write the script in such fashion as to make it seem *not* plausible that the Dark Lord would return a third time. And then people would relax, it would all be over.

Unless of course there actually *was* a Dark Lord out there to be feared. There *had* been a prophecy.

The boy leaning against the wall vented a soft sigh, and started walking again.

Harry had almost forgotten, but he *had* gotten around to showing Professor Quirrell the deck of cards he'd been given on Sunday night by 'Santa Claus', within which the King of Hearts was allegedly a portkey that would take him to the Salem Witches' Institute in America. Although of course Harry hadn't told Professor Quirrell *who'd* sent him the card, nor what it was *supposed* to do, before he'd asked Professor Quirrell if it was possible to tell where the portkey would send him.

The Defense Professor had transformed back to human form, and examined the King of Hearts, tapping it a few times with his wand.

And according to Professor Quirrell...

...the portkey would send the user somewhere in London, but he couldn't pinpoint it any nearer than that.

Harry had shown Professor Quirrell the note that had accompanied the deck of cards, saying nothing of the earlier notes.

Professor Quirrell had taken it in at a glance, given a dry chuckle, and observed that if you read the note *carefully*, it did not *explicitly* say that the portkey would take him to the Salem Witches' Institute.

You needed to learn to pay attention to that kind of subtlety, Professor Quirrell said, if you wanted to be a powerful wizard when you grew up; or, indeed, if you wanted to grow up at all.

The boy sighed again as he trudged off to class.

He was starting to wonder if all the other wizarding schools were also like this, or if it was only Hogwarts that had a problem.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

SELF ACTUALIZATION, PART I

H*esitation iss always eassy, rarely usseful.*

So the Defense Professor had told him; and while you could quibble about the details of the proverb, Harry understood the weaknesses of Ravenclaws well enough to know that you had to try *answering* your own quibbles. Did some plans call for waiting? Yes, many plans called for *de-layed action*; but that was not the same as *hesitating to choose*. Not delaying because you knew the right moment to do what was necessary, but delaying because you couldn't make up your mind—there was no cunning plan which called for that.

Did you sometimes need more information to choose? Yes, but that could also turn into an excuse for delaying; and it would be *tempting* to delay, when you were faced with a choice between two painful alternatives, and *not choosing* would avoid the mental pain for a time. So you would pick a piece of information you couldn't easily obtain, and claim that you couldn't possibly decide without it; that would be your excuse. Although if you knew *what* information you needed, knew *when* and *how* you would obtain that information, and knew what you would *do* depending on each possible observation, then that was less suspicious as an excuse for hesitating.

If you *weren't* just hesitating, you ought to be able to choose *in advance* what you would do, once you had the extra information you claimed you needed.

If the Dark Lord were *really* out there, would it be smart to go along with Professor Quirrell's plan to have someone impersonate the Dark Lord?

No. Definitely no. Absolutely not.

And if Harry knew for a *fact* that the Dark Lord *wasn't* really out there... in *that* case...

The Defense Professor's office was a small room, at least today; it had changed since the last time Harry had seen it, the stone of the room becoming darker, more polished. Behind the Defense Professor's desk stood the single empty bookcase that always decorated the room, a tall bookcase stretching almost from the floor to the ceiling, with seven empty wooden shelves. Harry had only once seen Professor Quirrell take a book from those empty shelves, and never seen him put a book back.

The green snake swayed above the seat of the chair behind the Defense Professor's desk, the lidless eyes staring unblinking at Harry from close to his own eye level.

They were warded now by twenty-two spells, all that could be cast within Hogwarts without attracting the Headmaster's attention.

"No," hissed Harry.

The green snake cocked its head, tilting it slightly; no emotion was conveyed by the gesture, not that Harry's Parselmouth talent conveyed to him. "*Reasson not?*" said the green snake.

"*Too rissky,*" Harry said simply. That was true whether or not the Dark Lord was out there. Forcing himself to decide in advance had made him realize that he'd just been using the unanswered question as an excuse to hesitate; the sane decision was the same, either way.

For a moment the dark pitted eyes seemed to gleam blackly, for a moment the scaled mouth gaped to expose the fangs. "*Think you have learned wrong lessson, boy, from previous failure. My plans are not in habit of failing, and last one would have gone flawlessly, but for your own foolishness. Correct lesson is to follow steps laid down for you by older and wiser Slytherin, tame your wild impulses.*"

"*Lesson I learned is not to try plots that would make girl-child friend think I am evil or boy-child friend think I am stupid,*" Harry snapped back. He'd been plan-

ning a more temporizing response than that, but somehow the words had just slipped out.

The sssss-ing sound that came from the snake was not heard by Harry as words, only as pure fury. A moment later, *"You told them—"*

"Of coursse not! But know what they would ssay."

There was a long pause as the snake-head swayed, staring at Harry; again no detectable emotion came through, and Harry wondered what Professor Quirrell could be thinking that would take Professor Quirrell that long to think.

"You sseriously care what thosse two think?" came the snake's final hiss. *"True younglingss thosse two are, not like you. Could not weigh adult matterss."*

"Might have done better than me," Harry hissed. *"Boy-child friend would have assked after ssecret motivess before assenting to resscue woman—"*

"Glad you undersstand that now," the snake hissed coldly. *"Alwaysss assk after other'ss advantage. Next learn to alwaysss assk after your own. If my plan iss not to your tasste, what iss yours?"*

"If necesssary—sstay at sschool ssix yearss and sstudy. Hogwartss sseemss fine place to dwell. Bookss, friendss, sstrange but tassty food." Harry wanted to chuckle, but there wasn't any gesture in Parseltongue for the kind of laughter he wanted to express.

The pits of the snake's eyes seemed almost black. *"Eassy to ssay that now. Ssuch as you and I, we do not tolerate imprissonment. You will losse patience long before sseventh year, perhapss before end of thiss one. I sshall plan accordingly."*

And before Harry could hiss another word of Parseltongue, the human-shape of Professor Quirrell was sitting in his chair once more. "So, Mr. Potter," said the Defense Professor, his voice as calm as if they had been discussing nothing important, as if the whole conversation had not occurred at all, "I hear that you have begun to practice dueling. Not the worthless sort with *rules*, I hope?"

Hannah Abbott looked as unnerved as Hermione had ever seen her (except on the day of the phoenix, the day Bellatrix Black had escaped, which

shouldn't ought to count for anyone). The Hufflepuff girl had come over to the Ravenclaw table during dinner, and tapped Hermione on her shoulder, and very nearly dragged her away—

"Neville and Harry Potter are learning dueling from Mr. Diggory!" Hannah blurted as soon as they were a few steps away from the table.

"Who?" said Hermione.

"*Cedric Diggory!*" said Hannah. "He's the Captain of our Quidditch Team, and general of an army, and he's taking *all* the electives and getting better grades than anyone, and I hear he learns dueling from professional tutors during the summers, and he once beat *two* seventh-year students, and even some teachers call him the Super Hufflepuff, and Professor Sprout says we should all emu, uh, emutate him or something like that, and—"

After Hannah finally stopped for air (the list had gone on for a while), Hermione managed to insert a word in edgewise.

"Sunshine Soldier Abbott!" said Hermione. "Calm *down*. We're not going to be fighting General Diggory, right? Sure, Neville's studying to beat us, but we can study too—"

"Don't you *see*?" Hannah shrieked, raising her voice a lot louder than it should've been, if they were trying to keep the conversation private from all the Ravenclaws looking at them. "Neville isn't studying to beat *us*! He's practicing so he can fight *Bellatrix Black*! They're going to go through us like a Bludger through a stack of pancakes!"

The Sunshine General gave her soldier a look. "Listen," said Hermione, "I don't think a few weeks of practice is going to make anyone an invincible fighter. Plus we already *know* how to handle invincible fighters. We'll concentrate fire on them and they'll go down just like Draco."

The Hufflepuff girl was looking at her with mixed admiration and skepticism. "Aren't you even, you know, *worried*?"

"Oh, *honestly!*" said Hermione. Sometimes it was hard being the only sensible person in your whole school year. "Haven't you ever heard the saying, the only thing we have to fear is fear itself?"

"*What?*" said Hannah. "That's crazy, what about Lethifolds lurking in the darkness, and being put under the Imperius Curse, and horrible Transfiguration accidents and—"

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SELF ACTUALIZATION I

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"I *mean*," said Hermione, exasperation leaking out into her now-raised voice, she'd been hearing this sort of thing *all week* now, "how about if we wait until *after* the Chaos Legion *actually* crushes us to get so scared of them and *did you just mutter 'Gryffindors' under your voice?*"

A few moments later, Hermione was walking back to her place at the table with a sweet smile plastered onto her young face, it wasn't the terrible cold glare of Harry's dark side but it was the scariest face *she* knew how to make.

Harry Potter was going *down*.

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"This is loony," gasped Neville, with what tiny amount of breath he could spare from being completely out of breath.

"This is *brilliant!*" said Cedric Diggory. The eyes of the Super Hufflepuff gleamed with manic enthusiasm, shining like the sweat on his forehead as he stamped his feet through the dance of one of his dueling postures. His usually-light steps had changed to heavier stomps, which might have had something to do with the Transfigured metal weights they'd all attached to their arms and legs and strapped over their chests. "Where do you *get* these ideas, Mr. Potter?"

"A strange old shop... in Oxford... and I'm never... shopping there... again." *Thud.*

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

SELF ACTUALIZATION, PART II

In the high reaches of Hogwarts where rooms and corridors changed on a daily basis, where the territory itself was uncertain and not just the map, where the stability of the castle began to fray into dreams and chaos without changing its architectural style or apparent solidity—in the high reaches of Hogwarts, a battle would soon be fought.

The presence of so many students would stabilize the corridors for a time, by dint of constant observation. The rooms and corridors of Hogwarts sometimes *moved* even while people looked directly at them, but they wouldn't *change*. Even after eight centuries, Hogwarts was still a little shy about changing in front of people.

But despite that transient permanence (the Defense Professor had said) the upper reaches of Hogwarts still had a military realism: you had to learn the ground anew each time, and check every closet for secret corridors all over again.

Sunday it was, Sunday the first of March. Professor Quirrell had recovered enough to supervise battles once more, and they were all catching up on the backlog.

The Dragon General, Draco Malfoy, watched two compasses he held in either hand. One compass was the color of the Sun, the other had a multicolored, iridescent sheen to indicate Chaos. The other two generals, Draco knew, had been given their own compasses; only Hermione Granger's hand, and Harry Potter's hand, would hold a compass that was orange-red and flickered in its reflections like fire, pointing always to the direction of the largest active contingent of Dragon Army.

Without those compasses they might have searched for days and never found each other, which was a territorial hazard of fighting in the upper levels of Hogwarts.

Draco had a bad feeling about what would happen when Dragon Army found the Chaos Legion. Harry Potter had changed since Bellatrix Black had escaped; the Heir of Slytherin had begun to seem truly Lordly now (and how had Professor Quirrell known that would happen?) Draco would have felt a lot better with Hermione Granger standing alongside him with her twenty-three Sunshine Soldiers in tow, but no, the Sunshine General was being stupidly proud and refusing to accept aid against General Potter. She wanted to take down Potter herself, she'd told him.

The Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy had maintained their influence over Britain for centuries by understanding that you couldn't always be *the* most powerful. Sometimes another Lord was just stronger, and you had to settle for *merely* being his foremost lieutenant. You could build up *quite* a position of wealth and power over a dozen generations of being second in command. You just had to be careful, each time, not to let your House be dragged down with the fall of the Lord you served. That was the Malfoy tradition which centuries of experience had honed...

And so Father had thoroughly explained to Draco that if he ran into someone who was obviously stronger than him, Draco was *not* to resent this and *not* to deny it and *not* to throw a tantrum that could sabotage his potential position, but Draco *was* to make sure that his place in the next generation's power structure wasn't any lower than second.

Granger, apparently, had never gotten this lecture from her own parents, and was still in denial about the obvious fact that Harry Potter was becoming stronger than her.

So Draco had secretly met with Captain Goldstein and Captain Bones and Captain Macmillan and they'd agreed to all do their best to make sure that Dragon and Sunshine didn't engage each other before they engaged the larger threat of Chaos.

It wasn't *really* violating the agreement against traitors, you weren't soliciting traitors if you honestly meant to *help* the other army.

A high ringing tone belled through the corridors to signal the start

of the battle, and a moment later Draco shouted “Go!” and the Dragons started running. It would tire his soldiers, it would cost them something even after they stopped and caught their breath, but they *had* to put Chaos directly between themselves and the Sunshine Regiment.

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Harry and Neville walked at a leisurely pace through the corridors, Harry watching the yellow-golden compass that pointed toward the location of the Sunshine Regiment, and Neville keeping a lookout just in case they ran into someone else.

Their footsteps sounded a bit thumpy, if you listened closely.

“So,” the Chaotic Lieutenant said after a while. “That’s why you had us practice dueling with all that weight strapped on?”

Harry nodded, keeping his eyes on the compass that led to Sunshine; if the apparent direction started to change quickly then they were getting close.

“I didn’t want to say anything in front of the others, but a couple of weeks isn’t a lot of time to put on extra muscle,” said Neville. “And the balance is different, and I think this weighs *more* actually, and doesn’t this count as Transfiguring a Muggle artifact?”

“Nope,” Harry said. “I checked that in advance. You can see it in Hogwarts statues, so some wizards *used* to wear it, even if they were just being fashionable for the Dark Ages.” And since nobody would ever try this if they *weren’t* fighting first-year students using weak spells like the Sleep Hex, it didn’t count as giving away good ideas, either.

They came to a Y-intersection, an annoying one; neither corridor bent in quite the right way to take them on a direct intercept course toward where Sunshine would go as they followed the Chaos Legion following Dragon Army. So Harry chose what seemed like the better of the two options, and Neville followed.

“We’d better try a quick Silencing Charm on this stuff when we get close,” Neville said. “It’s kind of noisy, they might figure it out.”

Harry nodded, and then said “Good idea” in case Neville hadn’t been looking at him.

They trudged on through the stone-floored corridor of the upper reach of Hogwarts, lit by windows of plain glass or stained glass, now and then passing statues of witches and dragons and even the occasional wizard-knight in plate armor or chainmail.

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The Sunshine Soldiers were striding through a long, wide corridor with their wands out and pointed. They couldn’t use the Prismatic Shield while they were maneuvering, but Parvati Patil and Jenny Rustad were currently maintaining *Contegos* around the officer group, who would be the first targets of any ambush.

Their tactic for the next battle, she and her officers had decided, would be to mix directly in with the enemy soldiers as fast as possible—after having practiced among *themselves* how to support one another, avoid hitting each other, and get into positions where enemy soldiers would hesitate to fire. They’d only gotten in four hours practice, but she thought her troops would already be better at that kind of mixed-in fighting than soldiers who hadn’t practiced at all. It seemed like the sort of tactic Chaos would use, but they hadn’t actually used it yet.

It was a good strategy, she believed. And yet still, no matter how much she’d lectured her soldiers, they’d persisted in whispering fearful rumors about what Harry and Neville were learning to do. Finally she’d gone off and talked with Captain Goldstein, who understood things like Troop Morale, and Anthony had suggested—

“That’s weird,” Captain Macmillan spoke up suddenly, frowning at the fiery and iridescent compasses he held in either hand. (Ernie was, as Harry would have termed it, “good at spatial visualization”, and so had been designated to hold both compasses and try to figure out what their enemies were doing.) “I think... Dragon’s not moving fast anymore... I think they got on the other side of Chaos from us first... and it looks like

Chaos is moving to attack them instead of trying to maneuver out from in between?"

Hermione frowned, trying to understand, and she saw similar frowns on the faces of Anthony and Ron. If Chaos and Dragon attacked each other straight out, and spent all their forces fighting each other, that was practically conceding the battle to Sunshine...

"Potter thinks we're allied so he's attacking Malfoy now, before Dragon can link up with us," said Blaise Zabini from the common ranks of soldiers. "Or Potter just thinks he can beat both armies in a row, if he attacks them separately." The Slytherin boy gave a condescending sigh. "Are you going to promote me back to officer now? You lot are hopeless without me, you know."

They all ignored the talking noises coming from Zabini's mouth.

"We still moving in the right direction?" said Anthony.

"Yeah," said Ernie.

"We getting close to them?" said Ron.

"Not yet—"

That was when the huge black-wooden doors at the end of the corridor flew open and crashed into the wall, revealing two figures almost completely enveloped in grey cloaks, grey cloth stretched over the faces beneath the grey hoods, one of those figures already raising a wand and pointing it directly at her.

And then the face of the game changed drastically, as Harry's voice, high and strained with the effort, screamed the word:

"*Stupefy!*"

The dueling-grade stunner blasted toward her, she was so shocked that she didn't start to move until almost too late, as the red jet of light *smashed* right through the *Contego* shield to their front and she just barely dodged, there was a tingle on her arm as the red light went past her, and she saw out of the corner of her eye Susan getting hit and blown off her feet into Ron—

"*Somnium!*" bellowed Anthony's voice, followed a moment later by a dozen voices crying "*Somnium!*"

Hermione frantically pushed herself to her feet, and as she rose, she saw the two figures in the grey cloaks just standing there.

You couldn't *see* Sleep Hexes, the spell was too weak—

But there was no way they all could've *missed*.

"*Stupefy!*" shrieked the voice of Neville Longbottom, and another red jet shot at her, she fell in an undignified heap as she desperately twisted out of the way, and when she scrambled up, panting, she saw that this time the stunbolt had gotten Ron where he'd been rising from the ground.

"Hello there, Sunshine," said Harry's voice from beneath his hood.

"We're the Grey Knights of Chaos," said Neville's voice.

"We'll be your opponents for this battle," said Harry's voice, "while Chaos's *other* army slaughters the Dragons."

"And by the way," said Neville's voice, "we're invincible."

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The two boys in their grey cloaks and robes, grey cloth over their faces, stood facing Sunshine's entire army, seemingly unfazed by a dozen Sleep Hexes.

Daphne heard a soft sigh from beside her, and when her head turned she saw that Hannah's lips were parted, and the Hufflepuff girl's eyes were huge, and she was staring at—

It would have been hard to describe the jumble of thoughts that flashed through Daphne's mind as she realized that Hannah was staring at Neville rather than Harry, which in turn seemed to trigger some part of her into noticing that in point of fact Neville *had* been getting pretty interesting lately as boys went, in fact right now the Last Scion of Longbottom was seeming downright *cool*, and something woke up inside her and her own lips parted and everything the Lady her Mother had ever instructed her about demure demeanors and flattery and scented shampoo blew straight out of her mind so hard it should have fluffed her hair about her ears, because she'd watched Hermione and Harry and she knew how she wanted *her* own courtship to go—

Her Lady Mother had also recently instructed her on a few spells it might be embarrassing not to know if you belonged to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Greengrass.

Daphne's wand swung to point to her left, and she shouted "*Tonare!*" The wand went over her head, and she spoke the incantation "*Ravum Calvaria!*"

And finally she grasped her wand in both hands and shrieked, "*Lucis Gladius!*"

The huge magical drain almost sent her to her knees, but she bore it, and when the blazing shape had fully formed and stabilized the drain was a little less.

Still, she had a feeling she'd better not try to fight with this for long.

That everyone was staring at her went *quite* without saying, and she *should* have leaped forward to confront Neville with her hair billowing around her, but it was all she could do to walk forward steadily to level her Most Ancient Blade at Neville Longbottom. That everyone moved aside and made way for her also went without saying.

"*I hight Daphne, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Greengrass!*" she cried. "*Greengrass of Sunshine!*" The dueling forms had gone completely out of her mind, she'd seen enough plays to remember death challenges and blood challenges but she couldn't remember at all what was appropriate for this, so she just pointed the incandescent sword toward the object of her crush and yelled, "*Let's see what you got, Nevvy!*"

Once again Harry's voice shrieked "*Stupefy!*", and later on, when she was remembering this, she could never quite believe she'd managed to do it, but she slashed out with her blade of light like it was a Beater's bat, and *hit the stunbolt back at Harry* who just barely managed to twist out of the way.

"*Tonare!*" shouted Neville, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Longbottom. "*Ravum Calvaria, Lucis Gladius!*"

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For a few seconds, no one did anything but stare at Neville and Daphne as they started whacking at each other. They were both moving slowly, and Hermione guessed that the spell was taking a lot of strength out of them.

It wasn't very impressive by comparison, if you were a Muggleborn and you'd watched certain movies.

But you still had to give them extra credit for using lightsabers at all.

"Point of order," said Harry's voice. "I know the Defense Professor is watching, but I still have to ask, does anyone know whether they'll slice each other in half if they actually hit—"

"No," Hermione said absently. This had been in one of her history books, though she'd had no idea the magical dueling sword looked like *that*. "They cast it so it'll only stun if it touches."

"You *know* that spell?"

"Oh, no, it's the Charm of the Most Ancient Blade, it's only legal for Noble and Most Ancient Houses to use—"

Hermione stopped talking and looked at Harry, or Harry's grey hood rather.

"Well," said Harry's voice, "I guess I could take down the rest of the Sunshine Regiment by myself, then." She couldn't see his face, but his voice sounded like he was smiling.

"You dodged when Daphne hit your own spell back at you," Hermione said. "So whatever you did, you're *not* invincible. A *Stupefy* can still get you."

"Interesting theory," said Harry's voice from beneath the hood. "Got anyone in your army who can test it?"

"I read about the Stunning Hex once," said Hermione. "A few months ago. I wonder if I can remember the instructions right?" Her wand came up to point at Harry.

There was a slight pause, as nearby a boy and a girl breathing in audible gasps slowly whacked at each other with lightsabers.

"Of course," Harry said, leveling his own wand on her, "I can just use *Somnium* on you. That'll take a lot less effort."

New *Contego* shields sprung into existence in front of her, cast by Jenny and Parvati, even as Harry spoke.

The tip of Hermione's own wand began making small motions in the air, a diamond within a circle, a diamond within a circle, rehearsing the gesture to match exactly what she remembered seeing in the book. It would be a difficult feat even for her, but she *had* to cast the spell right

on the first try, she couldn't afford any failed castings that would sap her energy.

"You know," said Hermione Granger, "I understand that it's not really your fault, but I'm getting tired of hearing people talk about the Boy-Who-Lived like you're—like you're some kind of *god* or something."

"Same here, I must say," said Harry Potter. "It's sad how people keep underestimating me."

Her wand kept rehearsing the diamond within the circle, over and over. Harry would be recharging his own strength, she knew, even as she practiced as much as she could before her attack. "I'm starting to think you need taking down a peg, General Chaos."

"You could be right," Harry said equably. His feet began to shuffle through what she recognized as a duelist's dance. "Unfortunately there's nothing left that can defeat me now except another Harry Potter."

"Let me be specific, Mr. Potter. *I'm* taking you down a peg."

"You and what other army?"

"You think you're pretty cool, don't you," said Hermione.

"Why, yes," said Harry. "Yes, I do. Some might call that arrogant, but am I supposed to be the last person in Hogwarts to notice how awesome I am?"

Hermione raised her left hand into the air, and made a fist.

It was a signal. Eight designated soldiers in her army would be pointing their wands at her, and quietly casting *Wingardium Leviosa*.

They'd practiced *this*, too, once Hermione had given up on lecturing her soldiers, and at Anthony's suggestion, tried giving them a Sunshine General who *looked* like she could defeat invincible enemies.

"You pretend you're Superman," said Hermione. She raised her left fist higher in the air, and the eight soldiers supporting her Hovered her off the ground. "*Well here's Super Hermione!*" Her hand pushed forward, and as she shot rapidly through the air toward Harry, regretting only that she couldn't see the look on his face, her wand made a diamond within a circle and she summoned up all the magic she could, it felt like she imagined touching a live wire would feel as the too-powerful spell poured through her when her voice screamed "*Stupefy!*"

The red bolt burst from her wand, perfectly formed.

Harry dodged it.

And then, because they hadn't practiced doing this part inside of hallways, she crashed into a wall.

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"*Somnium!*" shrieked Draco, and then after only a few seconds to recharge, "*SOMNIUM, CURSE YOU!*"

He *knew* he was hitting Theodore, the other boy wasn't even trying to dodge, but the scion of Nott only grinned as evilly as his father and leveled his wand—

Draco managed to leap aside just as Theodore said "*Somnium!*" but Draco was getting winded, he couldn't keep this up, Theodore wasn't bothering to dodge at all while Draco had to keep moving, this was *crazy*.

He had enough strength now to fire again, but—

Stupidity is doing the same thing and expecting a different result, Harry had said, this was *Harry's* work somehow, it couldn't be a Muggle artifact anymore but Draco couldn't figure out what it *could* be, and he should be thinking of hypotheses and ways to test them but he was too busy frantically dodging as Theodore laughed and shot another Sleep Hex at him, Draco felt a little numbness in his side that time as he twisted, that had been a very very near miss and finally Draco couldn't take it anymore, he didn't bother working out what theory he was testing or why as he just—

"*Luminos!*" shouted Draco, and Theodore was haloed in red light, "*Dulak!*" and it went out again (so Theodore *was* still being affected by magic), "*Expelliarmus!*" and Theodore's wand went flying (that had been a good spell to cast anyway now that Draco realized it) but Theodore was rushing toward Draco with his arms outstretched to grapple so Draco yelled "*Flipendo!*" and the other boy's feet were abruptly yanked up—

—and Theodore's back hit the ground with a surprisingly loud and *metallic*-sounding crash.

Draco's vision was swimming now from casting four spells in such fast succession, and Theodore was already scrambling to his feet, so there

wasn't even time to think in words, but Draco still managed to say "*Somnium!*" and *this* time he aimed for Theodore's face instead of the chest.

Theodore dodged (he *dodged!*) and the boy shouted "*Code seven on Malfoy!*"

"*Prismatis!*" cried Padma's voice and there was suddenly a shimmering rainbow wall in front of Draco, just as four Chaotic voices cried "*Somnium!*"

And there was a pause, as everyone looked at the huge Prismatic Sphere protecting the remnants of Dragon Army.

Casting that fifth spell had sent Draco to his hands and knees, but he looked up and managed to say, as clearly as he could, "If the Sleep Hex—doesn't work—aim for the face—I think the Lieutenants are wearing metal shirts."

"You've already lost too many soldiers," Finnigan said loudly from across the barrier, "we'll beat you anyway," and then the Gryffindor boy laughed evilly. He did the evil laughter almost as well as Harry Potter by now, and the other Chaotic Legionnaires started laughing with him soon afterward.

Draco could see from the corner of his eye where Gregory and Vincent lay unconscious. Padma was still sustaining the Prismatic Sphere, the largest one he'd ever seen her cast; but she was breathing hard, still visibly sweaty from when they'd all jogged to get into position, the Ravenclaw girl was a strong witch but not an *athletic* one.

He really hoped General Granger got here soon and hit Chaos from behind. General Potter and Neville of Chaos were missing, and Draco could guess where they'd gone, but two soldiers couldn't delay the whole Sunshine Regiment for too long all by themselves, could they?

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She knew it wasn't fair, that the other girl had given all she could, but Hermione still wished that Daphne had lasted longer.

"*Lagann!*" said Neville's voice from behind her as she flew, and there was the sound of a Prismatic Wall shattering, Hannah's voice desperately

cried "*Somnium!*" and then a few moments later Neville's voice calmly said "*Somnium*" and there was the thud of another of her soldiers falling over.

And the force keeping her in the air diminished again, Hermione could feel the grab of the Hover Charms straining at her, but now it just wasn't enough.

Her flight stopped and she began falling in slow motion toward the ground, and she should've signaled her soldiers to just *drop* her, but she was too angry and confused and not thinking fast enough and still trying to muster the strength for one last Stunning Hex, and so there was nowhere to go when Harry pointed his wand at her and said "*Somnium*" and that was the last word that Hermione Granger heard of her battle.

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

SELF ACTUALIZATION, PART III

Hermione wasn't feeling very nice right now, or Good either, there was a hot ball of anger burning inside her and she wondered if this was something like Harry's darkness (though it probably wasn't even close) and she shouldn't have felt that way over some silly little game but—

Her whole army. Two soldiers had beaten her whole army. That was what she'd been told after she woke up.

It was a little too much.

"Well," Professor Quirrell said. From up close the Defense Professor didn't look quite as healthy as he had the last time she'd been in his office; his skin looked paler, and he moved a little slower. His expression was as stern as ever, and his gaze as penetrating; his fingers tapped sharply on his desk, rap-rap. "I would guess that of the three of you, only Mr. Malfoy has guessed why I've asked you here."

"Something to do with Noble and Most Ancient Houses?" said Harry from beside her, sounding puzzled. "I didn't violate some kind of crazy law by firing on Daphne, did I?"

"Not quite," the man said with heavy irony. "Since Miss Greengrass did not invoke the correct dueling forms, she is not entitled to demand that you be stripped of your House name. Although of course I would not have permitted a formal duel. Wars do not respect such rules." The Defense Professor leaned forward and rested his chin on steepled hands, as though sitting upright had already tired him. His eyes gazed at them, sharp and dangerous. "General Malfoy. Why did I call you here?"

“General Potter against the two of us isn’t a fair fight anymore,” Draco Malfoy said in a quiet voice.

“*What?*” blurted Hermione. “We almost *had* them, if Daphne hadn’t fainted—”

“Miss Greengrass did not faint from magical exhaustion,” Professor Quirrell said dryly. “Mr. Potter shot her in the back with a Sleep Hex while your soldiers were distracted by the sight of their general flying into a wall. But congratulations nonetheless, Miss Granger, on *almost* defeating two Chaotic Legionnaires with a mere twenty-four Sunshine Soldiers.”

The blood flaming in her cheeks grew a little hotter. “That—that was just—if I’d only figured out he was wearing armor—”

Professor Quirrell gazed at her from over touched fingers. “Of course there are ways you *could* have won, Miss Granger. There always are, in every lost battle. The world around us redounds with opportunities, explodes with opportunities, which nearly all folk ignore because it would require them to violate a habit of thought; in every battle a thousand Hufflepuff bones waiting to be sharpened into spears. If you had thought to try a massed *Finite Incantatem* on general principles, you would have dispelled Mr. Potter’s suit of chainmail and everything else he was wearing except his underwear, which leads me to suspect that Mr. Potter did not quite realize his own vulnerability. Or you could have had your soldiers swarm Mr. Potter and Mr. Longbottom and physically wrest the wands from their hands. Mr. Malfoy’s own response was not what I would term *well-reasoned*, but at least he did not wholly ignore his thousand alternatives.” A sardonic smile. “But you, Miss Granger, had the misfortune to remember how to cast the Stunning Hex, and so you did not search your excellent memory for a dozen easier spells that might have proved efficacious. And you pinned all your army’s hopes on your own person, so they lost spirit when you fell. Afterward they continued to cast their futile Sleep Hexes, governed by the habits of fighting that had been trained into them, unable to break the pattern as Mr. Malfoy did. I cannot quite comprehend what goes through people’s minds when they repeat the same failed strategy over and over, but apparently it is an astonishingly rare realization that you can try something else. And so the Sunshine Regiment was wiped out by two soldiers.” The Defense Professor grinned mirth-

lessly. "One perceives certain similarities to how fifty Death Eaters dominated all of magical Britain, and how our much-loved Ministry continues in its rule."

The Defense Professor sighed. "*Nonetheless*, Miss Granger, the fact remains that this is not the first such defeat for you. In the previous battle, you and Mr. Malfoy united your forces, and yet you were fought to a standstill, so that you and Mr. Malfoy had to pursue Mr. Potter onto the roof. The Chaos Legion has now demonstrated, twice in succession, military strength equal to both other armies combined. This leaves me no choice. General Potter, you will select eight soldiers from your army, including at least one Chaotic Lieutenant, to be divided among Dragon Army and the Sunshine Regiment—"

"*What?*" Hermione burst out again, she glanced over at the other generals and saw that Harry looked as shocked as her, while Draco Malfoy only looked resigned.

"General Potter is stronger than both of you together," Professor Quirrell said with calm precision. "Your contest is over, he has won, and it is time to rebalance the three armies to present him with a renewed challenge."

"*Professor Quirrell!*" said Harry. "I didn't—"

"This is my decision as the Professor of Battle Magic at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and it is not subject to negotiation." The words were still precise, but the look in Professor Quirrell's eyes chilled Hermione's blood, even though he was glaring at Harry and not at her. "And I find it *suspicious*, Mr. Potter, that the moment you wished to isolate Miss Granger and Mr. Malfoy and force them to chase you onto the roof, you were able to annihilate just exactly as much of their united force as you pleased. Indeed, that is the level of performance I *expected* of you since the start of this year, and I am *annoyed* to discover that you have been holding back in my classes this entire time! I have seen what you can truly do, Mr. Potter. You are far beyond the point where Mr. Malfoy or Miss Granger can fight you on an equal level, and you will not be permitted to pretend otherwise. This, Mr. Potter, I tell you in my capacity as your professor: For you to learn to your full potential, you must exercise your full abilities and not hold back for *any* reason—

particularly not childish frets over what your friends might think!"

*
*

She left the Defense Professor's office with a larger army, and less dignity, and feeling a lot like a sad little bug that had just been squished, and trying very very hard not to cry.

"I *wasn't* holding back!" Harry said as soon as they turned the first corner away from Professor Quirrell's office, the moment the wooden door faded out of sight behind the stone walls. "I wasn't pretending, I never *let* either of you win!"

She didn't answer, couldn't answer, it would all break loose if she tried to say a word.

"Really?" said Draco Malfoy. The Dragon General still had that air of resignation. "Because Quirrell's right, you know, it's *suspicious* that you could beat nearly everyone in both our armies as soon as you wanted to make us chase you onto the roof. And didn't you say something then, Potter, about us needing to beat you when you were fighting for real?"

The burning sensation was creeping up her throat, and when it reached her eyes she would burst into tears, and from then on she would be just a crying little girl to both of them.

"That—" Harry's voice said urgently, she wasn't looking at him but his voice sounded like he had his head turned toward her. "That was—I tried a lot harder that time, there was an important reason, I *had* to, so I used a whole bunch of tricks I'd been saving up—and—"

She'd always been trying her hardest, every time.

"—and I, I let out a side of myself I wouldn't usually use for something like Defense class—"

So if she ever got close to winning against Harry when it *really* mattered, he could just go into his dark side and crush her, was that it?

...of course it was. She couldn't even *look* Harry in the eyes when he was being scary, how had she ever thought she could beat him for real?

The corridor forked, and Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy went left toward a staircase that climbed to the second floor, and she went right instead, she didn't even know where that passage went but right now she'd rather be lost in the castle.

"Excuse me, Draco," said Harry's voice, and then there was a pattering of footsteps behind her.

"Leave me alone," she said, it came out sounding stern but then she had to shut her mouth and press her lips together tightly and hold her breath to stop it all from coming out.

That boy just kept on coming, and ran around her and put himself in front of her, because he was stupid that was why, and Harry said, his voice now a high and desperate whisper, "I didn't run away when *you* were beating *me* in all my classes except broomstick riding!"

He didn't understand, and he would never understand, Harry Potter would never understand, because no matter what contest he lost he would still be the Boy-Who-Lived, if you were Harry Potter and Hermione Granger was beating you then it meant everyone was expecting you to rise to the challenge, if you were Hermione Granger and Harry Potter was beating you that meant you were just no one.

"It's not fair," she said, her voice was shaking but she wasn't crying yet, not yet, "I shouldn't have to fight your dark side, I'm just—I'm only—" *I'm only twelve*, that was what she thought then.

"I only used my dark side *once* and that was—when I *had* to!"

"So today you beat my *whole army* being just Harry?" She still wasn't crying yet, and she wondered what her face looked like right now, if she looked like an angry Hermione or a sad one.

"I—" Harry said. His voice got a little lower, "I wasn't... really *expecting* to win, that time, I know I said I was invincible but that was just to try to scare you, I really just thought we'd slow you down for a bit—"

She started walking again, walked right past him, and as she passed Harry's face tightened up like *he* was going to cry.

"Is Professor Quirrell right?" came a high desperate whisper from behind her. "If I have you for a friend, will I always be afraid to do better because I know it will hurt your feelings? That's not fair, Hermione!"

She took a breath and held it and ran, her feet pattering across the stone as fast as they could, running as fast as she dared with her vision all blurry, ran so that no one would hear her, and this time Harry didn't follow.

*
*

Minerva was going over the Transfiguration parchment due Monday, and had just marked down to negative two hundred points a fifth-year parchment with an error that could have potentially killed someone. During her first year as a professor she'd been indignant at the folly of older students, now she was just resigned. Some people not only never learned, they never noticed that they were hopeless, they stayed bright and eager and kept on trying. Sometimes they believed you when you told them, before they left Hogwarts, that they must *never* try anything unusual, give up free Transfiguration and use the art only through established Charms; and sometimes... they didn't.

She was in the middle of trying to unravel a particularly convoluted answer when a knock at the door disrupted her thoughts; and it wasn't her office hours, but it had only taken a very short time as Head of Gryffindor House for her to learn to suspend judgment. You could always deduct House points *afterward*.

"Come in," she said in a crisp voice.

The young girl who entered her office had clearly been crying, and then afterward had washed her face in hopes it wouldn't show—

"Miss Granger!" said Professor McGonagall. It had taken her a moment to recognize that face with its eyes reddened and cheeks puffed. "What happened?"

"Professor," said the young girl in a wavering voice, "you said that if I was ever worried or uncomfortable about anything, I should come to you at once—"

"Yes," said Professor McGonagall, "now what *happened*?"

The girl started to explain—

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*

Hermione stood still and the stairs turned around her, a revolving helix that shouldn't have taken her anywhere at all, and instead bore her continuously *upward*. Hermione thought it seemed like the Enchantment of the Endless Stair, which had been invented in 1733 by the wizard Arram Sabeti who'd lived on top of Mount Everest in the days when no Muggles could climb it. Only that couldn't be right because Hogwarts was much older—maybe the enchantment had been *reinvented*?

She should've been frightened, should've been nervous about her second meeting with the Headmaster.

She *was*, in fact, frightened and nervous about her second meeting with the Headmaster.

Only Hermione Granger had been thinking; she'd been thinking a lot, after she hadn't been able to run any further and had slid down against the wall with her lungs on fire, thinking while she curled up in a ball with her back against the chilly stone wall and her legs drawn up and crying.

Even if she lost to Harry Potter she was never, ever going to lose to Draco Malfoy, that was just totally *absolutely* unacceptable, and Professor Quirrell had praised General Malfoy for not ignoring his thousand alternatives; and so after Hermione had cried herself out she'd thought of fourteen other spells she *should've* tried against Harry and Neville, and then she'd started wondering if she might be making the same sort of mistake about other things; and that was how she'd ended up knocking on Professor McGonagall's door. Not asking for help, right now Hermione didn't have any plans she could ask for help *with*, just telling Professor McGonagall everything, because when she'd thought of it that had seemed like one of the thousand alternatives that Professor Quirrell had been talking about.

And she'd told Professor McGonagall about how Harry Potter had changed since the day the phoenix had been on his shoulder, and about how people more and more seemed to see her as just something of Harry's, and how it seemed like Harry was pulling farther and farther away from everyone else in their school year and went around with a sad air sometimes like he was losing something, and *she didn't know what to*

do anymore.

And Professor McGonagall had told her that they needed to talk to the Headmaster.

And Hermione had felt worried, but then the thought had come to her that *Harry Potter* wouldn't have been scared of the Headmaster. Harry Potter would have just barged ahead doing whatever he was trying to do. Maybe (the thought had come to her) it was worth *trying* to be like that, *not* being scared, just doing whatever, and seeing what happened to her, it couldn't really be worse.

The Endless Stair stopped turning.

The great oaken door in front of them with the brass griffin knocker opened without being touched.

Behind a black oaken desk with dozens of drawers facing in every direction, looking like it had drawers set *inside* other drawers, was the silver-bearded Headmaster of Hogwarts upon his throne, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, into whose gently twinkling eyes Hermione looked for around three seconds before she was distracted by all the other things in the room.

Some time later—she wasn't sure how long but it was while she was trying to count the number of things in the room for the third time and *still* not getting the same answer, even though her memory insisted that nothing had been added or removed—the Headmaster cleared his throat and said, “Miss Granger?”

Hermione's head snapped around, and she felt a little heat in her cheeks; but Dumbledore didn't appear annoyed with her at all, only serene, and with an inquiring look in those mild, half-glassed eyes.

“Hermione,” said Professor McGonagall, the older witch's voice was gentle and her hand rested reassuringly on Hermione's shoulder, “please tell the Headmaster what you said to me about Harry.”

Hermione began speaking, despite her newfound resolution her voice still stumbled a little with nervousness, as she described how Harry had changed in the last few weeks since Fawkes had been on his shoulder.

When she was done there was a pause, and then the Headmaster sighed. “I am sorry, Hermione Granger,” said Dumbledore. Those blue

eyes had grown sadder as she spoke. "That is... unfortunate, but I cannot say it is unexpected. That is a hero's burden, which you see."

"A *hero*?" said Hermione. She looked up nervously at Professor McGonagall and saw that the Transfiguration Professor's face had grown tight, though her hand still squeezed Hermione's shoulder reassuringly.

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "I was a hero myself once, before I was a mysterious old wizard, in the days when I opposed Grindelwald. You have read history books, Miss Granger?"

Hermione nodded.

"Well," said Dumbledore, "that is what heroes have to do, Miss Granger, they have their tasks and they must grow strong to accomplish them, and that is what you see happening to Harry. If there is anything that can be done to gentle his pathway, then *you* will be the one to do it, and not I. For I am not Harry's friend, alas, but only his mysterious old wizard."

"I—" said Hermione. "I'm not sure—I still want to be—" Her voice stopped, it seemed too awful to say aloud.

Dumbledore closed his eyes, and when he opened them, he looked a little older than before. "No one can stop you, Miss Granger, if you choose to stop being Harry's friend. As for what it would do to him, you may know that better than I."

"That—doesn't seem *fair*," Hermione said, her voice trembling. "That I've *got* to be Harry's friend because he's got no one else? That doesn't seem fair."

"*Being* a friend is not something you can be forced to, Miss Granger." The blue eyes seemed to look right through her. "The feelings are there, or they are not. If they are there, you can accept them or deny them. You *are* Harry's friend—and choosing to deny it would wound him terribly, perhaps beyond healing. But Miss Granger, what would drive you to such extremes?"

She couldn't find words. She'd never been able to find words. "If you get too near Harry—you get *swallowed up*, and no one sees *you* any more, you're just something of *his*, everyone thinks the whole world revolves around him and..." She didn't have the words.

The old wizard nodded slowly. "It is indeed an unjust world we live in, Miss Granger. All the world now knows that it is I who defeated Grindel-

wald, and fewer remember Elizabeth Beckett who died opening the way so I could pass through. And yet she is remembered. Harry Potter *is* the hero of this play, Miss Granger; the world *does* revolve around him. He is destined for great things; and I ween that in time the name of Albus Dumbledore will be remembered as Harry Potter's mysterious old wizard, more than for anything else I have done. And perhaps the name of Hermione Granger will be remembered as his companion, if you prove worthy of it in your day. For this I tell you true: never will you find more glory on your own, than in Harry Potter's company."

Hermione shook her head rapidly. "But that's *not*—" She'd known she wouldn't be able to explain. "It's not about *glory*, it's about being—something that belongs to someone else!"

"So you think you would rather be the hero?" The old wizard sighed. "Miss Granger, I have *been* a hero, and a leader; and I would have been a thousand times happier if I could have belonged to someone like Harry Potter. Someone made of sterner stuff than I, to make the hard decisions, and yet worthy to lead me. I thought, once, that I knew such a man, but I was mistaken... Miss Granger, you have no idea at *all* how fortunate are those like you, compared to heroes."

The hot burning feeling was creeping up her throat again, along with helplessness, she didn't understand why Professor McGonagall had brought her here if the Headmaster wasn't going to help, and from a glance at Professor McGonagall's face, it looked like Professor McGonagall also wasn't sure now that it had been a good idea.

"I don't want to be a hero," said Hermione Granger, "I don't want to be a hero's companion, I just want to be *me*."

(The thought came to her a few seconds later that maybe she *did* in fact want to be a hero, but she decided not to change what she'd said.)

"Ah," said the old wizard. "That is a tall order, Miss Granger." Dumbledore rose from his throne, stepped out behind his desk, and pointed to a symbol on the wall, so ubiquitous that Hermione's eyes had glossed right over it; a faded shield on which was inscribed the heraldry of Hogwarts, the lion and snake, and badger and raven, and in Latin engraved words whose point she'd never understood. Then, as she realized where that shield was, and how old it looked, it suddenly occurred to Hermione

that this might be the *original*—

“A Hufflepuff would say,” said Dumbledore, tapping his finger on the faded badger and making Hermione wince for the sacrilege (if it *was* the original), “that people fail to become who they are meant to be, because they are too lazy to put in all the work involved. A Ravenclaw,” tapping the raven, “would repeat those words that the wise know to be far older than Socrates, *know thyself*, and say that people fail to become who they are meant to be, through ignorance and lack of thought. And Salazar Slytherin,” Dumbledore frowned as his finger tapped the faded snake, “why, he said that we become who we are meant to be by following our desires wherever they lead. Perhaps he would say that people fail to become themselves because they refuse to do what is necessary to achieve their ambitions. But then one notes that nearly all of the Dark Wizards to come out of Hogwarts have been Slytherins. Did they become what they were meant to be? I think not.” Dumbledore’s finger tapped the lion, and then he turned toward her. “Tell me, Miss Granger, what would a Gryffindor say? I do not need to ask whether the Sorting Hat offered you that House.”

It didn’t seem like a hard question. “A Gryffindor would say that people don’t become who they should be, because they’re afraid.”

“Most people *are* afraid, Miss Granger,” said the old wizard. “They live their whole lives circumscribed by crippling fear that cuts off everything they might accomplish, everything they might become. Fear of saying or doing the wrong thing, fear of losing their mere possessions, fear of death, and above all the fear of what other people will think of them. Such fear is a most terrible thing, Miss Granger, and it is terribly important to know that. But it is not what Godric Gryffindor would have said. People become who they are meant to be, Miss Granger, by doing what is right.” The old wizard’s voice was gentle. “So tell me, Miss Granger, what seems to you like the *right* choice? For *that* is who you truly are, and wherever that path leads, that is who you are meant to become.”

There was a long space filled with the sounds of things that could not be counted.

She thought about it, because she was a Ravenclaw.

“I don’t *think* it’s right,” Hermione said slowly, “for someone to have

to live inside someone else's shadow like that..."

"Many things in the world are not right," said the old wizard, "the question is what is right for *you* to do about them. Hermione Granger, I shall be less subtle than is usual for a mysterious old wizard, and tell you outright that you cannot *imagine* how badly things could go if the events surrounding Harry Potter turn to ill. His quest is a matter you would not even *dream* of walking away from, if you knew."

"*What* quest?" said Hermione. Her voice was trembling, because it was very clear what answer the Headmaster was looking for and she didn't want to give it. "What *happened* to Harry back then, *why* was Fawkes on his shoulder?"

"He grew up," said the old wizard. His eyes blinked several times, beneath the half-moon glasses, and his face suddenly looked very lined. "You see, Miss Granger, people do not grow up because of time, people grow up when they are placed in grownup situations. That is what happened to Harry Potter that Saturday. He was told—you are not to share this information with anyone, you understand—he was told that he would have to fight someone. I cannot tell you who. I cannot tell you why. But that is what happened to him, and why he needs his friends."

There was a pause.

"*Bellatrix Black?*" Hermione said. She couldn't have been more shocked if someone had plugged an electrical cord into her ear. "You're going to make Harry fight *Bellatrix Black?*"

"No," said the old wizard. "Not her. I cannot tell you who, or why."

She thought about it some more.

"Is there any way I can *keep up* with Harry?" said Hermione. "I mean, I'm not saying it's what I'll *do*, but—if he needs friends then can we be *equal* friends? Can I be a hero too?"

"Ah," said the old wizard, and smiled. "Only you can decide that, Miss Granger."

"But you're not going to help me like you're helping Harry."

The old wizard shook his head. "I have helped him little enough, Miss Granger. And if you are asking me for a quest—" The old wizard smiled again, rather wryly. "Miss Granger, you are in your first year of Hogwarts. Do not be too eager to grow up; there will be time enough for that later."

"I'm twelve. Harry's *eleven*."

"Harry Potter is special," said the old wizard. "As you know, Miss Granger." The blue eyes were suddenly piercing beneath the half-moon glasses, and she was reminded of the day of the Dementor when Dumbledore's voice had said, inside her mind, that he knew about Harry's dark side.

Hermione put up her hand and touched Professor McGonagall's hand, which had stayed strong on her shoulder this whole time, and Hermione said, she was surprised that her voice didn't break, "I'd like to go, now, please."

"Of course," said Professor McGonagall, and Hermione felt the hand on her shoulder gently turning her around to face the oaken door.

"Have you chosen your path yet, Hermione Granger?" said Albus Dumbledore's voice from behind her, even as the door slowly creaked open to reveal the Enchantment of the Endless Stair.

She nodded.

"And?"

"I'll," she said, her voice stuck, "I'll, I'll—"

She swallowed.

"I'll do—what's right—"

She didn't say anything else, she couldn't, and then the Endless Stair began revolving around her once again.

Neither she nor Professor McGonagall spoke on the way down.

When the Flowing Stone gargoyles stepped out of their way, and the two of them stepped out into the corridors of Hogwarts, Professor McGonagall finally spoke, and she said in a whisper, "I'm so terribly sorry, Miss Granger. I did not think the Headmaster would say such things to you. I think he truly has forgotten what it is like to be a child."

Hermione glanced back up to her and saw that Professor McGonagall looked like *she* was about to burst into tears... only not really, but there was a tightness in her face that was like that.

"If I want to be a hero too," said Hermione, "if I've decided to be a hero too, is there anything *you* can do to help?"

Professor McGonagall rapidly shook her head, and said, "Miss Granger, I'm not sure the Headmaster is wrong about *that*. You *are* twelve."

“Okay,” said Hermione.

They walked forward a bit.

“Excuse me,” said Hermione, “is it okay if I walk back to the Ravenclaw tower by myself? I’m sorry, it’s not your fault or anything, I just want to be by myself right now.”

“Of course, Miss Granger,” said Professor McGonagall, her voice sounding a little hoarse, and Hermione heard her footsteps stop, and then turn around behind her.

Hermione Granger walked away.

She climbed a flight of stairs, and then another, wondering if there was anyone else in Hogwarts who would give her a chance to be a hero. Professor Flitwick would say the same thing as Professor McGonagall, and even if he didn’t, he probably couldn’t help, Hermione didn’t know who *could* help. Well, Professor Quirrell would come up with something clever if she used up enough Quirrell points, but she had a feeling that asking him would be a bad idea—that the Defense Professor couldn’t help anyone become the sort of hero that was worth becoming, and that he wouldn’t even understand the difference.

She had almost gotten to the Ravenclaw tower when she saw the flash of gold.

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

SELF ACTUALIZATION, PART IV

It was out of the corner of her eye that Hermione Granger saw it, a reflection on the polished metal of a statue at the junction of two corridors, a flash of gold, a flash of red, something like an image of fire; just for a moment she saw it, and then it was gone.

She paused, puzzled, and she *almost* walked away, but there had been something familiar about that brief glow—

Hermione walked forward to where the statue had stood, looked at the corridor from which she thought the fiery reflection might have come.

Faintly, as though from a faraway place, she heard the cry, the call.

Hermione started to run.

She ran for a while; whenever she got to a junction she would pause, catch as much breath as she could, and then she would see a flash of fire reflected from one direction or another, or hear that distant call. If it hadn't been for her army training she would've fallen over in exhaustion, running like that.

She never saw the phoenix.

And then she came to a four-way branch and there was *nothing*, no sign, she waited for long seconds and she heard no cry and saw no fire, and she was only just starting to wonder with a sick sad feeling if she'd imagined the whole thing, when she heard a *person* cry out.

When her rapidly racing feet turned the corner her mind took in the whole scene at a glance, three huge boys in green-trimmed robes already turning to look at her, and one shorter and smaller boy in yellow, who was dangling in the air from one foot held up high by an invisible hand.

The Sunshine General didn't even think about it, people who stopped to think didn't spring very good ambushes.

Her wand was in her hand, her fingers did the twist and her lips said "*Somnium!*" and the largest bully fell over, the Hufflepuff boy dropped out of the air with a *thump* and the other two bullies were trying to aim their wands at her and she said "*Somnium!*" again and another huge boy keeled over—the one who'd been aiming his wand faster, that was who she'd fired at.

Unfortunately casting two Sleep Hexes in a row like that was hard even for her, and she couldn't get off a third before—

The last bully shouted "*Protego!*" and was surrounded by a shimmering blue glow.

Twenty-four hours ago, Hermione would have panicked at that, a *real* Shielding Charm would let the bully-boy cast spells on her even while he was protected.

Now she—

"*Stupefy!*" shouted the bully-boy.

The crimson bolt blasted toward her with a terrible brilliance, blazing far brighter than any hex that had sprung from Harry's wand.

Hermione swayed slightly to the left, and the bolt missed, because the bully's *aim* hadn't been nearly as good as Harry's; and the thought came to her that maybe bullies and Professor Quirrell's armies didn't mix.

"*Stupefy!*" shouted the bully-boy again. "*Expelliarmus! Stupefy!*"

Anyway, *now* she'd just spent a whole hour thinking of all the *other* spells she could've cast on Harry and Neville—

"*Jellyfy!*" yelled the bully-boy, a wide-beam jinx with no visible bolt to dodge, and her knees suddenly felt almost too weak to support her. And then, with an angry roar producing an even brighter blaze of crimson, "*Stupefy!*"

She dodged that one by deliberately falling, and by then she'd recovered enough for her next spell, which was—

"*Glisseo,*" said Hermione, directing her remark to the floor.

"Oof," said the bully-boy as his feet went out from under him and *he actually dropped his wand*.

The *Protego* winked out.

"*Somnium*," said Hermione.

She was still breathing in gasps as she crawled over to where the Hufflepuff boy was sitting up, and groaning and rubbing his skull where he'd been dropped head-first into the floor; it was a good thing he hadn't been a Muggle, Hermione realized, or he might have snapped his neck. She hadn't actually thought of that.

"Uh," said the boy, his hair was of a color that would've been called 'brunette' if he was a girl, his eyes an undistinguished brown that somehow seemed just right for Hufflepuff, there weren't any tears on his face but he looked sort of pale. She pegged him at about fourth year, or third.

Then the brown eyes widened as he focused on her. "*General Sunshine?*"

"Yeah," she said. "That's (*gasp*) me." If the Hufflepuff boy said anything about her being Harry Potter's love interest, she decided, he was going to die.

"Wow," said the Hufflepuff boy. "That was—you just—I mean I saw you on the screens before Christmas but—wow! I can't believe you just did that!"

There was a pause.

I can't believe I just did that, thought Hermione Granger, who was feeling a little faint all of a sudden, it must have been all that running. "Excuse (*gasp*) me," she said, "can you (*gasp*) Unjellyfy my legs?"

The boy nodded, pushed himself to his feet, and reached inside his robes for his wand; but Hermione had to correct his gesture before the counter-Jinx worked right.

"I'm Michael Hopkins," said the boy once Hermione had rolled back to her own feet. He stuck out his hand. "Or just Mike inside Hufflepuff, there aren't any other Mikes in all of Hufflepuff this year, would you believe it?"

They shook hands, and Mike said, "Anyway, *thank you*."

Hermione wasn't prepared for the rush of euphoria that hit her then, saving someone like that literally felt better than anything she'd ever felt in her *whole life*.

She turned to look at the bullies.

They were very big and they looked, she thought, around fifteen years old, and she was suddenly realizing just how *large* a difference had sprung up between Hogwarts students who'd signed up for all of Professor Quirrell's extra-curricular activities, and students who'd had years of being taught by the worst Professors ever to go Professing. Being able to *hit* things that you aimed at, for example; or being able to think well enough in the middle of a fight to realize that you ought to *Innervate* your fallen allies. And other things Professor Quirrell had said, like that in the real world almost any fight would be settled by a surprise attack, suddenly made a lot more sense to her.

Still trying to catch her breath, she looked back at Mike.

"Would you (*gasp*) believe," said Hermione Granger, "that five minutes ago I was (*gasp*) having trouble figuring out how to become a (*gasp*) hero?"

Had she really thought she needed *permission* from someone, or that heroes sat around waiting for someone else to give them quests? It was very simple actually, you just went where the evil was, that was all it ever took to be a hero. She should've remembered, she shouldn't have needed a phoenix to tell her, that bad things sometimes happened right here in Hogwarts.

Then Hermione glanced nervously back at where the three older boys were lying unconscious as the realization hit that they'd *seen* her, they might *know* who she was, they might sneak up on her and take *her* by surprise and—and they could really hurt her—

Hermione stopped.

She remembered that Harry Potter had put himself in the middle of *five* Slytherin bullies on the first day of class when he hadn't even known how to use his wand.

She remembered the Headmaster saying that you grew up by being put in grownup situations, and that most people lived their lives inside a constraining circle of fear.

And she remembered Professor McGonagall's voice saying, 'You *are* twelve.'

Hermione took a deep breath, once, twice, and three times.

She asked Mike if he needed to go to Madam Pomfrey's office, which he didn't; and got him to tell her the names of the Slytherin boys, just in case.

And then Hermione Granger strolled away from the heap of unconscious bullies, making sure to put a smile on her face as she walked.

She knew that she was probably going to get hurt sooner or later. But if you were too scared of getting hurt to do what was right, then you couldn't be a hero, it was as simple as that; and if you'd put the Sorting Hat on her head at that moment it wouldn't have waited even *one second* before calling out 'GRYFFINDOR!'

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She was still thinking about it when she came down to dinner; the euphoria of saving someone still hadn't worn off, and she was beginning to worry that it had broken something in her brain.

As she approached the Ravenclaw table a sudden epidemic of whispers broke out, and Hermione wondered if the Hufflepuff boy had said anything yet before she realized that the whispers probably weren't about *that*.

She sat down across from Harry Potter who looked *extremely* nervous, probably because she was still smiling.

"Uh—" said Harry, as she served herself freshly toasted bread, butter, cinnamon, no fruits or vegetables whatsoever, and three helpings of chocolate brownies. "Uh—"

She let him go on like that until she'd finished pouring herself a glass of grapefruit juice, and then she said, "I've got a question for you, Mr. Potter. How do you think people fail to become themselves?"

"*What?*" said Harry.

She looked at him. "Pretend there isn't all this stuff going on," she said, "and just say whatever you'd have said yesterday."

"Um..." Harry said, looking very confused and worried. "I think we already *are* ourselves... it's not like I'm an imperfect copy of someone else. But I guess if I try to run with the sense of the question, then I'd say that

people don't become themselves because we absorb all this crazy stuff from the environment and then regurgitate it. I mean, how many people playing Quidditch would be playing a game like that if they'd invented the game themselves? Or back in Muggle Britain, how many people who think of themselves as Labour or Conservative or Liberal Democrat would invent that exact bundle of political beliefs if they had to come up with everything themselves?"

Hermione considered this. She'd been wondering if Harry would say something Slytherin or maybe even Gryffindor, but this didn't seem to fit into the Headmaster's list; and it occurred to Hermione that there might be a lot more viewpoints on the subject than just four.

"Okay," said Hermione, "different question. What makes someone a hero?"

"A *hero*?" said Harry.

"Yeah," said Hermione.

"Ah..." Harry said. His fork and knife nervously sawed at a piece of steak, cutting it into tinier and tinier pieces. "I think a lot of people can do things when the world channels them into it... like people are expecting you to do it, or it only uses skills you already know, or there's an authority watching to catch your mistakes and make sure you do your part. But problems like that are probably already being solved, you know, and then there's no need for heroes. So I think the people we call 'heroes' are rare because they've got to make everything up as they go along, and most people aren't comfortable with that. Why do you ask?" Harry's fork stabbed three pieces of thoroughly shredded steak and lifted them up to his mouth.

"Oh, I just stunned three older Slytherin bullies and rescued a Hufflepuff," said Hermione. "I'm going to be a hero."

When Harry had finished choking on his food (some of the other Ravenclaws in hearing distance were still coughing) he said, "*What?*"

Hermione told the story, it began rippling out in further whispers even as she spoke. (Though she left out the part about the phoenix, because that seemed like a private thing between the two of them. Hermione had felt surprised, thinking about it afterward, that a phoenix would appear for someone who *wanted* to be a hero; it seemed a bit selfish when

she thought about it that way; but maybe it didn't matter to phoenixes so long as they saw that you were willing to help people.)

When she was done talking, Harry stared at her across the table and didn't say a word.

"I'm sorry for how I acted earlier," Hermione said. She sipped from her glass of grapefruit juice. "I should've remembered that if I'm still beating the pants off you in Charms class then it's okay for you to do better in Defense."

"Please don't take this the wrong way," said Harry. He looked too-adult now, and grim. "But are you sure this is who *you* are, and not, to put it bluntly, me?"

"I'm quite certain," said Hermione. "Why, my name practically spells out 'heroine' except for the extra 'm', I never noticed that until today."

"Being a hero isn't all fun and games," said Harry. "Not real heroing, the sort grownups have to do, it isn't like this, it isn't going to be this easy."

"I know," said Hermione.

"It's hard and it's painful and you've got to make decisions where there isn't any good answer—"

"Yes, Harry, I read those books too."

"No," said Harry, "you don't understand, even if the books warn you there's no way you *can* understand until—"

"That doesn't stop you," said Hermione. "It doesn't stop you even a little. I bet you never even *considered* not being a hero because of that. So why d'you think it'll stop me?"

There was a pause.

A sudden huge smile lit Harry's face, a smile that was as bright and as boyish as the frown had been grim and adult, and everything was all right again between them.

"This is going to go horribly mind-bogglingly wrong somehow," said Harry, still smiling hugely. "You know that, right?"

"Oh, I know," said Hermione. She ate another bite of toast. "That reminds me, Dumbledore refused to be my mysterious old wizard, is there someplace I can write to get another one?"

AFTERMATH:

"...and Professor Flitwick says her determination seems unshakeable," Minerva said tightly, staring at the silver-bearded old wizard who was responsible for this. Albus Dumbledore was just sitting silently and listening to her with a distant sad look in his eyes. "Miss Granger didn't even blink when Professor Flitwick threatened to have her transferred to Gryffindor, just said that if she left she would take all the books with her. Hermione Granger has decided she's going to be a hero and she's not taking no for an answer. I doubt you could have pushed her into this any harder if you had *tried* to—"

It took all of five full seconds for Minerva's brain to process the realization.

"ALBUS!" she shrieked.

"My dear," said the old wizard, "after you have dealt with your thirtieth hero or so, you will realize that they react quite predictably to certain things; such as being told that they are too young, or that they are not destined to be heroes, or that being a hero is unpleasant; and if you truly wish to be sure you should tell them all three. Although," with a brief sigh, "it does not do to be *too* blatant, or your Deputy Headmistress might catch you."

"Albus," Minerva said, her voice even tighter, "if she is hurt, I swear this time I'll—"

"She would have come to that same place in due time," Albus said, the distant sad look still in his eyes. "If someone is meant to become a hero then they will not listen to our warnings, Minerva, no matter how hard we try. And given that, it is better for Harry if Miss Granger does not fall too far behind him." Albus produced, as though from nowhere, a tin which flipped open to reveal small yellow lumps, she'd never been able to figure out where he kept it and she'd never been able to detect the magic involved. "Lemon drop?"

"She is a twelve-year-old girl, Albus!"

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AFTERAFTERMATH:

Within the windows, barely visible in the evening gloom, fishes swam in the black waters; illuminated by the bright shine of the Slytherin common room as they came closer, fading into darkness as they swam away.

Daphne Greengrass was sitting in a comfortable black leather couch, her head collapsed into her hands, glowing golden-yellowish as bright sparks of white light winked in and out of existence around her.

She'd been ready to be teased about liking Neville Longbottom. She'd been expecting to hear a lot of snide remarks about Hufflepuffs. She'd thought of whole *reams* of snappy comebacks for it while she was on the way back to the Slytherin dungeons.

She'd been looking *forward* to being teased about liking Neville. Being teased about that sort of thing meant you'd grown up into a real girl.

As it turned out, nobody had worked out that her challenging Neville to a Most Ancient Duel meant that she liked him. She'd thought it would be *obvious* but no, nobody else had even thought of that apparently.

It was always the hex you didn't see that hit you.

She should've just called herself Daphne of Sunshine, like Neville of Chaos. Or Sunny Daphne like Sunny Ron. Or *anything* except Greengrass of Sunshine.

Greengrass of Sunshine.

It had gone from there to Greengrass of Sunshine and Blue Skies.

Then someone had added Snow-Topped Mountains and Frolicking Woodland Creatures.

Currently she was being referred to as the Sparkly Unicorn Princess of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Sparklypoo.

And some cursed sixth-year girl had hit her with a Sparkling Jinx, she hadn't even known there *was* such a thing as a Sparkling Jinx, and *Finite Incantatem* hadn't worked, and she'd asked older girls who she'd *thought* were her friends (she had apparently been wrong about this) and then she'd threatened the caster with grievous political mayhem wreaked by

her father and nonetheless Daphne Greengrass was still sitting in the Slytherin common room with her head in her hands, sparkling brightly and wondering how she'd ended up as the only sane person in Hogwarts.

It was *after dinnertime* and they were *still at it* and if they didn't stop by tomorrow morning she was going to transfer to Durmstrang and become the next Dark Lady.

"Hey, everyone!" said the Carrow twins dramatically, waving an issue of the *Daily Prophet*. "Did you hear the news? The Wizengamot just ruled that 'let's see what you got' constitutes a lawful challenge to be fought until the challenger lies down and has a nap!"

"How dare you insult the honor of the Sparkly Unicorn Princess!" shouted Tracey. "Let's see what you got!" Then Tracey lay down flat on her sofa and started snoring loudly.

Daphne's sparkling head sank further into her glowing hands. "After my family takes over I'm going to have you all put under anti-Apparition jinxes and Flooed into the sea," she said to no one in particular. "You're all okay with that, right?"

Thunk-thunk, thunk-thunk-thunk, thunk.

Daphne looked up, surprised; that was a Sunshine code-signal—

"*I hight someone knocking!*" bellowed Mr. Goyle. "*Knocking of the door!*"

"*Let's see what you've got, door!*" shouted an older boy near the door, and yanked the door open.

There was a moment of complete surprise.

"I've come to have a word with Miss Greengrass," said the Sunshine General, sounding like she was trying to sound confident. "Could someone please—"

From the look on Hermione's face she had just noticed Daphne sparkling.

And *that* was when Millicent Bulstrode raced up from the lower dorms and shouted, "Hey, everyone, guess what, now *Granger* went and beat up Derrick and what's left of his crew, and his father owled him and said that if he didn't—"

Millicent caught sight of Hermione standing in the doorway.

There was a very loud silence.

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SELF ACTUALIZATION IV

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“Uh,” said Daphne. *What?* said her brain. “Uh, what’re you doing here, General?”

“Well,” said Hermione Granger with a strange smile on her face, “I’ve decided it’s not fair if mysterious old wizards give some people a chance to be heroes and not others, and also I’ve read history books and there aren’t nearly enough girl heroes in them. So I thought I’d just drop by and see if you wanted to be a hero and why are you glowing like that?”

There was another silence.

“This,” said Daphne, “was probably *not* the best time to ask me that question—”

“*I’ll take it!*” shouted Tracey Davis, leaping off her sofa.

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And thus was born the Society for the Promotion of Heroic Equality for Witches.

CHAPTER SEVENTY

SELF ACTUALIZATION, PART V

Even if you had been the Deputy Headmistress for three decades, and a Transfiguration Professor before that, it was rare that you saw Albus Dumbledore caught completely flatfooted.

“...Susan Bones, Lavender Brown, and Daphne Greengrass,” Minerva finished. “I should also note, Albus, that Miss Granger’s account of your seemingly unsupportive attitude—I believe her phrase was ‘he said I should be happy to be just a sidekick’—has generated a good deal of *interest* among the older girls. Several of whom came to me to ask if Miss Granger’s accusations were true, since Miss Granger had said that I was there.”

The old wizard leaned back in his huge chair, still gazing at her, his eyes looking rather abstracted beneath the half-moon glasses.

“It placed me in something of a dilemma, Albus,” said Professor McGonagall. Her face stayed quite neutral, she made sure of that. “I now know that you did not truly mean to discourage the girl. Quite the opposite, in fact. But you and Severus have often told me that to keep a secret I must give no sign that differs from the reaction of someone truly ignorant. Thus I had no choice but to confirm that Miss Granger’s account was accurate, and feign the appropriate degree of worry, with a slight overtone of offense. After all, had I *not* known you were deliberately manipulating Miss Granger, I might have been rather put out.”

“I... see,” the old wizard said slowly. His hands toyed absently with his silver beard, small quick gestures.

"Thankfully," Professor McGonagall continued, "so far Professors Sinistra and Vector are the only two faculty members to don Miss Granger's buttons."

"Buttons?" repeated the old wizard.

Minerva drew forth a small silver disc bearing the initials SPHEW, laid it on Albus's desk, and gave it a brief tap with her finger.

And the voices of Hermione Granger, Padma Patil, Parvati Patil, Lavender Brown, Susan Bones, Hannah Abbott, Daphne Greengrass, and Tracey Davis cried out in unison, "*We won't settle for second best, it's time to give a witch a quest!*"

"Miss Granger is selling them for two Sickles, and tells me that she has so far sold fifty of them. I believe that Nymphadora Tonks, in seventh-year Hufflepuff, is enchanting them for her. To conclude my report," Professor McGonagall said briskly, "our eight newly minted heroines have asked permission to conduct a protest outside the entrance to your office."

"I hope," Albus said, frowning, "you explained to them that—"

"I explained to them that Wednesday at 7PM would be fine," said Minerva. She took back the button from the Headmaster's desk, favored Albus with a honeyed smile, and turned to the door.

"Minerva?" said the old wizard from behind her. "*Minerva!*"

The oaken door shut solidly behind her.

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There wasn't a lot of room between the brief stone walls that demarcated the vestibule to the Headmaster's office, so although a lot of people had wanted to watch the protest, not many had been allowed to come. Just Professor Sinistra and Professor Vector, who were wearing the buttons, and the prefects Penelope Clearwater and Rose Brown and Jacqueline Preece, who were wearing the buttons. Behind *them*, Professor McGonagall and Professor Sprout and Professor Flitwick, who weren't wearing the buttons, scrutinizing the whole affair. Harry Potter and the Head Boy of Hogwarts were there, and the boy prefects Percy Weasley and Oliver

Beatson, all wearing the buttons to show Solidarity. And of course the eight founding members of SPHEW, forming a picket line next to the gargoyles with their signs. Hermione's own sign, attached to a solid wooden handle which seemed to weigh heavier and heavier in her hands as the seconds passed, said NOBODY'S SIDEKICK.

And Professor Quirrell, who was leaning with his back against the far stone wall and watching with unreadable eyes. The Defense Professor had gotten one of her buttons, though she'd never sold one to him; and he wasn't wearing it, but idly tossing it with one hand.

This whole idea had seemed like a much better idea four days ago, when the fires of her indignation had been burning fresh and hot, and she'd been facing the prospect of doing it all four days *later* instead of *right now*.

But she had to carry on, because that was what heroes did, they carried on, and also because it had seemed infinitely too awful to tell everyone she was calling it off. Hermione wondered how much heroism had gone on for reasons like that. Most books didn't say "And then they refused to give up, no matter how sensible it would have been, because that would've been too embarrassing"; but a great deal of history made a lot more sense that way.

At 7:15pm, Professor McGonagall had told her, Headmaster Dumbledore would come down and talk to them for a couple of minutes. Professor McGonagall had said not to be frightened—the Headmaster was a good person deep down, and they'd properly gotten the school's authorization for the protest.

But Hermione was very very aware that even if she was doing it with signed permission, she was still Defying Authority.

After she'd decided to be a hero, Hermione had done the obvious thing, and gone to the Hogwarts library and taken out books on how to be a hero. Then she'd returned those books back to their shelves, because it'd been patently obvious that none of the authors had been actual heroes themselves. Instead she'd just read five times over, until she'd memorized every word, the thirty inches by Godric Gryffindor that was all his autobiography and his life's advice. (Or the English translation, anyway; she couldn't read Latin yet.) Godric Gryffindor's autobiography

had been a lot more *compressed* than the books Hermione was used to reading, he used *one sentence* to say things that should've taken thirty inches just by themselves, and then there was *another* sentence after that...

But it was clear from what she'd read that, while Defying Authority wasn't the *point* of being a hero, you couldn't be a hero if you were too scared to do it. And Hermione Granger knew by now how others saw her, and she knew what other people thought she couldn't do.

Hermione hefted her picket sign a little higher and concentrated on breathing slowly and rhythmically instead of hyperventilating until she fell over.

"Really?" said Miss Preece in a tone of undisguised fascination. "They couldn't *vote*?"

"Indeed," said Professor Sinistra. (The Astronomy Professor's hair was still dark, and her dark face only slightly lined; Hermione *would* have guessed her age at around seventy, except—) "I quite remember my mother's rejoicing when they announced the Qualification of Women Act, although she did not actually qualify." (Which meant that Professor Sinistra had been around her Muggle family in 1918.) "And that wasn't the worst of it. Why, just a few centuries earlier—"

Thirty seconds later all the non-Muggleborns, male and female both, were staring at Professor Sinistra with utterly shocked expressions. Hannah had dropped her sign.

"And *that* wasn't the worst of it either, not by half," finished Professor Sinistra. "But you see where this sort of thing could potentially lead."

"Merlin preserve us," said Penelope Clearwater in a strangled voice. "You mean *that's* how men would treat us if we didn't have wands to defend ourselves?"

"Hey!" said one of the boy prefects. "*That's* not—"

There was a short, sardonic laugh from the direction of Professor Quirrell. When Hermione turned her head to look she saw that the Defense Professor was still idly toying with the button, not bothering to glance up at the rest of them, as he said, "Such is human nature, Miss Clearwater. Rest assured that *you* would be no kinder, if witches had wands and men lacked them."

"I hardly think so!" snapped Professor Sinistra.

A cold chuckle. "I suspect it happens more often than any dare suggest, in the proudest pureblood families. Some lonely witch spies a handsome Muggle; and thinks how very easy it would be, to slip the man a love potion, and by him be adored alone and utterly. And since she knows he can offer her no resistance, why, it is only natural for her to take from him whatever she pleases—"

"*Professor Quirrell!*" said Professor McGonagall sharply.

"I'm sorry," Professor Quirrell said mildly, his eyes still looking down on the button in his hand, "are we all still pretending it doesn't happen? My apologies, then."

Professor Sinistra snapped, "And I suppose that wizards don't—"

"There are *children* present, Professors!" Again Professor McGonagall.

"Some do," Professor Quirrell said equably, as though discussing the weather. "Although personally, I don't."

There was a bit of silence, for a time. Hermione put up her sign again—it had slipped down to her shoulder while she was listening. She'd never thought of that, not even a little, and now she was trying *not* to think of it, and her stomach was feeling a bit queasy. She looked in Harry Potter's direction, not quite knowing why she did; and she saw that Harry's face was perfectly still. A chill ran down her spine before she looked away, not quite fast enough to miss the small nod that Harry gave her, as though they were agreeing on something.

"To be fair," Professor Sinistra said after a while, "since I received my Hogwarts letter I can't recall encountering any prejudice on account of being a woman, or colored. No, now it is all for being a Muggleborn. I believe Miss Granger said that it was *just* with heroes that she found a problem, so far?"

It took Hermione a moment to recognize that she'd been asked the question, and then she said "Yes," in a tone that squeaked a little. This whole thing had blown up a bit larger than she'd imagined when she'd started it.

"What exactly did you check, Miss Granger?" said Professor Vector. She looked older than Professor Sinistra, her hair starting to gray a little;

Hermione hadn't ever come close to Professor Vector in person until the Arithmancy Professor had asked her for a button.

"Um," Hermione said, her voice a little high, "I checked the history books and there's been as many woman Ministers of Magic as men. Then I looked at Supreme Mugwumps and there were a few more wizards than witches but not many. But if you look at people like famous Dark Wizard hunters, or people who've stopped invasions of Dark creatures, or people who've overthrown Dark Lords—"

"And the Dark Wizards themselves, of course," said Professor Quirrell. Now the Defense Professor had looked up. "You may add that to your list, Miss Granger. Among all the suspected Death Eaters we know of only two sorceresses, Bellatrix Black and Alecko Carrow. And I daresay that most wizards would be hard-pressed to name a single Dark Lady besides Baba Yaga."

Hermione just stared at him.

He couldn't *possibly* be—

"Professor Quirrell," said Professor Vector, "what exactly are you implying?"

The Defense Professor raised the button so that the golden-lettered SPHEW faced them, and said, "Heroes," then turned the button to show its silver backside and said, "Dark Wizards. They are similar career paths followed by similar people, and one can hardly ask why young witches are turning away from one course without considering its reflection."

"Oh, now I see!" said Tracey Davis, speaking up so suddenly that Hermione gave a small startle. "You're joining our protest because you're worried that not enough girls are becoming Dark Witches!" Then Tracey giggled, which Hermione couldn't have managed at this point if you paid her a million pounds sterling.

There was a half-smile on Professor Quirrell's face as he replied, "Not really, Miss Davis. In truth I do not care about that sort of thing in the slightest. But it is futile to count the witches among Ministers of Magic and other such ordinary folk leading ordinary existences, when Grindelwald and Dumbledore and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named were all men." The Defense Professor's fingers idly spun the button, turning it over and over. "Then again, only a very few folk ever do anything interesting with

their lives. What does it matter to you if *they* are mostly witches or mostly wizards, so long as *you* are not among them? And I suspect you will not be among them, Miss Davis; for although you are ambitious, you have no ambition."

"*That's not true!*" said Tracey indignantly. "And what's it mean?"

Professor Quirrell straightened from where he had been leaning against the wall. "You were Sorted into Slytherin, Miss Davis, and I expect that you will grasp at any opportunity for advancement which falls into your hands. But there is no great ambition that you are driven to accomplish, and you will not *make* your opportunities. At best you will grasp your way upward into Minister of Magic, or some other high position of unimportance, never breaking the bounds of your existence."

Then Professor Quirrell's gaze shifted away from Tracey, he was looking at *her*, the pale blue eyes staring at her with an awful intensity—"Tell me, Miss Granger. Do *you* have an ambition?"

"Professor—" squeaked the high stern voice of Professor Flitwick, and then her Head of House's voice cut off, and from the side of her vision Hermione saw that Harry had laid his hand on Professor Flitwick's shoulder and was shaking his head, face looking very adult.

Hermione felt like a deer caught in headlights.

"What drove you to break your bounds, Miss Granger?" said the Defense Professor, still gazing directly at her. "Why is getting good marks in class no longer enough? Is it true greatness that you seek? Does some aspect of the world dissatisfy you, that you must remake according to your will? Or is this all merely a child's game to you? I will be quite disappointed if this is only about rivaling Harry Potter."

"I—" said Hermione, her voice so high-pitched it made a sort of peeping sound, but then she couldn't think of what else to say.

"You may take a moment to think, if you like," said Professor Quirrell. "Pretend it is a homework essay, six inches due Thursday. I hear you are quite eloquent in them."

Everyone was looking at her.

"I—" said Hermione. "I don't agree with one single thing you just said, anywhere."

"Well spoken," came Professor McGonagall's crisp voice.

Professor Quirrell's gaze did not waver. "That is not six inches, Miss Granger. *Something* drives you to defy the Headmaster's verdict and gather followers about yourself. Perhaps it is something you prefer not to speak aloud?"

Hermione knew the correct answer wouldn't impress Professor Quirrell, but it was the correct answer, so she said it. "I don't think you need ambition to be a hero," Hermione said. Her voice wavered but it didn't crack. "I think you just have to do what's right. And they're not my followers, we're friends."

Professor Quirrell leaned back against the wall again. The half-smile had faded from his face. "Most folk tell themselves they are doing right, Miss Granger. They do not thereby rise above the ordinary."

Hermione took a couple of deep breaths, trying to be brave. "It's not *about* being not ordinary," she said as stoutly as she could. "But I think if someone just tries to do what's right, over and over again, and they're not too lazy to do all the work it takes, and they think about what they're doing, and they're brave enough to do it even when they're scared—" Hermione paused for an instant, her eyes darting to Tracey and Daphne, "—and they cleverly plan how to do it—and they don't just do what other people do—then I think someone like that would already get into enough trouble."

Some of the girls and boys chuckled, as did Professor McGonagall, who looked wry and proud at the same time.

"You may be right about that," said the Defense Professor, his eyes half-lidded. He tossed Hermione the button, and she caught it without thinking. "My donation to your cause, Miss Granger. I understand that they are worth two Sickles."

The Defense Professor turned and walked away without another word.

"I thought I was going to faint!" gasped Hannah after his footsteps had faded, and she heard some of the other girls letting out their breath or putting down their signs for a moment.

"I do *too* have an ambition!" said Tracey, who seemed to be almost on the verge of tears. "I'm—I'm—I'll figure out what it is by tomorrow, but I have one, I'm sure!"

"If you really can't think of anything," Daphne said, giving Tracey a comforting pat on the shoulder, "just go with the oldie but goodie and try to take over the world."

"Hey!" said Susan sharply. "You're supposed to be heroes now! That means you have to be *good*!"

"No, it's all right," said Lavender, "I'm pretty sure General Chaos wants to take over the world and *he's* sort of a good guy."

More conversation was going on behind the picket line. "My goodness," said Penelope Clearwater. "I think that's the most *overtly* evil Defense Professor we've ever had."

Professor McGonagall coughed warningly, and the Head Boy said, "You weren't around for Professor Barney," which made several people twitch.

"Professor Quirrell just *talks* like that," said Harry Potter, though he sounded less certain than before. "I mean, think about it, he doesn't *do* anything like what Professor Snape does—"

"Mr. Potter," squeaked Professor Flitwick, voice polite and face stern, "why did you ask me to stay silent?"

"Professor Quirrell was testing Hermione to see if he wanted to be her mysterious old wizard," Harry said. "Which totally would not have worked out in any way, shape, or form, but she had to answer for herself."

Hermione blinked.

Then Hermione blinked again, as she realized that it was Professor Quirrell who was Harry Potter's mysterious old wizard, and not Dumbledore at all, and that *really wasn't a good sign*—

A rumbling noise filled the small stone vestibule, and Hermione, her nerves already on edge, spun rapidly around, almost dropping her protest sign as her other hand darted toward her wand.

The gargoyles were stepping aside, the Flowing Stone rumbling like rock as it moved like flesh. The huge ugly figures waited only briefly, dead gray eyes staring out in silent vigil. Then the great gargoyles folded their wings back into place and stepped back into their former positions, the Flowing Stone not changing its outward appearance at all as it returned from flexibility to motionlessness, and the brief gap in the stone of Hogwarts was solid once more.

And before them all, wearing robes of bright purple that probably only looked hideous if you were Muggleborn, stood the towering form of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, the vanquisher of the Dark Lord Grindelwald and protector of Britain, the rediscoverer of the fabled Twelve Uses of Dragon's Blood, the most powerful wizard alive; and he was looking at *her*, Hermione Jean Granger, General of the recently expanded Sunshine Regiment, who was getting the best grades in the first year of Hogwarts classes, and who had declared herself a heroine.

Even her *name* was shorter than his.

The Headmaster smiled benevolently at her, his wrinkle-lined eyes twinkling cheerfully beneath their half-circles of glass, and said, "Hello, Miss Granger."

The odd thing was that it wasn't nearly as scary as talking to Professor Quirrell. "Hello, Headmaster Dumbledore," Hermione said with only a slight quaver in her voice.

"Miss Granger," said Dumbledore, now looking more serious, "I think you and I may have had a bit of a misunderstanding. I did not mean to imply that you could not, or should not be a hero. I certainly did not mean to imply that witches in general should not be heroes. Only that you were... a bit young, to be thinking of such things."

Hermione, unable to help herself, glanced at Professor McGonagall and saw that Professor McGonagall was giving her an encouraging smile—or she was giving the two of them *some* kind of smile, anyway—so Hermione looked back at the Headmaster and said, the small quaver in her voice a little larger now, "Since you became Headmaster forty years ago, there've been eleven students to graduate Hogwarts who became heroes, I mean people like Lupe Cazaril and so on, and *ten* of those were boys. Cimorene Linderwall was the only witch."

"Hm," said the Headmaster. There was a thoughtful expression on his face; he at least *seemed* to be thinking about it. "Miss Granger, I have never been one for tallying such numbers. Often it is too much easier to count than to understand. Many good people have come out of Hogwarts, witches and wizards both; those famed as heroes are only one kind

of good person, and perhaps not the highest. You did not include Alice Longbottom or Lily Potter in your reckoning... But leave that aside. Tell me, Miss Granger, did you tally how many heroes came out of Hogwarts in the forty years before me? For in that time I can recall only three now called heroes; and among those three, no witches at all."

"I'm not trying to say it's *just* you!" Hermione said. "Only I think maybe a *lot* of people, like the Headmasters before you too, maybe even your whole society and everything, might be discouraging girls."

The old wizard sighed. His half-glasses eyes looked only at her, as though they were the only two people present. "Miss Granger, it might be possible to discourage witches from becoming Charms Mistresses, or Quidditch players, or even Aurors. But not heroes. If someone is meant to be a hero then a hero they will be. They will walk through fire and swim through ice. Dementors will not stop them, nor the deaths of friends, and not discouragement either."

"Well," Hermione said, and paused, struggling with the words. "Well, I mean... what if that's not *actually* true? I mean, to *me* it seems that if you want more witches to be heroes, you ought to teach them heroing."

"Many boys and girls are heroes in their dreams," Dumbledore said quietly. He did not look at any of the other girls, only at her. "Fewer in the waking world. Many have stood their ground and faced the darkness when it comes for them. Fewer come for the darkness and force it to face them. It is a hard life, sometimes lonely, often short. I have told none to refuse that calling, but neither would I wish to increase their number."

Hermione hesitated; there was something in the lined face that stopped her, like a hint to all the emotion that wasn't being displayed, years and years of it...

Maybe if there were more heroes, their lives wouldn't be so lonely, or so short.

She couldn't bring herself to say that, though, not to him.

"But the point is moot," said the old wizard. He smiled, a bit ruefully she thought. "Miss Granger, you cannot teach heroism like you would teach Charms. You cannot assign twelve inches on how to carry on when all hope seems lost. You cannot rehearse students on when to stand up and tell the Headmaster he has done wrong. Heroes are born, not taught. And for whatever reason, more of them are born boys than girls." The

Headmaster shrugged, as if to say that *he* was helpless to do anything about that.

“Um,” Hermione said. She couldn’t help it, she glanced behind her.

Professor Sinistra was looking a bit indignant. And it *wasn’t* true that everyone was staring at her like she’d just been silly, the way she’d started to imagine while she was listening to Dumbledore.

Hermione turned back to face Dumbledore again, took a deep breath, and said, “Well, maybe people who are going to be heroes, will be heroes no matter what. But I don’t see how anyone could really *know* that, aside from just saying it afterward. And when *I* told you that I wanted to be a hero, you weren’t very encouraging.”

“Mr. Potter,” the Headmaster said mildly. His eyes didn’t leave hers. “Please tell Miss Granger your impression of our own first meeting. Would you say that I was encouraging? Speak the truth.”

There was a pause.

“Mr. Potter?” said Professor Vector’s voice from behind her, sounding puzzled.

“Um,” Harry’s voice said from further back, sounding extremely reluctant. “Um... well, actually in my case the Headmaster set fire to a chicken.”

“He *what*?” Hermione blurted, only there were several other people exclaiming things at around the same time so she wasn’t sure anyone heard her.

Dumbledore went on gazing at her, looking perfectly serious.

“I didn’t know about Fawkes,” Harry’s voice said rapidly, “so he told me that Fawkes was a phoenix, while he was pointing to a chicken on Fawkes’s stand so I’d think *that* was Fawkes, and then he set the chicken on fire—and also he gave me this big rock and told me it had belonged to my father and I ought to carry it everywhere—”

“But that’s *crazy*!” Susan blurted out.

There was a sudden hush.

The Headmaster slowly turned his head to stare at Susan.

“I—” said Susan. “I mean—I—”

The Headmaster leaned down until he was face-to-face with the young girl.

“I didn’t—” said Susan.

Dumbledore put a finger to his lips and twiddled them, making a *bweeble-bweeble-bweeble* sound.

The Headmaster straightened up again and said, “Well, my good heroines, it has been pleasant speaking to you, but alas, much else remains to do this day. Still, rest assured that I am inscrutable at everyone, not just witches.”

The gargoyles stepped aside, the Flowing Stone rumbling like rock as it moved like flesh.

The huge ugly figures waited briefly with dead gray eyes staring out in silent vigil, as Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, smiling as benevolently as when he’d first emerged from his office, stepped back into the Enchantment of the Endless Stair.

Then the great gargoyles folded their wings back into place and stepped back into their former positions, only one last brief “Bwa-ha-ha!” echoing out before the gap closed.

There was a long silence.

“He *really* set a chicken on fire?” said Hannah.

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The eight of them had continued protesting even after that, but to be honest their heart had gone out of it.

It *had* been established, after some careful questions from Professor Flitwick, that Harry Potter hadn’t smelled the chicken burning. Which meant that it had probably been a pebble or something, Transfigured into a chicken and then enclosed in a Boundary Charm to make sure that no smoke escaped into the air—both Professor Flitwick and Professor McGonagall had been very emphatic about nobody trying that without their supervision.

But still...

But still... what?

Hermione didn’t even *know* but still what.

But *still*.

After a lot of glances exchanged between girls none of whom had wanted to be first to say it, Hermione had declared the protest over, and the adults and boys had drifted off.

"You don't think we were being unfair to Dumbledore, do you?" said Susan as the heroines walked away to the sound of eight pairs of feet trodding on the stone paving of Hogwarts's corridors. "I mean, if he *is* crazy at everyone and not just at witches then it's not discrimination, right?"

"I don't want to protest against the Headmaster any more," Hannah said weakly. The Hufflepuff girl seemed a bit unsteady on her feet. "I don't care what Professor McGonagall says about him not holding it against us, it's just too much for my nerves."

Lavender snorted. "I guess *you* won't be slaying armies of Inferi anytime soon—"

"Stop that!" Hermione said sharply. "Look, all of us have got to *learn* to be heroines, right? It's okay if someone doesn't know right away."

"The Headmaster doesn't think it *can* be learned," Padma said. The Ravenclaw girl's face was thoughtful, her steps measured as she strode through the corridor. "The Headmaster doesn't even think that's a good idea."

Daphne was striding with her back straight and her head held bolt upright, looking more like a Proper Young Lady in her Hogwarts robes than Hermione could have done with her best formal dress. "The Headmaster," Daphne said in a precise voice, her shoes making hard, sharp tacking sounds on the stone, "thinks the lot of us are a bunch of silly girls playing games, and that someday Hermione might make a good sidekick but the rest of us are hopeless."

"Is he *right*?" said Parvati. The Gryffindor girl's face was very serious, making her look much more like her twin than she usually did. "I mean it has to be asked—"

"No!" spat Tracey. The Slytherin girl was stalking through the hallway looking ready to *kill* someone, like a miniature female Snape. Of all the girls, Tracey was the one who Hermione knew least. Hermione had talked to Lavender once before, but she'd never really *seen* Tracey except at wandpoint during a battle, until the Slytherin had jumped up from her sofa to volunteer. "We'll show him! We'll show them *all*!"

"Okay," said Susan, "that was *definitely* evil—"

"No," said Lavender, "that's a Chaos Legion motto, actually. Only she didn't do the insane laughter."

"That's right," Tracey said, her voice low and grim. "This time I'm not laughing." The girl went on stalking through the corridor, like she had dramatic music accompanying her that only she could hear.

(Hermione was starting to worry about what *exactly* the impressionable youths of the Chaos Legion were learning from Harry Potter.)

"But—I mean—" Parvati said. She still had a contemplative look on her face. "I mean, you can see *why* the Headmaster would think we were just silly girls, right? What does protesting outside the Headmaster's office have to do with becoming heroines?"

"Huh," Lavender said, now looking thoughtful herself. "That's true. We should do something heroic. I mean heroic."

"Um—" said Hannah, which very much expressed Hermione's own feelings on the subject.

"Well," said Parvati, "has everyone already been through Dumbledore's third-floor forbidden corridor? I mean everyone in Gryffindor's been through it by now—"

"Hold *on!*" Hermione said desperately. "I don't want you doing anything *dangerous!*"

There was a pause while everyone looked at Hermione, who was realizing, much too late, why Dumbledore hadn't wanted anyone *else* to be a hero.

"I don't think you can become a heroine if you never do anything dangerous," Lavender observed reasonably.

"Besides," said Padma, a considering look on her face. "Everyone knows that nothing *really* bad ever happens in Hogwarts, right? To students, I mean, not to the Defense Professors. We've got all these ancient wards and so on."

"Um—" Hannah said again.

"Yeah," said Parvati, "the worst that can happen is that we'll lose a few dozen House points or something, and there's two of us from each House so *that'll* all come out even."

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CHAPTER 79

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“Why, that’s *brilliant*, Hermione!” said Daphne in a tone of great amazement. “The way you set it up means we can get away with *anything*! And I didn’t even notice your cunning plan until now!”

“UM—” said Hermione, Hannah, and Susan.

“Right!” said Parvati. “So now it’s time for us to become real heroines. We’ll come for the darkness—”

“And make *it* face *us*—” said Lavender.

“And teach it to be afraid,” Tracey Davis said grimly.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

SELF ACTUALIZATION,
PART VI

“Well,” Daphne whispered, keeping her voice as low as she could, “at least now I don’t feel like the only sane person in Hogwarts any more.”

“Because now you’ve got the rest of us as friends?” whispered Lavender Brown, who was tiptoeing along at her left side.

“I don’t think that’s what she means,” General Granger murmured from Lavender’s own left.

They crept slowly and carefully through the corridors of Hogwarts, all eight of them keeping both ears peeled for the slightest sound of Trouble, just like it was a battle and they were looking for enemy soldiers to ambush; only in this case they were looking for bullies to Vanquish and victims to Rescue in the span between the end of breakfast-time and when Lavender and Parvati had to get to their Herbology class.

Lavender had argued that if one first-year girl could take down three older bullies, then eight first-year girls ought to be able to outfight twenty-four older bullies because of Multiplication.

Judging by her frantic spluttering and waving of hands, General Granger hadn’t found this convincing.

Padma had stayed silent for a bit during the ensuing argument, and then observed thoughtfully that even in Hogwarts, beating up first-year girls probably wouldn’t be good for your reputation as a bully.

Parvati had straightened up at this, exclaiming that this meant they were the *only ones* who could do something about Hogwarts’s bully problem, which made it *really truly* heroic. Plus the *whole reason* their parents

had moved to Britain was so that the two of them could attend the world's only magical school with a 0% fatality rate, and what was the point if they didn't take advantage and try a few things?

To which General Granger had responded that Parvati didn't understand the point of a perfect safety record *at all*—

Lavender had said that if they were *really* all friends together and not Hermione's followers like Professor Quirrell thought, then they should vote on things like this.

Daphne had expected that hers would be the deciding vote after Hermione and Susan and Hannah voted no. And so Daphne had considered it carefully after her first flush of enthusiasm wore off. She *was* a Slytherin, after all, and that meant it was *her* responsibility to keep a watchful eye on their own interests while they were all running around trying to help people—her job to figure out how risky it really was, and whether it would be worth it for *them*, just like Mother would have done in her place. Always looking out for yourself and your friends like that, was what real Slytherining was all about...

Hannah Abbott, the nervous little Hufflepuff girl, had in a small trembling voice said "Yes."

And now Daphne and Susan and Hermione *had* to stay with the other five, they couldn't *possibly* let the others go off on their own. Because no Gryffindor would ever live down hurting the last surviving child of the Bones family, and no Slytherin would dare assault a daughter of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Greengrass. (Daphne *hoped* so, anyway.) And General Granger who'd started the whole thing... you didn't even have to ask.

The corridors of Hogwarts passed them by one after another, their tense hands never straying far from their wands, as stone and wood and Everburning Torches came into vision and then moved past. At one point they heard footsteps and drew in their breath, hands almost dropping to their wands, but it was just a lone older Ravenclaw who looked at them curiously before sniffing and dropping his head back to his book as he walked on.

The heroines crept past solemn oaken panels carved with gilded frescos, and came to a dead end leading into a boys' bathroom, and turned

around, and wandered *back* through the solemn oaken panels carved with gilded frescos, and then turned through dusty old brick corridors grouted with worn cement, which sort of led them in a circle actually, so they consulted a portrait and then went down a *different* dusty old brick corridor instead, that took them to a brief rise of marble stairs that should've put them on the third-and-a-halfth floor if it'd been anywhere but Hogwarts, and then it was back to tiled stone pavement again, and skylights that let shafts of sunlight pour down even though they were nowhere near the roof, and after they'd followed that passageway around a few corners it took them to another boys' bathroom, clearly marked with a plaque showing the silhouette of a robed figure whizzing into a toilet.

The eight of them stood before the closed door and stared with a certain amount of weariness.

"I'm bored," said Lavender.

Padma made a show of taking a pocketwatch out of her robes and looking at it. "Sixteen minutes and thirty seconds," she said. "A new record for the longest attention span in Gryffindor."

"I don't think this is going to work either," said Susan. "And I'm a *Hufflepuff*."

"Y'know," Lavender said thoughtfully, "I wonder if maybe what *really* makes someone a hero, is that when they try something like this, something interesting *actually happens*."

"I bet you're right," said Tracey. "I bet if we had *Harry Potter* with us, we'd run into three bullies and a hidden room full of treasure in the first five minutes. I bet that all General Chaos has to do is go to the bathroom and he, like, finds Slytherin's Chamber of Secrets or something—"

Daphne couldn't quite let that one go past. "You think Lord Slytherin would've put the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets in a *bathroom*—"

"What I'm *saying*," said Susan, as Tracey was opening her mouth to reply, "is that we've got no way of actually *finding* any bullies. I mean, all *they've* got to do is find a Hufflepuff somewhere, but we've got to run across them at exactly the right *time*, d'you see? Which is a *very good problem* because if we *did* find them we'd all get squished like bugs. Can't we just do the forbidden third-floor corridor like we're *supposed* to?"

Lavender snorted scornfully. “You don’t become a *real* heroine just by doing the forbidden things the Headmaster *tells* you not to do!”

(Daphne’s mind tried to wrap around this statement as she silently thanked the Sorting Hat for not putting her anywhere near Gryffindor.)

“Come to think...” Parvati said slowly, “I mean, what’re the odds that Harry Potter would run across those five bullies on his *first morning* of school? He must’ve had *some* way of finding them.”

Daphne happened to be standing where looking at Parvati let her see Hermione, so she noticed the Ravenclaw girl’s expression change—and then she realized that the Sunshine General had *also* found some bullies just recently—

“Oh!” said Padma in a tone of sudden realization. “Of course! He got told by the ghost of Salazar Slytherin!”

“*What?*” said Daphne at the same time as several other people.

“That’s who the ghost was that scared me, I’m pretty sure,” Padma explained. “I mean I only figured it out afterward, but... yeah. Salazar Slytherin’s ghost doesn’t like it when Slytherins bully people, he thinks it shames his name, and the ghost is still keyed into the Hogwarts wards so he knows everything that happens, I bet.”

Daphne’s mouth was hanging open; and she saw that Hannah had put a hand to her forehead and was leaning against the stone walls, while Tracey’s eyes were blazing like little brown stars.

Salazar Slytherin’s ghost?

Had leagued himself with Harry Potter?

And had sent Hermione Granger to stop Derrick’s crew?

She would have paid a hundred Galleons to be there when Draco Malfoy got told about this.

Although considering how fast rumors spread through Hogwarts, now that Padma had spilled the beans, Millicent had probably told him thirty minutes ago...

In fact... now that Daphne *thought* about it...

“So,” said Parvati. “We’ve got to ask the Boy-Who-Lived where to find Salazar Slytherin’s ghost? Wow, I guess if I’m saying stuff like that out loud, I might actually be turning into a heroine—”

"Yes!" said Lavender. "We've got to ask the Boy-Who-Lived where to find Salazar Slytherin's ghost!"

"We've got to ask... the Boy-Who-Lived... where to find Salazar Slytherin's ghost..." repeated Hannah in a nervous voice, like she was forcing herself to say it.

"And if *that* doesn't work," shouted Tracey, "we'll stun Harry Potter, tie him up and bring him *with* us!"

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It said something, Hermione Granger thought, and it was something rather sad—as the eight of them strolled back through the maze of twisty little passages that was Hogwarts, their time before the next class having run out without finding any bullies—that she genuinely didn't know whether Harry Potter had been led around by the ghost of Salazar Slytherin or a phoenix or *what*. And whatever Harry had done, she hoped it *didn't* work for them. And most of all she hoped that the others didn't vote for Tracey's idea of stunning Harry Potter and carting his unconscious body around with them to attract Adventures. That couldn't possibly work in real life, or, if it did, she was giving up.

Hermione looked from witch to witch, Tracey chatting with Lavender, and the others making occasional remarks; and her gaze caught on a girl who was subdued and quiet, the one person whose thoughts right now she couldn't guess at all.

"Hannah?" she said to the girl walking alongside her. Hermione tried to make her voice as gentle as she could. "You don't have to answer, but is it okay if I ask why you voted yes on fighting bullies?"

Hermione had thought she'd made her voice soft, but everyone stopped walking, and Lavender and Tracey halted their conversation and looked at them.

Hannah's cheeks were already reddening, and just as Hannah opened her mouth—

"It's 'cause she's got more courage than *you* think, obviously," said Lavender.

Hannah paused with her mouth open.

She closed her mouth.

She swallowed, hard and visibly, while her cheeks reddened even further.

Then Hannah took a deep breath, and said, in a small voice, "There's a boy I like."

The Hufflepuff girl flinched as she said it, and her head darted around nervously to look at everyone looking at her, while the pause and silence stretched.

"Um, okay?" Susan said eventually.

"I've got *five* boys I like," said Lavender.

"Padma and I knew we'd both like the same boys," said Parvati, "so we made a list and flipped a Knut to see who got to pick first."

"I know who *I'm* destined to marry," said Tracey. "I don't care what the world says, he's meant to be mine!"

This made all the other girls look expectantly at Hermione, whose brain had gone ahead and flushed Tracey's last statement entirely so it could focus on just on the first thing Hannah had said.

"Um," said Hermione. She carefully continued keeping her voice gentle. "Hannah, the reason why you joined the Society for Promotion of Heroic Equality for Witches was that there's a boy who might like you more if you become a hero?"

The Hufflepuff girl nodded again, her cheeks reddening even further while she stared down at her own reflection in her black-polished shoes.

"She likes Neville Longbottom, actually," Daphne said. The Slytherin gave a woeful sigh. "And unfortunately for her, he's going to marry someone else. It's very tragic."

This produced a high-pitched *eeping* sound from Hannah as she went on staring at her feet.

"Wait what?" said Lavender. "Neville's going to marry someone else? How do you know about this? *Who?*"

Daphne just shook her head sadly with a downcast expression.

"*Excuse me,*" said Hermione, and then when the others looked at her again, "Ah..." while she tried to organize her thoughts. "I mean, um... Hannah... trying to become a hero so that a boy will like you isn't very *feminist*."

"It's pronounced *feminine* actually," said Padma.

"And why're you calling Hannah unfeminine?" said Susan. "There's nothing unfeminine about wanting to impress a boy."

"Besides," said Parvati, sounding puzzled, "isn't the whole point that we're trying to be heroes even though that isn't feminine?"

The ensuing discussion would not be remembered by Hermione Granger as one of her most successful forays into the realms of political education. She tried to explain, and then after the resulting argument tried to explain again, while the other seven girls looked at her more and more skeptically. Afterward Daphne declared in the imperious tones of the future Lady Greengrass that if this feminism business meant girls weren't allowed to pursue boys in whichever way they pleased, then feminism could stay in the Muggle lands where it belonged. Lavender suggested that maybe witchism could say that witches got to do anything they wanted, which sounded like more fun than feminism. And finally Padma closed off further discussion by observing wearily that she didn't see much point to going on arguing, since SPHEW wasn't *about* anything to do with feminism in the first place, it was just about more girls becoming heroes.

Hermione had given up at that point.

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As their Charms session that day ended and the first-year Ravenclaws began shuffling out of the class, Hermione was already wincing to herself. They'd made it to class just barely before the opening gong, they'd had to run right over to their desks and sit down, so there hadn't been time for the awful thing to happen *yet*; but that just meant that Hermione got to look forward to the coming disaster for the *whole class*.

Sure enough, after Professor Flitwick squeaked his dismissal and everyone rose from their chairs, Harry began walking toward her; and for her own part Hermione shoved her book into her mokeskin pouch and very quickly walked over to the door and threw it open and headed into

the corridors, and of course Harry followed her with a surprised look because they had a library session scheduled—

“Hermione?” Harry said as he closed the door behind him. “What’s wrong?”

The door flew open behind Harry not a moment after he closed it, almost hitting Harry as he stepped out of the way, and Padma Patil stepped out of the classroom with a dreadful look of determination upon her face.

“Excuse me, Mr. Potter,” came the awful words, the young girl’s high voice resounding through the corridor like the gloomy bells of doom, “can I ask you for help with something?”

Harry’s eyebrows drew up, and he said, “You can *ask*, of course.”

“Can you tell us how to talk to Salazar Slytherin’s ghost? We want him to tell us where to find bullies, like he tells you.”

There was a little bit of silence in the corridor outside the classroom.

The door opened again, and Su peered out with an inquiring look—

“Well, we’ve got to get to the library,” Harry said quite casually, his face looking relaxed, “would you mind following us?” and began to walk off in the direction that led to the library on odd-numbered days of the month, and Su made like she was going to follow but Harry’s face turned toward her for a moment.

It wasn’t until Harry had rounded a corner that he drew his wand, said in a low precise voice “*Quietus*” and then turned to Padma and said, “An interesting guess, Miss Patil.”

Padma looked rather smug, then; and said, “I *should’ve* figured it out earlier, really. There was that *hiss* in the ghost’s voice, I should’ve thought Parselmouth right away, even before he started talking about Godric Gryffindor.”

Harry’s face didn’t change. “May I ask, Miss Patil, whether you’ve shared this thought with—”

“She said it in front of everyone in *SPHEW*,” Hermione said.

Harry’s eyes had that look they had when he was very rapidly calculating something, and then he said, “Hermione, what’s the chance that—”

“She said it in front of Lavender *and* Tracey.”

“Um,” said Padma. “Should I not’ve done that?”

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“Wait here,” growled Mr. Goyle, and went around the corner; and there was the sound of him knocking on Draco Malfoy’s private room.

There was a bit of a queasy feeling in Tracey’s stomach, and she reminded herself again that since Padma had spilled the beans *someone* was bound to tell Draco Malfoy, and it might as well be *her*, and it wasn’t as if she *owed* Harry Potter anything, and a Slytherin had to do what was necessary to achieve her Ambitions.

She’d been collecting Ambitions ever since Professor Quirrell told her off, and so far she’d decided that she wanted to own her own Nimbus 2000 broomstick, become super famous, marry Harry Potter, eat Chocolate Frogs for breakfast every day, and defeat at least *three* Dark Lords just to show Professor Quirrell who was ordinary.

“Mr. Malfoy will see you,” said the low, menacing voice of Mr. Goyle as he returned. “And you’d better hope he doesn’t think you’re wasting his time.” The boy loomed at her briefly, and then stepped aside.

Tracey added having her own servants to her list of Ambitions, and entered.

The Malfoy private bedroom looked just like Daphne’s. She’d been privately hoping for diamond chandeliers or golden frescos on the walls—she’d never have said it in front of Daphne, but the House of Malfoy *was* a step up from Greengrass. But it was just a small bedroom like Daphne’s, and the only difference was that Malfoy’s stuff was decorated in silver snakes instead of emerald plants.

As she stepped through the doorway, Draco Malfoy—who was perfectly groomed even inside his own bedroom—rose up from his desk chair to greet her with a small friendly bow, wearing a charming smile just like she was someone who *mattered*, which made Tracey so flustered that she forgot everything she’d rehearsed inside her head and just blurted out, “I’ve got something to tell you!”

“Yes, Gregory said so,” Draco Malfoy said smoothly. “Please, Miss Davis, sit down.” He gestured to *his own desk chair*, even as he sat down on his bed.

She felt somewhat lightheaded as she carefully sat herself down in Malfoy's own chair, her fingers unthinkingly fiddling with how her dress robes fell across her knees, trying to make them look as elegant and uncreased as Draco Malfoy's—

"So, Miss Davis," said Draco Malfoy. "What did you want to tell me?"

Tracey hesitated, and then when Malfoy's face started to look a bit impatient, just stammered it all out, everything Padma had said about Salazar Slytherin's ghost sending Harry Potter to stop bullies and also what Daphne had told her about Hermione Granger being in on it—

Draco Malfoy's expression didn't change at all as she spoke, not even in the slightest, and it dawned on Tracey with a sickening lurch in her stomach.

"You don't *believe* me!" she said.

There was a slight pause.

"Well," said Draco Malfoy, with a smile that wasn't quite as charming as his last one, "I *do* believe that's what Padma said and what Daphne said, so thank you anyway, Miss Davis." The boy rose from where he'd been sitting on his bed, and Tracey, not even thinking, rose from the chair.

As he was escorting her to the door, just as he was about to turn the knob, it occurred to Tracey that—"You didn't ask what I wanted for the information," she said.

Draco Malfoy gave her some kind of look, she didn't quite know what it was supposed to mean, and he didn't say anything.

"Well, anyway," Tracey said, making an on-the-spot change to her previous Plans, "I *don't* want anything for the information, I was just being friendly."

A brief look of surprise crossed Draco Malfoy's face for just an instant before his expression flattened again and he said, "It's not that easy to become friends with a Malfoy, Miss Davis."

Tracey smiled, and meant it. "Well, I'll just go on being friendly, then," she said, and left the room with a skip in her step, feeling like a real Slytherin for maybe the first time in her life, and having just decided that Draco Malfoy would be one of her husbands too.

After the girl was gone, Gregory came in, shut the door again and said, "Are you alright, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco said nothing to his servant and friend. His eyes gazed off into nowhere, like he was trying to stare through the wall of his bedroom, through the Hogwarts lake that surrounded the Slytherin dungeons, through Earth's crust and atmosphere and the interstellar dust of the Milky Way, into the utterly empty and lightless void between galaxies which no wizard and no scientist had ever seen.

"Mr. Malfoy?" Gregory said, starting to sound a little worried.

"I can't believe I believed every word of that," said Draco.

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Daphne finished her final inch of Transfiguration and looked up across the Slytherin common room, at where Millicent Bulstrode was still working on her own homework. It was time to come to a Decision.

If SPHEW did go around trying to stun bullies, the bullies wouldn't like it, that was certain. And they'd try to do something unpleasant about it, which was also certain. On the other hand, if the bullies got really nasty then Hermione could ask Harry Potter for help, or they could pool their combined Quirrell points and ask the Defense Professor for a favor... No, the thing that Daphne was *really* worried about was if this business got them in bad with Professor Snape. You didn't want to *ever* end up on the wrong side of Professor Snape.

But since the day she'd challenged Neville to a Most Ancient Duel, she'd noticed people looking at her differently. Even the Slytherins who'd made fun of her were looking at her differently. It was dawning on Daphne that being the daughter of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Greengrass brought in a *lot* more respect if you were a beautiful *heroine* born to a Most Ancient House, and not just a pretty noble girl. It was the difference between having your role played by the lead actress and having your role played by a two-Galleon extra with a screechy laugh.

Fighting bullies might not be the *best* way to become a heroine. But Father had once told her that the trouble with passing up opportunities was that it was habit-forming. If you told yourself you were waiting for a better opportunity next time, why, next time you'd probably tell yourself the same thing. Father had said that most people spent their whole *lives* waiting for an opportunity that was good enough, and then they died. Father had said that while seizing opportunities *would* mean that all sorts of things went wrong, it wasn't nearly as bad as being a hopeless lump. Father had said that *after* she got into the habit of seizing opportunities, *then* it was time to start being picky about them.

On the other hand, Mother had warned her not to take all of Father's advice, and said that Daphne wasn't allowed to ask about Father's sixth year in Hogwarts until she was at least thirty years old.

But in the end Father *had* gotten Mother to marry him and successfully plotted his way into a Most Ancient House, so there *was* that.

Millicent Bulstrode finished her homework and began putting her things away.

Daphne stood up from her desk, and walked over.

Millicent swung out her legs from the table and stood up, slinging her bookbag over one shoulder, then looked over at where Daphne was approaching, the girl's expression puzzled.

"Hey, Millicent," Daphne said as she drew near, making her voice low and excited, "guess what I figured out today?"

"The thing about Salazar Slytherin's ghost helping Granger?" said Millicent. "I already heard about that—"

"No," Daphne said in a hushed whisper, "this is even *better*."

"Really?" Millicent said, in an equally low excited voice. "What is it?"

Daphne looked around conspiratorially. "Come to my room and I'll tell you."

They went off toward the stairs that led downward, the private rooms were even lower in the lake than the seventh-year dorms...

Soon enough Daphne was sitting in her comfy desk-chair and Millicent had bounced over to the edge of her bed.

"*Quietus*," said Daphne, when they were both seated; and then instead of putting her wand away inside her robes, Daphne just let her hand fall

naturally down to her side, still holding the wand, just in case.

"All right!" said Millicent. "What is it?"

"You know what I figured out?" said Daphne. "I figured out that you get the gossip so fast, you know about things *before they actually happen.*"

Daphne had half-expected Millicent to turn white and fall over, and she didn't really, but the girl did flinch pretty hard before she started stammering denials.

"Don't worry," said Daphne with her sweetest smile, "I won't tell anyone else you're a seer. I mean, we're friends, right?"

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Rianne Felthorne, seventh-year of Slytherin, was working diligently on yet another two-foot essay (she was taking everything except Divination and Muggle Studies and her N.E.W.T. year seemed to consist *entirely* of homework) when her Head of House strode up to the table she was working at and barked "You will come with me, Miss Felthorne!" and walked away even as she frantically began putting away her parchment and book and quill.

When she caught up with Professor Snape, he was waiting just outside the room and gazing at her with half-lidded eyes that seemed far too intense; and before she could ask what this was about he spun without a word and stalked off through the hallways, so that she had to scramble to keep up.

Their walk took them down a flight of stairs, and then another, below what she'd thought was the lowest level of the Slytherin dungeons. And the corridors began to look older in their appearance, the architecture reverting back in time by centuries into roughened stone held together by crude-looking mortar. She began to wonder if Professor Snape was taking her to the *real* dungeons that she'd heard rumors of, the true dungeons of Hogwarts that had been sealed off to all but faculty; and if maybe Professor Snape did terrible things down there to innocent helpless young girls but that was probably just wishful thinking on her part.

They went down another flight of stairs, and came out into a room that was no room at all, but an empty rock cavern with a single door, pierced by many dark openings and lit by a single torch of ancient style that fired as they entered.

Professor Snape took out his wand, then, and began to cast Charm after Charm, she lost track of how many; and when the Potions Master was done he turned back toward her, locked his intense eyes on hers, and said in a level voice unlike his usual drawl, "You will say nothing to anyone of this matter, Miss Felthorne, nothing now or ever. If that is acceptable to you, nod. If not, we will turn and go."

She nodded, frightened and with a strange hope dawning in her heart (well, not exactly her heart).

"The task I have for you is very simple, Miss Felthorne," said Professor Snape's toneless voice, "and your extremely generous pay of fifty Galleons is merely to compensate you for being Memory-Charmed afterward."

She drew an involuntary breath. Her family might be rich but they had other daughters and kept her on a tight leash and it was certainly a lot of money for *her*.

Then her ears caught up with the words *Memory-Charmed* and for a moment she felt outraged, there was no point if she couldn't keep the memories, what sort of girl did Professor Snape think she *was*?

"You surely know," said Severus Snape, "of Miss Hermione Granger, the Sunshine General?"

"*What?*" said Rianne Felthorne in sudden horror and disgust. "She's in her *first year*! Ew!"

CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO

SELF ACTUALIZATION, PART VII: PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY

The winter Sun had well set by the time dinner ended, and so it was amid the peaceful light of stars twinkling down from the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall that Hermione left for the Ravenclaw Tower alongside her study partner Harry Potter, who lately seemed to have a *ridiculous* amount of time for studying. She hadn't the faintest idea of when Harry was doing his actual homework, except that it was getting done, maybe by house elves while he slept.

Nearly every single pair of eyes in the whole Hall lay on them as they passed through the mighty doors of the dining-room, which were more like siege gates of a castle than anything students ought to go through on the way back from supper.

They went out without speaking, and walked until the distant babble of student conversation had faded into silence; and then the two of them went on a little further through the stone corridors before Hermione finally spoke.

"Why'd you do that, Harry?"

"Do what?" said the Boy-Who-Lived in an abstracted tone, as if his mind were quite elsewhere, thinking about vastly more important things.

"I mean, why didn't you just *tell* them no?"

"Well," Harry said, as their shoes pattered across the tiles, "I can't just go around saying 'no' every time someone asks me about something I

haven't done. I mean, suppose someone asks me, 'Harry, did you pull the prank with the invisible paint?' and I say 'No' and then they say 'Harry, do you know who messed with the Gryffindor Seeker's broomstick?' and I say 'I refuse to answer that question.' It's sort of a giveaway."

"And *that's* why," Hermione said carefully, "you told everyone..." She concentrated, remembering the exact words. "That if hypothetically there *was* a conspiracy, you could not confirm or deny that the true master of the conspiracy was Salazar Slytherin's ghost, and in fact you wouldn't even be able to admit the conspiracy existed so people ought to stop asking you questions about it."

"Yep," said Harry Potter, smiling slightly. "That'll teach them to take hypothetical scenarios too seriously."

"And you told *me* not to answer anything—"

"They might not *believe* you, if you deny it," said Harry. "So it's better to say nothing, unless you want them to think you're a liar."

"But—" Hermione said helplessly. "But—but now people think I'm *doing* things for *Salazar Slytherin!*" The way the Gryffindors had been looking at her—the way the *Slytherins* had been looking at her—

"It goes along with being a hero," Harry said. "Have you seen what the *Quibbler* says about *me*?"

For a brief second Hermione imagined her parents reading a newspaper article about her, and instead of the story being about her winning a nationwide spelling bee or any of the other ways she'd imagined getting into the papers, the headline said "HERMIONE GRANGER GETS DRACO MALFOY PREGNANT".

It was enough to make you think twice about the whole heroine business.

Harry's voice turned a bit more formal. "Speaking of which, Miss Granger, how goes your latest quest?"

"Well," said Hermione, "unless the ghost of Salazar Slytherin really *does* show up and tell us where to find bullies, I don't think we're going to have much luck." Not that she was sorry about that.

She glanced over at Harry, and saw the boy giving her a peculiarly intense look.

"You know, Hermione," the boy said quietly, as though to make sure that nobody else in the world heard, "I think you're right. I think some people get a lot more help than others in becoming heroes. And I don't think that's fair, either."

And Harry grabbed at her witch's robes where they lay over her arm, and hustled her into a side-hall of the corridor they were walking through, her mouth gaping open in surprise even as Harry's wand came into his hand, they rounded a curve of the side-hall and it was so narrow that it was almost pushing her and Harry into each other, even as Harry pointed to the way they'd come and softly said "*Quietus*", then a moment later, in the other direction, "*Quietus*" again.

The boy looked searchingly around them, not just to every side, but even upward toward the ceiling and down toward the floor.

And then Harry stuck a hand in his pouch and said, "Invisibility cloak."

"Gleep?" said Hermione.

Harry was already drawing out folds of shimmering black fabric from the mokeskin device. "Don't worry," the boy said with a small grin, "they're so rare that nobody bothered to make a school rule against them..."

And then Harry held out the dark velvet mesh to her, and said, his voice strangely formal, "I do not give you, but loan you, my cloak, unto Hermione Jean Granger. Protect her well."

She stared at the shimmering velvet of the cloak, cloth that swallowed all the light that fell on it except what glinted from small strange reflections, fabric so perfectly black it should've shown dust or lint or *something* but it didn't, the longer you looked the more you felt like what you were seeing wasn't really there at all, but then you blinked again and it was just a black cloak.

"Take it, Hermione."

Hardly even thinking, Hermione stretched out her hand to grasp the fabric; and then just as her brain woke up and she started to pull her hand back, Harry let go of the cloak and it started to fall and she grabbed at it without thinking. And the instant her fingers touched and held the cloak she felt an intangible jolt run through her like picking up her wand for

the first time; and it was like she heard a song being sung, ever so faintly, in the back of her mind.

"That's one of my quest items, Hermione," Harry said softly. "It belonged to my father, and it's not something I can replace, if it's lost. Don't loan it to anyone else, don't show it to anyone, don't tell anyone it exists... but if you want to borrow it for a while, just come to me and ask."

Hermione finally tore her eyes loose from the depthless black folds and stared back up at Harry.

"I can't—"

"You certainly can," Harry said. "Because there's nothing even the tiniest bit fair about my finding this gift-wrapped in a box next to my bed one morning, and you... not." Harry paused thoughtfully. "Unless you *did* get your own invisibility cloak, in which case never mind."

Then the implications of *invisibility cloak* finally dawned on her, and she pointed a shocked finger at Harry, though they were close enough together that she couldn't quite straighten her arm properly, and her voice rose with considerable indignation as she said, "So *that's* how you disappeared from the Potions closet! And the time when—" and then she trailed off, because even *with* an invisibility cloak she still couldn't see how Harry had...

Harry buffed his fingernails on his robes with artful nonchalance, and said, "Well, you knew there had to be *some* trick to it, right? And now the heroine will mysteriously know where and when to find bullies—just like she listened to the bullies planning it, even though nobody her age could *possibly* have turned herself invisible to spy on them."

There was a pause and a silence.

"Harry—" she said. "I'm—I'm not sure anymore that fighting bullies is such a good idea."

Harry's eyes stayed steady on hers. "Because the other girls might get hurt?"

She nodded, just nodded.

"That's *their* choice, Hermione, just like it's yours. I decided not to do the obvious stupid thing that everyone does in books, try to keep you safe and protected and helpless, and have you get really angry at me, and push me away while you go off on your own and get into even more trouble, and

then heroically pull through it successfully, after which I'd finally have my epiphany and realize that blah blah blah etcetera. I know how that part of my life story goes, so I'm just skipping over it. If I can predict what I'm going to think later, I might as well go ahead and think it now. Anyway, my point is, you shouldn't smother *your* friends to keep them safe, either. Just tell them up front it's predictably going to go horribly wrong, and if they still want to be heroines after that, fine."

It was at times like this that Hermione wondered if she was *ever* going to get used to the way Harry thought. "Harry, I really," her voice stuck for a second, "really, *really* don't want them getting hurt! Especially because of something I started!"

"Hermione," Harry said seriously, "I'm pretty sure you did the right thing. I don't see what could realistically happen to them that would be *worse* for them, in the long run, than *not trying*."

"What if they get *badly* hurt?" Hermione said. Her voice felt blocked in her throat; she remembered Captain Ernie saying how Harry had just stared straight into the eyes of a bully as the bully bent his finger back, before Professor Sprout had arrived to save him; and there was another thought that came after that, about Hannah and her delicate hands with the fingernails that she carefully painted in Hufflepuff yellow every morning, but that wasn't allowed to be imagined. "And then—they'll never do anything courageous, ever again—"

"I don't think it works like that," Harry said steadily. "Even if it all goes mind-bogglingly wrong, I don't think it works like that inside a human mind. The important thing is believing about yourself that you're someone who can break your boundaries. Trying and getting hurt can't possibly be worse for you than being... *stuck*."

"What if you're *wrong*, Harry?"

Harry paused for a moment, and then shrugged a little sadly, and said, "What if I'm right?"

Hermione looked back at the black mesh running over her hand. From the inside the cloak felt strangely soft and yet firm against her palm, as if it was trying to give her hand a reassuring hug.

Then she lifted her arm back up, holding the cloak back to Harry.

Harry didn't move to take it.

"I—" said Hermione. "I mean, thank you, thank you a lot, but I'm still thinking about it, so you can take it back for now. And... Harry, I don't think it's right to *spy* on people—"

"Not even on known bullies, to rescue their victims?" Harry said. "I've never been bullied, but I've been through a realistic simulation, and it didn't feel very pleasant. Have you ever been bullied, Hermione?"

"No," she said in a quiet voice, and went on holding out Harry's invisibility cloak to him.

Finally Harry took back his cloak—she felt a small twitch of loss as the inaudible song vanished from the back of her mind—and started to stuff the black material back into his pouch.

As the pouch ate the last of the fabric, Harry turned from her, to break the Quieting Barrier—

"And, um," Hermione said. "That's not *the* Cloak of Invisibility, is it? The one we read about in the library on page eighteen of Paula Vieira's translation of Gottschalk's *An Illustrated Scroll of Lost Devices*?"

Harry turned his head back, grinning slightly, and said in exactly the same tone of voice he'd used earlier with the other students at dinner, "I cannot confirm or deny that I possess magical artifacts of incredible power."

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When Hermione climbed into bed that night she was still trying to decide. Her life had been simpler at dinnertime, back when there hadn't *been* any practical way for them to find bullies; and now she had to choose again; not for herself, this time, but for her friends. In her mind's eye she kept seeing Dumbledore's lined face and the pain it hadn't quite hidden, and in her mind's ears she kept hearing Harry's voice saying "That's their choice, Hermione, just like it's yours."

And her hand kept remembering the sensation of the cloak against her fingers, replaying it over and over in her mind. There was a power to the feeling that compelled her thoughts to return to it, and to the song she'd heard / hadn't heard in a part of her mind and magic which now lay silent once more.

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SELF ACTUALIZATION VII:
PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY

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Harry had spoken to the cloak like it was a *person*, telling it to take good care of her. Harry had said the cloak had belonged to his father, that he couldn't replace it if it was lost...

But... Harry wouldn't *really* do that, would he?

Just *hand* her one of the three Deathly Hallows created centuries before Hogwarts?

She could say that she felt flattered, but this went *way* beyond feeling flattered, into making her wonder just what she was to Harry, exactly.

Maybe Harry was the sort of person who went around loaning ancient lost magical artifacts to *anyone* he considered a friend, but—

But when she thought about *which* part of his life Harry had said he'd skipped over, the part where he tried to keep her safe and protected...

Hermione stared up at the ceiling of the Ravenclaw dorm. Somewhere beyond her bed, Mandy and Su were talking. She'd turned up her Quieting Charm to where she couldn't hear the exact words, but could still hear their faint murmur; there was something comforting about sleeping in a dorm with the other girls. Harry kept his own Quieter turned up all the way, she knew.

She was starting to wonder if maybe Harry actually *did*, well...

You know...

Like her.

It took Hermione Granger a long time to fall asleep that night.

And when she woke up the next morning there was a small slip of parchment peeking out from under her pillow which said *At half-past ten you will find a bully in the fourth passageway to the left of the hall leaving the Potions classroom—S.*

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When Hermione entered the Great Hall that morning, her stomach was filled with flying butterflies the size of Hippogriffs; even as she approached the Ravenclaw breakfast table she still hadn't decided what to *do*.

There was an empty place next to Padma, she saw. That would be where to sit down, if she was going to tell Padma and then ask Padma to tell Daphne and Tracey.

Hermione walked toward the empty place next to Padma.

There were words waiting in her throat, *Padma, I got a mysterious message—*

And she could feel a huge brick wall inside her, stopping the words from coming out. She'd be putting Hannah and Susan and Daphne *in danger*. Taking them and leading them by the hand straight into trouble. That was Wrong.

Or she could just go try to handle the bully herself, without telling her friends anything, and that, quite obviously, was also Wrong.

Hermione knew she was being faced with a Moral Dilemma, just like all those wizards and witches she'd read about in stories. Only in stories people always got a *right* choice and a wrong choice, not two wrong ones, which seemed a bit unfair. But she had the sense, somehow—maybe it came from the way Harry always talked about how the history books would see them—that she was faced with a Heroic Decision, and that her whole life might end up going one way or another, depending on what she chose right now, *this morning*.

Hermione sat down at the table without looking to either side, just gazing at the plate and silverware like they might have answers hidden inside, thinking as hard as she ever had, and a few seconds later she heard Padma's voice whispering almost in her ear, "Daphne says she knows where a bully's going to be at ten-thirty today."

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Doomed.

They were all doomed, in Susan Bones's opinion.

Auntie sometimes told stories which started out like this, people doing something they *knew* was stupid, and the stories usually ended with someone being *doomed* all over the floor and all over the walls and getting on Auntie's shoes.

"Hey, Padma," muttered Parvati, her voice just barely audible over the soft impacts of eight girls tiptoeing through the corridor leading to the Potions classroom, "d'you know why Hermione's been sighing all morning—"

"No talking!" hissed Lavender, the harsh whisper sounding much louder than Parvati's mutter. "You never know when Evil might be listening!"

"*Shhh!*" said three other girls even more loudly.

Utterly, totally, quite extremely doomed.

As they approached the fourth passageway to the left of the Potions classroom, where Daphne's mysterious informant had said the bullying would take place, the eight of them moved slower, the sound of their feet got softer, and finally General Granger made the gesture that meant *Halt, I'll look ahead*.

Lavender raised a hand, then, and when Hermione turned to look at her, Lavender, looking puzzled, pointed straight down the corridor, gestured to herself, and then tried to sign something else that Susan didn't understand—

General Granger shook her head, and once again, this time with slower, more exaggerated movements, made the sign for *Halt, I'll look ahead*.

Lavender, looking even more puzzled, pointed back the way they'd come, and made a bouncing gesture with her other hand.

Now everyone else was looking even more confused than Lavender, and Susan thought with some acerbity that evidently one hour of practice done two days ago wasn't enough to remember a new set of code signals.

Hermione pointed at Lavender, then at the floor beneath Lavender's feet, the expression on her face making it very clear that the intended meaning was *You. Stay. Here*.

Lavender nodded.

Doom doom doom, went the words of the Chaos Legion's marching song through Susan's mind, *doom doom doom doom doom doom...*

Hermione reached into her robes, and drew out a little rod with a mirror on the end of it and an eyepiece. Very very softly indeed, the Raven-

claw girl crept up to the wall, right next to where the passageway opened off the corridor, and peeked just the tip of the eyepiece around the corner.

Then a little more.

Then a little more.

Then General Granger cautiously stuck her head around the side.

General Granger turned back to them, nodded, and made the hand gesture for *follow me*.

Susan felt a little better as she crept forward. The part of the Plan which called for them to arrive thirty minutes before the bully had, apparently, actually worked. Maybe they were only *slightly* doomed...?

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At ten-twenty-nine, almost on the dot, the bully showed up. If anyone had been present to hear—though the corridor was apparently empty—they would have heard his shoes clicking solidly through the main corridor, entering the passageway, walking toward where the passageway turned its first corner, turning that corner, and then stopping in some surprise upon seeing that the passageway now terminated in a solid brick wall where no wall had been before.

Then the bully shrugged and turned away, as he leaned back to watch the main passage from just around the corner.

It was the castle Hogwarts, after all.

Behind the hastily Transfigured thin panels they'd assembled into the outward appearance of a brick wall, the girls waited; not speaking, not moving, hardly even breathing, but watching through the eyeholes they'd left themselves.

As Susan's gaze took in the bully, she could feel the tightening of her chest all the way into her toes. The boy looked to be in his seventh-year if not *older*, and his robes were trimmed in green instead of the red they'd been hoping for, and he had *muscles*, and after staring for a bit longer, Susan realized his stance had the balance that meant that he *dueled*.

Then they all heard the sound of more feet approaching from the corridor. The fourth-year Gryffindors and Slytherins had just been let out of Potions class.

The footsteps pattered past, and diminished and faded, and the bully didn't do anything. For a moment Susan felt an instant of relief—

Then another, smaller group of footsteps approached.

The bully still didn't do anything, as the footsteps went past.

That happened a few more times.

And then, as there approached the faintly audible sound of one last set of footsteps, the seven girls heard the bully's voice saying, clear and cold and quiet, "*Protego*".

Someone *did* gasp then, though fortunately very very quietly. If they couldn't get in even a single shot—

The bullies were learning *already*, Susan realized, she hadn't expected SPHEW to be able to do this very often before the bullies caught on—but—Hermione had already defeated three bullies—and the school had been buzzing with speculation about Salazar Slytherin's ghost, yesterday—

He's expecting us!

Susan would have whispered to give up, to abort the plan, only there was no way to convey a message to—

"*Silencio*," said the bully in a soft, deliberate voice with his wand pointed toward the corridor, the blue haze of his Shielding Charm shimmering around him. "*Accio victim*."

When the fourth-year boy came into their field of vision he was dangling upside down as if an invisible hand were holding him high by one leg, his red-trimmed robes beginning to slide down his thighs to reveal the pants beneath. His mouth was opening and closing helplessly, no sound coming out.

"I suppose you're wondering what's going on," the seventh-year Slytherin said in a quiet, cold voice. "Don't worry. It's so simple even a Gryffindor could understand."

With that, the Slytherin's left hand formed a fist and drove hard into the Gryffindor's belly. The fourth-year boy's body jerked around frantically, but still no words left his mouth.

"You're my victim," said the older Slytherin. "I'm a bully. I'm going to beat you up. And we'll see if anyone stops me."

It was at that moment that Susan realized it was a trap.

And in almost the same moment, there rang out the mighty and high-pitched voice of a young girl, crying, "*Stop, evildoer! Finite Incantatem!*"

Lavender, thought Susan, agonized. The Gryffindor girl had volunteered to be a distraction, while the rest of them executed a flank attack from where the bully wouldn't expect it, that had been the plan, only now—

"In the name of Hogwarts," cried Lavender's voice, though they couldn't see her, "and in the name of heroines everywhere, I command you to let go of that EEK!"

"*Expelliarmus*," said the bully. "*Stupefy*. *Accio* stupid heroine."

When Lavender floated into their vision, dangling by one foot and unconscious, Susan blinked; the girl was dressed in a bright crimson-and-gold skirt and blouse, instead of her usual Hogwarts robes.

The bully was also giving the girl's upside-down body an odd look, and then he pointed his wand at her and said "*Finite Incantatem*," but the clothes stayed the same.

Then the bully shrugged, and, still facing in the direction of Lavender instead of the dangling fourth-year boy, drew back his fist—

"*Lagann!*" yelled five voices, and five green spirals blasted from five wands aimed through five holes in the false wall, and an instant later Hermione's voice shouted "*Stupefy!*"

Five green spirals shattered ineffectually on blue haze, and Hermione's red bolt bounced off the haze and struck the fourth-year boy, who jerked and then was still.

And the seventh-year bully turned around, smiling grimly, as the first-year girls screamed and charged.

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Susan's eyes flew open and instantly she was rolling away from where she'd lain on the floor, her lungs still on fire and her whole body still

aching from when she'd been hit, the battle had only moved forward a few seconds from what she could see, Hannah's body falling with her arm still stretched out toward Susan, "*Glisseo!*" shouted Hermione but the older boy just slashed his wand down leaving a trail of green glow behind and Hermione's Charm visibly disrupted into a shower of blue-white sparks, then in almost the same motion the bully said "*Stupefy!*" and Hermione was blown backward and Susan summoned up all the magic she had left and shouted "*Innervate!*" at Hermione's body even as the bully turned toward her, the bully's wand pointed in her direction again and then Padma yelled "*Prismatis!*" just before the bully shouted "*Impedimenta!*", the rainbow sphere forming *around the bully* and the seventh-year Slytherin staggered as his own hex was reflected back at him, but an instant later the bully's wand swept back to tap himself and then Padma's Prismatic Sphere shattered like a blown soap bubble as the bully's wand cut through it and "*Innervate!*" yelled Parvati at Hannah's body and Tracey and Lavender screamed at the same time, "*Wingardium Leviosa!*"—

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Hannah Abbott held out her wand with a hand that trembled with exhaustion, she didn't have enough magic left for even one *Innervate*, now.

The rest of the passageway was silent, scattered bodies lying across the ground, Padma and Tracey and Lavender, Hermione and Parvati in a heap against one wall, Susan standing in petrified rigor as her eyes tracked it all helplessly, even the Gryffindor boy lying sprawled and motionless (Hermione had woken him and he'd fought, but it hadn't been enough).

It had been a very short battle.

The bully was still smiling, the only signs of his exertion a wavering ripple in the blue glow surrounding him, and a few beads of sweat on his forehead.

The bully raised his arm, wiped the sweat off his forehead, and stalked toward her like a man-shaped living Lethifold.

Hannah turned and fled, spun and ran with screams kept bound in her choking throat, sprinted past the fallen paneling of the fake brick wall, ran down the passageway with all the speed she could muster, weaving as much as she could—

Just before Hannah got to the turn in the passageway, the bully's voice from behind her said "*Cluthe!*" and she got awful cramps all through her legs, she fell down and slid and hit her head against the wall, only she didn't even notice the pain of the smack as she started to scream with the twisting muscles—

The bully was still stalking toward her, Hannah saw as she turned her head; approaching her slowly, still wearing that dreadful smile.

And she rolled, despite the pain as her leg muscles knotted up around themselves, she rolled around the corner of the passageway, and screamed, "Go *away!*"

"I think not," said the bully, his voice deep and scary like that of a grown man, sounding very close at hand now.

The bully walked around the corner and Daphne Greengrass stabbed her Most Ancient Blade directly into his groin.

There was a flash that lit up the whole corridor—

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It was with a subdued mien that seven girls left Madam Pomfrey's office, leaving one of their own behind in a hospital bed.

Hannah would be all right in about thirty-five minutes, the healer had said; torn muscles were easy to mend.

Daphne had done all the talking, and according to her, Hannah had suffered a mishap with a Road-Running Charm which had caused the leg cramps. Madam Pomfrey had given them a sharp look but hadn't argued, even though that Charm was around six years above their level.

Madam Pomfrey had also given Daphne a potion to help with her state of total magical exhaustion, and warned her not to cast any spells for the next three hours. That, supposedly, was from Daphne using up too much

magic trying to *Finite* Hannah, rather than the Most Ancient Blade drawing out all of her power to break the *Protego*.

The rest of them had decided not to say anything about the bruises under their robes until they could get some older girls to cast *Episkey*. There were limits to what Daphne could talk around.

The whole thing, Susan thought, had been too close, much too close. If the bully had so much as looked around the corner—if he'd taken a moment to recast his Shielding Charm—

"We should stop," said Susan, as soon as the seven of them had gotten out of hearing range of the healer's office. "We should stop doing this."

For some reason, then, even though they were supposed to vote on this sort of thing, everyone turned to look at General Granger.

The Sunshine General didn't seem to see them looking at her, she just strode on, gazing off straight ahead.

After a little while, Hermione Granger said, in a voice that sounded thoughtful and a little sad, "Hannah said *she* didn't want us to stop. I'm not sure it's right for us to... be less brave *for* her, than she is."

All the other girls, except Susan, nodded at that.

"I think that's got to be as bad as it gets," said Parvati. "And we can handle it. We've proved that now."

Susan couldn't think of anything to say to that. She didn't think that shrieking at the top of her lungs about blatant stupidity and DOOM would be persuasive. And she couldn't just *leave* the other girls, either. Wasn't it enough to be cursed with hard work, why did Hufflepuffs have to be *loyal* on top of everything else?

"By the way, Lavender," said Padma. "What in the name of Merlin's underpants were you *wearing* back there?"

"My hero outfit," said the Gryffindor girl.

Daphne sounded weary, as she spoke without turning her own head from where she was plodding through the hall. "It's the costume of the Soldier of Gryffindor from the play *Chronicles of the Lunarian Soldiers*."

"Did you Transfigure it?" said Parvati, looking puzzled. "But the bully cast *Finite* on you—"

"Nope!" Lavender said. "It's *real*! See, I just Transfigured my hero outfit into a regular shirt and skirt *beforehand*, so all I had to do was cast

Finite on myself after I saw the bully. Do you want your own, Parvati? I got mine made yesterday by Katarina and Joshua in sixth-year, for twelve Sickles—”

“I think,” General Granger said in a careful voice, “that would make us all look a little silly.”

“Well,” said Lavender, “we should vote on whether to—”

“I think,” General Granger said, “that no matter what *anyone* votes, I’m not going to be caught *dead* wearing one of those costumes—”

Susan ignored the argument. She was trying to think up some sort of clever strategy for being less doomed.

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The whole Great Hall went silent, even if only for a moment, as the seven of them walked into lunch.

Then the applause started.

It was scattered, not the massive applause of everyone applauding at once. A lot of it came from the Gryffindor table, less from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, and none from Slytherin.

Daphne felt her face tightening. She’d *hoped*—well, maybe after they found a Gryffindor bully to stop and a Slytherin to rescue, her fellow Slytherins would realize—

She looked at the Hufflepuff table.

Neville Longbottom was applauding with his hands held high above his head, although he wasn’t smiling. Maybe he’d heard about Hannah, or maybe he was wondering why Hannah wasn’t there.

Then, not quite able to help herself, she glanced toward the Head Table.

Professor Sprout’s face was lined with concern. She and Professor McGonagall were leaning their heads toward Headmaster Dumbledore, who had a solemn look, and all their lips were moving quickly. Professor Flitwick looked more resigned than anything else, and Quirrell, face slack, was taking trembling stabs at his soup using a spoon gripped in a fist.

Professor Snape was looking directly at—

Her?

Or—at Hermione Granger, standing next to her?

A small, thin smile crossed the Potions Master's face, and he raised his hands, brought them together once in a motion that was too slow to be a real clap; and then the Potions Master turned back to his plate, ignoring the conversations around him.

Daphne felt a little chill go down her spine, and she hastily turned to walk toward the Slytherin table. Susan and Lavender and Parvati peeled off from their group, heading toward the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor tables on the other side of the Great Hall.

It happened as they were passing the part of the Slytherin table where the Slytherin Quidditch team sat.

That was when Hermione stumbled suddenly, stumbled *hard* like she was being yanked off her feet, and went sprawling into the gap between where Marcus Flint and Lucian Bole sat, and there was a sad little splutching sound as Hermione's face ended up in Flint's plate of steak and mashed potatoes.

Everything seemed to happen too quickly then, or maybe it was just Daphne herself who was thinking too slow, as Flint let out a bellow of indignation and his hand yanked Hermione back and threw her into the Ravenclaw table, and she bounced off a student's back and collapsed onto the ground—

The quiet spread out in ripples.

Hermione pushed herself up on her hands, though she didn't get all the way to her feet, Daphne could see that her whole body was shaking, and that her face was still covered with mashed potatoes with scattered pieces of steak.

For a long moment, nobody spoke, nobody moved. Like nobody in the whole Great Hall could imagine, any more than Daphne could, what happened next.

Then Flint's powerful voice, the voice of the Slytherin Captain that bellowed commands on the Quidditch pitch, said in a dangerous rumble, "You ruined my food, girl."

Another moment of frozen silence. Hermione's head—Daphne could see it trembling—turned to look at the Slytherin Quidditch Captain.

"Apologize to me," said Flint.

Harry Potter started to push himself up from the Ravenclaw table, and then stopped abruptly, halfway to his feet, as if he'd just thought of something—

Then five other people stood up from the Ravenclaw table.

All of the Slytherin Quidditch team stood up, their wands coming into their hands, and then students stood up at the Gryffindor table and at the Hufflepuff table and without thinking Daphne turned to look at the Head Table and she saw that the Headmaster was still sitting down, watching, just watching, Dumbledore was *just watching* and he had one hand out as though to restrain Professor McGonagall—in just one second someone would shout a spell and then it would be too late, *why wasn't the Headmaster doing anything*—

And a voice said, "My apologies."

Daphne turned back to look, her mouth gaping open in absolute shock.

"*Scourgify*," said that smooth voice, and the mashed potatoes vanished from Hermione's face, revealing the Ravenclaw's surprised expression as Draco Malfoy approached her, sheathed his wand again, and then knelt to one knee beside her and offered her a hand.

"Sorry about that, Miss Granger," said Draco Malfoy's polite voice. "I guess someone thought they were being funny."

Hermione took Draco's hand, and Daphne suddenly realized what was about to happen—

But Draco Malfoy *didn't* raise Hermione halfway up and then drop her.

He just pulled her to her feet.

"Thanks," said Hermione.

"You're welcome," Draco Malfoy said in a loud voice, not looking to either side to see where all four Houses of Hogwarts were staring at him in total shock. "Just remember, being cunning and ambitious doesn't mean you have to be like that."

And then Draco Malfoy went back to his seat at the Slytherin bench and sat down like he hadn't—he hadn't just—*he'd just*—

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SELF ACTUALIZATION VII:
PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY

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Hermione went to the nearest empty place at the Ravenclaw bench and sat down.

A number of other people, rather slowly, sat down.

“Daphne?” said Tracey. “Are you all right?”

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Draco’s heart was hammering in his chest so hard he worried it might explode right out of his chest in a shower of blood, like that curse Amycus Carrow had used once on a puppy.

Draco’s face stayed completely controlled, because he knew (it’d been drilled into him over and over) that if he showed the slightest sign of the fear he was feeling, his Housemates would rip him apart like a swarm of Acromantulas.

There’d been no time to check with Harry Potter, no time to plot, no time to think, just the instant of realizing that the time to start rescuing Slytherin’s reputation was *right then*.

From all sides of the long Slytherin table, angry faces stared at Draco.

But they were outnumbered by the faces that just looked puzzled.

“All right, I give up,” said a sixth-year boy that Draco didn’t recognize, sitting across from him and two places to his right. “Why did you do that, Malfoy?”

Although his mouth was very dry, Draco didn’t swallow. That would have been a sign of fear. Instead he took a bite of carrots, which had the most moisture of anything on his plate, and chewed and swallowed, thinking as rapidly as he could.

“You know,” Draco said, making his voice as cutting as he could—as his heart thumped even harder in his chest, as everyone around him stopped talking to listen—“there’s *probably* some way to make Slytherin look even *worse* than attacking eight first-year girls from all four Houses who are working together to stop bullies, but I can’t think of *how*. This way we get the benefit of what Greengrass is doing.”

The puzzled faces stayed puzzled.

"What?" said the sixth-year boy, and "Wait, *what* benefit?" said a fifth-year girl sitting to his right.

"It makes Slytherin House look better," said Draco.

The Slytherins around him were giving him quizzical gazes like he'd just tried to explain algebra.

"Look better to *who*?" said the sixth-year boy.

"But you just helped a *mudblood*," said the fifth-year girl. "How's *that* supposed to look good?"

Draco's throat closed up. His brain was experiencing a hideous malfunction during which it couldn't think of anything to say except the truth—

Then, "It's probably some kind of tremendously clever scheme Malfoy's got going," said a fifth-year boy. "You know, like in *The Tragedy of Light*, where everything that looks like a setback is part of the plot. And it ends with Granger's head on a stick and nobody suspecting that it was him."

"*That* makes sense," someone said from further down the table, and there was a lot of nodding.

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"Do *you* know what the boss's up to?" Vincent muttered in an undertone.

Gregory Goyle didn't reply. In his mind he could hear very clearly his master's voice, saying, *I can't believe I believed every word of that*, the day the rumor had started about Salazar Slytherin showing Potter and Granger where to find bullies.

"Mr. Goyle?" whispered Vincent.

Gregory Goyle's lips shaped the words, *Oh no*, but no sound came out.

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Hermione had left lunch early that day, for some reason she hadn't felt hungry. Those few seconds of horrible humiliation had kept burning through her mind, over and over, the feeling of her face squishing into the mashed potatoes and then being thrown through the air and then

the Slytherin's boy's voice saying 'Apologize to me'... it might have been the first time in her whole life that she'd felt like *hating* someone. The boy who'd thrown her (Marcus Flint, they'd said his name was) and whoever had cast the tripping Jinx on her in the first place... she'd felt it, for one horrible instant she'd wanted to go tell Harry that if he started getting *creative* on her behalf, she wouldn't object.

She hadn't been a minute out of the Great Hall before she'd heard the sound of running feet behind, and turned to see Daphne racing toward her.

And listened to what her Sunshine Soldier had to say...

"Don't you *understand*?" Daphne's voice was barely below a shriek. "Just because someone's nice to you doesn't mean they're your friend! He's *Draco Malfoy*! His father's a Death Eater, all the parents of all his friends are Death Eaters—Nott, Goyle, Crabbe, *everyone around him*, do you get it? They *all* despise Muggleborns, they want everyone like you to *die*, they think you're good for nothing but being a *sacrifice* in horrible Dark rituals! Draco is *the next Lord Malfoy*, he's been raised from birth to hate you and he's been raised from birth to *lie*!" Daphne's gray-green eyes stared fiercely at her, demanding assent and understanding.

"He—" Hermione said falteringly. She remembered the rooftop, the awful jolt as she started to fall, Draco Malfoy's hand grabbing hers and holding it so hard that she'd had bruises afterward. She'd had to tell him twice before he finally let her fall. "Maybe Draco Malfoy isn't like them—"

Daphne's whisper was almost a scream. "If he *doesn't* end up doing you ten times as hard as he just helped you, his *life is over*, do you understand? I mean Lucius Malfoy would *literally* disinherit him! D'you know what the chance is that he's *not* up to something?"

"Tiny?" said Hermione in a small voice.

"Zero!" hissed Daphne. "I mean *none*! I mean *less* than zero! I mean the chance is so small that you couldn't find it with three Magnifying Charms and a Point-Me spell and—and—and an ancient map and a centaur prophet! Everyone in Slytherin knows he's plotting to do something to you and doesn't want to be suspected, I heard someone say he was seen pointing his wand at you just before you tripped—don't you *see*? *This is all part of Malfoy's plan!*"

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CHAPTER 72

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Draco sat eating his steak with roasted cauliflower florets and Ashwinder sauce (it wasn't made from real Ashwinder eggs, it just tasted like fire), trying not to laugh and trying not to cry.

He'd *heard* about plausible deniability, but hadn't realized how much it mattered until he found that Malfoys didn't have any.

"You want to know my plot?" said Draco. "*Here's* my plot. I'm not going to do *anything* and then the *next* time people think I'm plotting something, they won't be sure."

"Huh..." said the fifth-year boy. "I don't think I believe you, that doesn't sound cunning enough to be really it—"

"That's what he *wants* you to think," said the fifth-year girl.

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"Albus," Minerva said dangerously, "did you *plan* all this?"

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"Well, if I *did* snap my fingers under the table, I wouldn't just *tell* you that—"

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The Defense Professor's quavering hand dropped his spoon into the soup again.

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"What do you mean, *set you up*?" said Millicent. The two of them were sitting cross-legged on Daphne's bed, having come there straight from the Great Hall after lunch. "With my Seer's eyes that stare through Time Itself, I saw you *winning*."

Daphne stared at Millicent, her own merely mortal eyes rather narrowed at the moment. "That boy was *expecting* us."

"Well, yeah!" said Millicent. "Everyone knows you're hunting bullies!"

"Hannah got hit by a really painful hex," Daphne said. "She had to visit a healer, Millicent! If we're friends you should've *warned* me!"

"Look, Daphne, I *told* you—" The Slytherin girl paused, as if trying to remember something, and then said, "I mean, I told you, what I See *has* to come to pass. If I try to change it, if *anyone* tries to change it, really terrible, awful, no good, extremely bad things will happen. And then it'll come to pass *anyway*. If I See you getting beaten up, I *can't* tell you that, because then you'd try to *not go*, and *then*—" Millicent stopped.

"And then?" Daphne said skeptically. "I mean, what happens if we just don't go?"

"I don't *know*!" said Millicent. "But it probably makes being eaten by Lethifolds look like a tea party!"

"Look, even I know that's not how prophecies work," Daphne said, then paused. "At least prophecies don't work like that in plays..." Admittedly, there were all sorts of tragedies where trying to avoid a prophecy *made* it happen, or where, on the other hand, trying to *go along* with a prophecy was the only reason why it happened. But you *could* make prophecies happen your own way if you were clever enough; or someone who loved you enough could take your place; or with enough effort it was possible to break a prophecy outright... Then again, in plays the Seers never remembered what they Saw, either...

Millicent must have seen Daphne's hesitation, because the other girl started looking a little more confident. "Well," Millicent said sharply, "this isn't a play! Look, I'll tell you if I See it being a hard battle or an easy one. But that's *all* I can do, you understand? And if I say 'hard' you *can't* not show up! Or—or—" Millicent's eyes rolled back in her head, and she intoned hollowly, "*Those who try to cheat their destinies will come to sad and gloomy ends*—"

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Professor Sprout shook her head, her face looking tight.

"But—" said Susan. "But you helped *Harry Potter* that one time—"

"And it was made *quite clear* to me," Professor Sprout said in a voice that sounded like someone was using a Shrinking Charm to squeeze her throat, "that it was Professor Snape's job, and not mine, to keep order in Slytherin House—Miss Bones, *please*, you don't have to *do* this if—"

"Yes, I *do* have to," Susan said unhappily. "I'm a Hufflepuff, we have to be loyal."

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"A mysterious parchment under your pillow?" said Harry Potter, looking up from where he was sitting, in the Quieted nook where they were studying. Then the boy's green eyes narrowed. "It wasn't from Santa Claus, was it?"

Pause.

"Okay," said Hermione. "I'm *not* going to ask, and you're *not* going to tell me, and we're *both* going to pretend you never said that and I don't know anything about it—"

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Susan approached the table as soon as the older girl was alone, glancing around the Hufflepuff common room to make sure nobody was watching (the way Auntie had taught her to do it, so that it wouldn't be obvious that she was looking).

"Hey, Susie," said the seventh-year Hufflepuff. "Do you already need more—"

"Can I please talk to you privately for a bit?" Susan said.

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Jaime Astorga, seventh-year of Slytherin, and until recently considered a promising upstart on the youth dueling circuit, stood ramrod straight in Professor Snape's office, with his teeth clenched tight and sweat trickling down his spine.

"I distinctly recall," said the Head of his House in a sardonic drawl, "that I warned you, and a number of others this very morning, that there

were certain first-year girls who might prove annoying, if a fighter were *incautious* and allowed himself to be *taken by surprise*."

Professor Snape stalked in a slow circle around him.

"I—" said Jaime, as more sweat beaded on his forehead. He knew how ridiculous it sounded, how much of a pathetic excuse. "Sir, they shouldn't have been able to—" One first-year-girl shouldn't have been able to break his *Protego*, no matter what sort of ancient Charm she used—Greengrass must have had *help*—

But it was very clear that his Head of House wouldn't believe that.

"Oh, I quite agree," murmured Snape in a low tone, instinct with menace. "They shouldn't have. I begin to wonder if Mr. Malfoy, whatever his plotting, has a point, Astorga. It cannot be good for the repute of Slytherin's House if our fighters, rather than demonstrating their strength, lose to little girls!" Snape's voice had risen. "It is well that you had the good taste to be defeated by a little girl who is a fellow Slytherin of a Noble House, Astorga, or I would deduct points from you myself!"

Jaime Astorga's fists clenched at his side, but he couldn't think of a thing to say.

It was some time before Jaime Astorga was allowed to leave the presence of his Head of House.

And afterward, only the walls, the floor, and the ceiling saw Severus Snape's smile.

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That evening Draco was visited by his father's owl, Tanaxu, who wasn't green but only because there weren't such things as green owls. The best Father had been able to find was an owl of the purest silver feathers, with great luminous green eyes, and a beak as sharp and cruel as any snake's fang. The parchment wrapped around Tanaxu's leg was short and to the point:

What are you doing, my son?

The parchment that Draco sent back was equally short, and it said,
I am trying to stop harm done to Slytherin's reputation, father.

In as much time as it took for an owl to fly from Hogwarts to Malfoy Manor and back again, the family owl bore another message to Draco, and this one said only:

What are you really doing?

Draco stared at the parchment he'd unwrapped from the owl's leg. His hands trembled, as he held up the parchment to the light of his fireplace. Five words, carved in black ink, shouldn't have been scarier than death.

There wasn't very much time to think. Father knew exactly how long it took for a message to go from Malfoy Manor to Hogwarts and back again; he would know if Draco delayed to compose a careful lie.

But Draco still waited until his hand stopped trembling, before he wrote his reply, the only answer he'd thought of that Father might accept.

I am preparing for the next war.

Draco wrapped that parchment around the owl's leg and tied it, and then sent Tanaxu winging out from his room, through the halls of Hogwarts, into the night.

He waited, but no reply came.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE

SELF ACTUALIZATION, PART VIII: THE SACRED AND THE MUNDANE

The red jet of fire took Hannah full in the face, flipping her end-over-heels and smacking her head straight into the stone wall, where her pale face seemed to linger for an instant, framed by flying strands of brown-golden hair, before she collapsed to the ground in a heap of robes, as the third and final volley of blazing green spirals brought down their foe's Shield Charm.

The March days marched by, filled with lectures and study and homework, breakfast and lunch and dinner.

The Gryffindor boy stared at the eight of them, tension in every line of his body's frame, his face working soundlessly; and then his hands released their clenched grasp on the Slytherin boy's lapels, and he walked away without anyone saying a word. (Well, Lavender almost said a word—her mouth was just opening in indignation, maybe because she hadn't gotten a chance to declaim her speech—but luckily Hermione spotted it and made the gesture that meant SHUT UP.)

Then there was sleeping, of course. You wouldn't want to forget about sleeping just because it seemed so normal.

"Innervate!" said the young voice of Susan Bones, and Hermione's eyes flew open and her lips drew in air with a gasp, her lungs feeling heavy like there was a huge weight resting on her chest. Beside her, Hannah was already sitting up, holding her head in her hands and grimacing. Daphne had warned them that this

would be a 'hard' fight, creating a certain trepidation in Hermione, and indeed in all of them. Except maybe Susan, who'd just shown up at the appointed meeting-time, and walked alongside them without speaking, and fought the seventh-year bully until she was the last girl standing. Maybe the Gryffindor had been reluctant to fight the last daughter of Bones, or maybe Susan had just gotten very lucky; at any rate, when Hermione had tried to sit up again, she'd realized that her chest had felt heavy because there was, in fact, a rather large body sprawled on top of her.

And you wouldn't want to forget about magic either, even if the actual moment of casting a spell only formed a very small part of your day. It was the whole point of Hogwarts, after all.

"Okay, how about if we all ride around on skateboards?" said Lavender. "We could get places faster than walking. And we'd look really awesome on skateboards, Muggle artifacts may not be as fast as broomsticks but they look cooler—we should vote on it—"

As for the remaining fractions of time, you would fill that according to your nature: gossip about upper-year romances, or books and study sessions.

Hermione reached out a trembling hand to grasp her copy of *Hogwarts: A History* from where it had fallen, the ever-comforting book only a pace distant from where she herself had ended up on the floor, after the red-robed upper-year girl had "bumped" her into a wall. And then the older Gryffindor witch had walked away without a look back, only a whispered "Salazar's—" and a word that hurt her more than anything the Slytherins said about mudbloods, 'mudblood' was just a strange wizarding word but Hermione knew the word the Gryffindor had said. She couldn't get used to it, she just couldn't get used to being hated. It still hurt just as much every time it happened, and somehow it hurt even more coming from the Gryffindors who were supposed to be the good ones.

Harry had divided up eight of his soldiers among the other armies, as ordered; he'd voluntarily given up two Chaotic Lieutenants, sending Dean Thomas to Dragon Army and then trading Seamus Finnigan to her for Blaise Zabini, who Harry had said was being "underutilized" in Sunshine. Lavender had elected to join most of SPHEW in Sunshine; Tracey had decided to stay with Chaos.

"So you can work your charms on General Potter?" said Lavender, as Hermi-

one ignored both of them as hard as she could. "I've got to say, Traces, I think our Sunshine General has him pretty well sewn up by now—you'd have better luck convincing Hermione that the three of you should have one of those, you know, arrangements—"

Nobody had figured out yet what Draco Malfoy was plotting.

"Certain?" said Harry Potter, sounding rather reluctant. "You know a rationalist isn't ever certain of anything, Hermione, not even that two and two make four. I can't actually read Malfoy's mind, and if I could, I couldn't be certain he wasn't a perfect Occlumens. All I can say is that based on what I've seen of Malfoy, it's a lot more plausible than Daphne Greengrass thinks, that he actually is trying to show the Slytherins a better way. We should... we really should try to go along with that, Hermione."

(Well, Harry seemed to think Draco Malfoy was a good guy. But then the trouble was that Harry also tended to trust people like Professor Quirrell.)

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"Professor Quirrell," Harry said, "I'm worried about the hatred Slytherin House seems to be developing for Hermione Granger."

They were sitting in the Defense Professor's office, Harry sitting far back from the teacher's desk (and the sense of pending disaster was still noticeable, even then), the empty bookcase still framing Professor Quirrell's balding head. The cup balanced on Harry's thigh was filled with Professor Quirrell's obscure, probably-expensive Chinese tea, and it said something about the way Harry had been thinking lately that he'd needed to make a conscious decision to drink it.

"And this concerns me for what reason?" said Professor Quirrell, sipping his tea.

"Yes, well," said Harry, "I'm just going to ignore that—oh, stop that, Professor Quirrell, *you've* been plotting to restore Slytherin House's reputation since at least the first Friday of this year."

There might have been a tiny crack of a smile, at the edges of those thin pale lips; and then again, there might not have been. "I think Slytherin's House will do well enough in the end, Mr. Potter, regardless

of the fate of one girl. But I do agree that the present outlook is not favorable for your little friend. The bullies of two Houses, many of them with powerful and well-connected families, see Miss Granger as a threat to their reputation and a shame to their pride. As powerful a motive as that is to hurt her, it pales compared to the raw envy of the Gryffindors, who see an outsider gaining the laurels of heroism which they have dreamed of since childhood.” Now the smile on Professor Quirrell’s lips was definite, though slight. “And then there are those of Slytherin House who hear that Salazar Slytherin’s ghost has abandoned them to favor a mudblood. I wonder if you can even conceive, Mr. Potter, of how such as they would react? Those who do not believe it would cheerfully kill Miss Granger for the insult. And as for those Slytherins who wonder deep down, in some quiet place within themselves, if it might perhaps be *true*... their inner panic is something scarcely to be contemplated.” Professor Quirrell sipped his tea equably. “When you are more experienced, Mr. Potter, you will see such consequences in advance of your plotting. As it stands, you are being ill-served by your willful ignorance of all human nature you deem unpleasant.”

Harry sipped his own tea.

“Ah...” said Harry. “Professor Quirrell... help?”

“I already offered Miss Granger my help,” said Professor Quirrell, “as soon as I foresaw what would develop. My student told me, in polite terms, to stay out of her business. Nor would she tell you anything different, I expect. As I have little to truly gain or lose in this matter, I hardly intend to press the point.” The Defense Professor shrugged, his teacup held steady in the exactly-right polite grip, so that the surface of the liquid did not even ripple as Professor Quirrell leaned back within his chair. “Do not worry too much, Mr. Potter. Emotions run high around Miss Granger, but she is in less danger than you might imagine. When you are older, you will learn that the first and foremost thing which any ordinary person does is nothing.”

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SELF ACTUALIZATION VIII:
THE SACRED AND THE MUNDANE

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The envelope which the Slytherin System had delivered to Daphne at lunch was unsigned, as always; the parchment within named a time and a place and said, simply, "*Hard.*"

That wasn't what had concerned Daphne. What had concerned Daphne was that Millicent didn't seem to be looking in her or Tracey's direction at lunch that day. She'd just stared straight ahead at her plate and eaten. Millicent had looked up just once that Daphne saw, in the direction of the Hufflepuff table, and then looked quickly back down again; though Daphne was too far away to see the expression on Millicent's face, since Millicent had sat down far away from her and Tracey.

Daphne had thought about that during lunch, with a sick feeling in her stomach unlike anything she'd felt before, and which had caused her to stop eating halfway through her first plate.

What I See has to come to pass... it probably makes being eaten by Lethifolds look like a tea party...

It wasn't any conscious decision that Daphne made, nothing like Slytherins were supposed to do, no weighing of the benefits to herself.

Instead—

Daphne told Hannah and Susan and everyone, that her informant had warned her that the next bully was going to target Hufflepuffs in particular, and that the bully planned to risk the teachers' wrath in order to *really* hurt either Hannah or Susan, like *seriously*, and the two of them needed to stay out of this one.

Hannah had agreed to stay out of it.

Susan had—

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"*What are you doing here?*" yelled General Granger, though it was sort of a yell and a whisper at the same time.

Susan's round face didn't change, like the Hufflepuff girl had suddenly developed the sort of experienced blankness that Daphne's own Mother used. "Am I here, really?" Susan said calmly.

"You said you wouldn't come!"

"Did I say that?" said Susan. She flipped her wand casually in one hand, leaning against the stone wall of the corridor where they were waiting, her reddish-brown hair somehow arranging itself in perfect order against the yellow trim of her witch's robes. "I wonder why. Maybe I didn't want Hannah to get any strange ideas. Hufflepuff loyalty, you know."

"If you don't leave," said the Sunshine General, "I'll call a mission abort, and we'll *all* go back to our study halls, Miss Bones!"

"Hey!" said Lavender. "We didn't vote on—"

"That's fine by me," said Susan, who was keeping a steady gaze on the other end of the corridor where it merged into the tiled hallway where they'd been told to expect the bully. "I'll just stay here myself, then."

"Why—" said Daphne. Her heart was in her throat. *If I try to change it, if anyone tries to change it, really terrible, awful, no good, extremely bad things will happen. And then it'll come to pass anyway...* "Why are you doing this?"

"It's not like me," said Susan. "I know. But—" Susan shrugged. "People don't always behave like themselves, you know."

They pleaded.

They begged.

Susan didn't even say anything anymore, she just kept watching, waiting.

Daphne was nearly crying, she kept wondering if she'd *caused* this, if trying to change Fate was making this happen *worse*—

"Daphne," said Hermione, her voice sounding much higher than usual, "go get a teacher. Run."

Daphne spun on her heels and started to pelt down the other direction of the stony corridor, and then she realized, and she turned back to where all the other girls except Susan were watching her go, and Daphne, feeling like she was about to throw up, said, "I can't..."

"What?" said Hermione.

"I think it gets worse every time you try to fight it," said Daphne. That was how it worked in plays, sometimes.

Hermione stared at her, and then Hermione said, "Padma."

The other Ravenclaw girl just tore right out of there without arguing. Daphne watched her go, knowing that Padma wasn't as good a runner as

SELF ACTUALIZATION VIII:
THE SACRED AND THE MUNDANE

her, and now wondering if maybe that would turn out to be the *only reason* why help would come too late...

"Bullies are here," Susan said laconically. "Huh, they've got a hostage."

They all whirled, and looked, and saw—

Three older bullies, Daphne's eyes recognized Reese Belka who was a top lieutenant in one of the seventh-year armies, and Randolph Lee who was number two in the Hogwarts dueling club, and worst of all, Robert Jugson III, in his sixth year, whose father was almost certainly a Death Eater.

All three were surrounded by Shielding Charms, blue hazes that glowed beneath the surface in ribbons of other color and showed occasional faceting above, multi-layered shields like the three of them thought they were fighting serious duelists and had expended energy accordingly.

And behind them, bound and supported by glowing ropes, was Hannah Abbott. Her eyes were wide and panicked and her mouth was moving, though they couldn't hear anything through the *Quietus* they'd put up earlier.

Then Jugson made an offhand gesture with his wand, and the glowing ropes flung Hannah at them, there was a small pop as Hannah's body blew through the Quieting barrier, Susan's wand was instantly pointing at Hannah and Susan's voice muttered "*Wingardium Leviosa*"—

"Run!" screamed Hannah, as she was gently lowered to the ground.

But the corridor behind them and in front of them was now blocked with a glowing gray field, a barrier spell that Daphne didn't recognize.

"Do I need to explain what this is about?" Lee said with false joviality. The seventh-year duelist was sporting a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Well, just in case, you little inconveniences, and that includes you Miss Greengrass, you've been quite enough trouble and you've told quite enough lies. We brought your little friend just to make sure everyone knew we got all of you—though I suppose the other Ravenclaw girl is hiding around a corner or clinging to the ceiling somewhere? Well, no matter. This is your—"

"Enough talk," said Robert Jugson III, "time for pain," and raised his wand. "*Cluthe!*"

Simultaneously Susan pointed her wand and said “*Prismatis!*” and a small rainbow sphere formed in midair almost instantly, the miniature barrier so condensed and bright that it stayed intact even as Jugson’s hex hit it and bounced off toward Belka, whose wand flashed to swat away the dark bolt; and then a moment later the many-colored blaze was gone.

Daphne’s eyes went wide for a moment; she’d never thought of using a Prismatic Sphere like *that*—

“Jugsy, honey?” said Belka. Her lips widened in a vicious smile. “I thought we discussed this. First we beat them, *then* we play.”

“P-please,” said Hermione Granger in a faltering voice, “let them go—I, I, I promise I’ll—”

“Oh, really,” said Lee in an annoyed tone. “Are you about to offer to turn yourself over if we let the others go? We’ve got *all* of you, now.”

Jugson smiled, then. “It could be funny,” said the sixth-year junior Death Eater, softly and with menace. “How about if you lick my shoes, mudblood, and *one* of your friends can go? Pick whichever one you like best, leave the others to get hurt.”

“Nope,” said the young voice of Susan Bones, “not going to happen,” and with a blindingly fast motion the Hufflepuff girl leapt leftward just as a red stunbolt erupted from Belka’s wand, Daphne could hardly *see* the movement as Susan seemed to hit the corridor wall and then bounce off it like she was a rubber ball and her legs smashed into Jugson’s *face*, it didn’t go through the shield but the sixth-year went sprawling backward with the impact and Susan followed him downward and her foot stamped down on the boy’s wand arm, again being repelled by the shield, “*Elmekia!*” shouted Lee and Parvati shouted “*Prismatis!*” and the rainbow wall formed but the fiery blue blast passed right through it like it wasn’t even there, the bolt missed Susan by inches, there was a whirlwind of motion that Daphne couldn’t follow during which Belka had her feet knocked out from under her, but the older witch just rolled back to a stand and then—

Daphne saw it coming, and her lips started to mouth “*Pris—*” but it was already too late.

Three blasts of brilliance slammed into Susan at once, she had her wand raised as though she could counter them and there was a white flash

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SELF ACTUALIZATION VIII:
THE SACRED AND THE MUNDANE

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as the hexes struck the magical wood, but then Susan's legs convulsed and sent her flying into a corridor wall. Her head hit with a strange cracking sound, and then Susan fell down and lay motionless with her head at an odd-seeming angle, her wand still clutched in one outstretched hand.

There was a moment of frozen silence.

Parvati scrambled over to where Susan lay, pressed a thumb over the pulse point on Susan's wrist, and then—then slowly, tremblingly, Parvati rose to her feet, her eyes huge—

"*Vitalis revelio*," said Lee just as Parvati opened her mouth, and Susan's body was surrounded by a warm red glow. Now the seventh-year boy really was grinning. "Probably just a broken collarbone, I'd say. Nice try, though."

"Merlin, they *are* tricky," said Jugson.

"You had me going for a second there, dearies." The seventh-year girl wasn't smiling at all.

"*Tonare!*" screamed Daphne, raising her wand above her head and focusing harder than she ever had in her life. "*Rava calvaria! Lucis—*"

She didn't even see the hex that got her.

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Hermione felt the jolt of Innervation bringing her awake, and out of some intuitive strategism she *didn't* roll to her feet right away; it had been a completely hopeless battle and she didn't know what she could do but some instinct told her that leaping to her feet wasn't it.

Just a crack, Hermione opened her eyes, and the thin rays of light that entered them showed Parvati backing away from all three bullies, the last girl standing that Hermione could see.

And her eyes also showed Tracey fallen not far away from her, and Hermione's wand was still in her hand; and so, desperately hoping the Slytherin girl would show more sense than she usually did, Hermione made the wand movements as subtly as she could, and hardly moving her lips, whispered, "Innervate."

Hermione felt the spell working, but Tracey didn't move. Hermione hoped it was because Tracey was being cunning, and waiting to...

What *could* they do?

Hermione didn't know, and the panic that had waited through the moments of fighting was starting to eat her up inside now that she was still, now that she was trying to think, now that she could see that it was all absolutely hopeless.

That was when Hermione heard a thud, and though it was out of her field of vision now, she knew that Parvati had fallen.

A moment of silence came, and passed.

"Now what?" said the voice of the scary-soft boy.

"Now we wake up the mudblood," said the precise voice of the scary-formal boy, "and find out who's *really* behind them, not Salazar Slytherin's ghost."

"No, dears," said the voice of the scary-sweet girl, "*first* we bind them all *very* securely—"

And then there was a sound like lightning and thunder and Hermione's eyes widened in shock before she could stop herself, and in her widened field of vision she saw the scary-soft boy convulsing as yellow arcs of energy crawled over him like giant blazing worms. His wand flew out of his hand as he collapsed to the ground, twitching, and then a moment later he lay still.

"Is everyone else asleep now?" said a voice. "Good."

Susan Bones rose from the floor near where the scary-soft boy had stood, neck still oddly bent. Then she rolled her head around her shoulders, a casual loose motion, and her head was straight again.

The round-faced first-year girl stood facing the remaining two bullies with one hand cocked on her hip.

Grinning.

And surrounded by faceted blue haze.

"Polyjuice!" spat the bully-girl.

"*Polyfluis Reverso!*" roared the remaining boy bully.

Something like the form of a mirrored scarf spat out of his wand—
Passed without resistance through the haze surrounding Susan—

For an instant, she glowed in a strange mirror-color, like a reflection of herself—

And then the glow faded.

The young girl still stood there, hand on her hip.

“Wrong,” said Susan.

“And *this* is the truth,” said Susan. “In case nobody ever told you—”

In her small hand a wand rose up, blurred by the blue haze surrounding it.

“You don’t mess with the ‘Puffs,” said Susan, and with a grey flash so bright it hurt Hermione’s half-closed eyes, the real battle started.

It went on for a while.

Some of the ceiling got melted.

The girl-bully tried to cry a truce, that they would leave and take Jugson with them, and Susan roared out the syllables of a curse Hermione recognized as Abi-Dalzim’s Horrid Wilting which was illegal in seven countries.

Eventually the girl-bully lay unconscious and unawakenable on the ground, and the last boy-bully had fled leaving his companions’ bodies behind, and Susan was leaned over against one wall, covered in sweat and her scorched robes soaked through with wet spots, gasping for breath, and clutching at her right shoulder using her left hand.

After a while Susan straightened up, and turned to look back at where her fellow witches were sleeping on the floor.

Well, they *should’ve* been sleeping on the floor.

Lavender was already sitting up with eyes as wide as watermelons.

“That...” said Lavender.

“Was...” said Tracey.

“*What?*” said Hermione.

“I mean, *what?*” said Parvati.

“*Cool!*” said Lavender.

“Oh, hell,” said Susan Bones. Her face had already looked a little pale beneath the sweat, and now it was getting paler, looking almost frighteningly white. “Ah... could I convince you that you hallucinated all that?”

There was a rapid exchange of glances. Hermione looked at Parvati, Parvati looked at Lavender, Lavender briefly locked gazes with Tracey.

The four of them looked back at Susan and shook their heads.

"Oh, hell," said Susan again. "Look I'll be back in a few minutes but I've really got to go now *please* don't say anything bye!"

And Susan ran out into the hallway, moving surprisingly fast, before anyone could say another word.

"No, seriously, *what?*" said Parvati.

"*Innervate,*" said Hermione, pointing her wand at Daphne, whose body she hadn't been able to see before; and Lavender pointed her wand at Hannah's body and said the same.

Hannah's eyes opened and she tried frantically to roll to her feet, but collapsed to the ground halfway through.

"It's okay, Hannah!" said Lavender. "We won."

"We *what?*" said Hannah from her little heap on the floor.

Daphne hadn't stirred, but Hermione could see her chest rising and falling, and the breathing rhythm looked normal enough. "I think she's okay," said Hermione, "but—" She took a moment to swallow, her mouth was still dry. This had all gotten way, way, way out of hand. "I think we ought to take Daphne to Madam Pomfrey's..."

"Sure, sure, just *give me a second here* and I'll *probably be fine,*" said Parvati.

"Excuse me," Hannah said in a tone that was polite, but firm. "How did we win? And why does the ceiling look all melty?"

There was a pause.

"Susan did it," said Tracey.

"Yeah," said Parvati, voice only slightly shaky as she stood up and started to brush off her red-trimmed robes, "it turns out that Susan Bones is the Heir of Hufflepuff and she's opened up the long-lost entrance to Helga Hufflepuff's Chamber of Hard Work and Practice."

"*Huh?*" said Hannah, who was feeling over herself as if to make sure all her body parts were still there. "I thought that was just something Professor Sprout says to teach us an Important Moral Lesson—*Susan is?*"

Slowly, Hermione was beginning to feel a bit more together. It hadn't really been more than thirty seconds of extreme terror, at least not the parts she'd been conscious for. "Actually," Hermione said carefully, as her mind started to work again, "I'm pretty sure that *is* just something

Professor Sprout says, it wasn't in *Hogwarts: A History* or anywhere else I've read—"

"*She's a double witch!*" shouted Tracey, her voice so high it cracked. "She is! She's one of *them*! She's been this whole time!"

"*What?*" yelled Parvati, twisting around to look at Tracey. "That is the *looniest* thing—"

"Of *course!*" said Lavender, now all the way on her feet and starting to bounce up and down with excitement. "I should've *realized!*"

"Susan's a *what?*" said Hermione.

"A *double* witch!" said Tracey.

"You see," said Lavender, speaking very rapidly, "There've always been stories, about these children who are born as super magicians who can cast spells no one else can, and there's a whole secret school hidden inside Hogwarts with classes that only they can see and go to—"

"Those are just *stories!*" yelled Parvati. "That's not how real life works! I mean, sure, I read those books too—"

"Just a minute, please," said Hermione. Maybe her mind *was* feeling a little slow after all. "You mean even though you *already* get to go to a magical school and everything, you still want to go to a *double* magical school?"

Lavender looked at her, puzzled. "What?" said Lavender. "Who *wouldn't* want to have super extra magical powers? It would be like this whole amazing *destiny* and everything! It'd mean you were *special!*"

Hannah nodded to that, looking up from where she'd crawled to Daphne's side and was checking the girl for broken bones. "I wish *I* was a double witch," Hannah said, and then, sounding a little sadder, "though I don't believe there is any such thing, really... what did you see Susan do, exactly? I mean, are you sure you weren't just seeing things after getting stunned?"

Hermione truly, truly couldn't find any words at this point.

"Oh, no," said Tracey. The Slytherin girl spun around to look at the entrance to the corridor, her robes fluttering around her. "Oh no! We've got to get out of here! We've got to get away before Susan comes back with someone who can Super-Memory-Charms us!"

"Susan wouldn't *do* that!" said Parvati. "I mean, if there even *was*—"

“WHAT’S GOING ON HERE?” roared a high-pitched squeaky voice, as Professor Flitwick stormed into the partially melted corridor like a small, dangerously compressed package of pure academic fury, an ashen-faced Padma gasping along behind him.

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“What *happened?*” Susan blurted to the girl who looked exactly like her, except for the scorched robes damp with sweat.

“Ooh, great question!” said the other Susan Bones as she rapidly skinned off what was left of her borrowed clothes. A moment later the girl began to Metamorphose back into her more accustomed form of Nymphadora Tonks. “Sorry but I couldn’t think of anything myself so you’ve got about three minutes to decide on an answer to that—”

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As Daphne Greengrass observed afterward with some acidity, the flaw in Hermione’s cunning plan to make sure that House points were taken evenly from all four Houses if they got caught, was that it didn’t work on *detentions*.

They’d all agreed to keep their mouths shut about Susan’s mysterious powers—even Tracey, after Susan threatened to have her Super-Memory-Charmed if she didn’t promise. Unfortunately, they discovered at dinner-time that someone had forgotten to tell the *bullies* about their agreement, and also that Susan Bones had sacrificed her soul to dreadful forbidden powers which now inhabited the hulk of her body and that was why they’d all gotten detention.

“Hermione?” Harry Potter said to her from beside her at the dinner table, his voice very tentative. “Please don’t take offense, and I’ll understand if you say it’s none of my business, but I think all this is starting to spin out of control.”

Hermione went on mashing the slice of chocolate cake on her plate into a seamless mush of cake and icing. “Yes,” Hermione said, her voice

might have been a little acerbic, “that was what I said to Professor Flitwick while I was apologizing to him, that I knew things had gotten out of hand, and he yelled: *Really, Miss Granger? Do you think?* in a squeak so loud that my ears caught on fire. I mean my ears *actually caught on fire*. Professor Flitwick had to put them out again.”

Harry had put his hand to his forehead. “Excuse me,” Harry said. His face was perfectly straight. “Sometimes I still have a little trouble getting used to that sort of thing. Hey, Hermione, remember when we were young and naive and we still thought the world was a relatively understandable place?”

Hermione put her fork down and looked at him for a moment. “Do you sometimes wish you were a Muggle, Harry?”

“*Huh?*” said Harry. “Well, of course not! I mean, even if I was a Muggle, I’d probably have tried someday to take over the worrrrrlllll—” as Hermione gave him a *look* and the boy hastily swallowed the word and said, “I mean *optimize* of course, you *know* that’s what I really mean, Hermione! My point is, it’s not like my *goals* would change one way or another. But with magic it’s going to be a lot easier to get things done than if I had to do stuff using only the Muggle capability set. If you think about it logically, that’s *why* I’m going to Hogwarts instead of just ignoring all this and studying for a career in nanotechnology.”

Hermione, having finished hand-crafting her Chocolate Cake Sauce, began to dip her carrots in it and eat them.

“Why do you ask?” said Harry. “Do *you* wish you were back in the Muggle world?”

“Not exactly,” Hermione said, as she crunched into both the carrot and the chocolate. “I was just, well, feeling strange about having *wanted* to be a witch... Did you want to be a wizard when you were little?”

“Of course,” Harry said promptly. “I also wanted psychic powers and super-strength and adamantium-reinforced bones and my own flying castle and sometimes I felt sad that I might have to settle for just being a famous scientist and an astronaut.”

Hermione nodded. “You know,” she said softly, “I think the witches and wizards who *grow up* here don’t really appreciate magic properly...”

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CHAPTER 73

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“Well, of course they don’t,” Harry said, “that’s what gives us our advantage. Isn’t that obvious? I mean seriously, that was bloody obvious to me within five minutes of walking into Diagon Alley.” There was a puzzled look on the boy’s face, like he couldn’t understand why she was paying attention to something so ordinary.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR

SELF ACTUALIZATION, PART IX: ESCALATION OF CONFLICTS

Harry walked forward a step, then another step, until a sense of unease began to pervade him, a disquiet in his nerves.

He said nothing, lifted no hand; the pervading sense of unease would say it for him.

From behind the closed door of the office came a whisper, carrying through the door as though no door were present.

"It is not my office hours," said that cold whisper, "nor yet the time of our meeting. I take ten Quirrell points from you, and be glad it is not more."

Harry stayed calm. Going through Azkaban had recalibrated his scale of emotional disturbances; and losing a House point, which had formerly rated five out of ten, now lay somewhere around zero point three. Harry's voice was likewise level, as he said, "You made a testable prediction and it was falsified, Professor. I only wished to note that."

As Harry turned to go, he heard the door opening behind him, and he swung back around in some surprise.

Professor Quirrell was leaning back in his chair, his head lolling back against its rest, as a parchment floated before him. Both the Defense Professor's hands rested limply on the desk, as though nerveless. He might have been a corpse, excepting that the ice-blue eyes still moved, back and forth, back and forth.

The parchment vanished, and was replaced by another so quickly it was like the material had only flickered.

Then the lips moved as well. "And from this," whispered the lips, "you infer what, Mr. Potter?"

Harry was shaken by the sight, but his voice stayed even as he said, "That ordinary people do not always do nothing, and that Hermione Granger is in more danger from Slytherin House than you thought."

The lips curved, ever so barely. "So you think I have failed in my grasp of human nature. But that is hardly the only possibility, boy. Do you see the other?"

Harry furrowed his brows as he stared at the Defense Professor.

"I tire of this," the Defense Professor whispered. "You will stand there until you see it for yourself, or else leave." As though Harry had stopped existing, the Defense Professor's eyes looked back to the parchment, once more scanning back and forth.

It was six parchments later that Harry saw it, and said out loud, "You think your prediction failed because there was some other factor at work which was not in your model. Some reason why Slytherin House hates Hermione more than you realized. Like when the orbital calculations for Uranus were wrong, and the problem wasn't in Newton's Laws, it was that they didn't know about Neptune—"

The parchment vanished, and was not replaced. The head rose from its lolling position then, facing Harry more directly, and the voice which issued forth was quiet, but not toneless. "I think, boy," Professor Quirrell said softly, but in something approaching his normal voice, "that if all Slytherin House hated her so much, I would have seen it. And yet three formidable fighters of that House did something rather than nothing, at risk and at cost to themselves. What force could have moved them, or willed their motion?" The icy blue glitter of the Defense Professor's eyes met Harry's own gaze. "Some hand possessed of influence within Slytherin, perhaps. Then how would that hand have benefited itself by harm done to the girl and her followers?"

"Um..." said Harry. "It would have to be someone threatened by Hermione somehow, or someone who would get the credit if she was hurt? I don't know anyone who fits that profile, but then I don't know much

about anyone in Slytherin outside first-year.” The thought was also coming to Harry that deducing a hidden mastermind from a single mildly-unexpected attack seemed like insufficient evidence to support the prior improbability of the theory; but then it *was* Professor Quirrell who was doing the deducing...

The Defense Professor was just looking at Harry, eyelids slightly lowered as though in impatience.

“And yes,” said Harry, “*I am* sure that Draco Malfoy isn’t behind it.”

A hiss of outward air like a sigh. “He is the son of Lucius Malfoy, trained to the most exacting standards. Whatever you have seen of him, even in what seem to be unguarded moments when his mask slips and you trust that you have seen the truth beneath, even that may all be part of the face he chooses to show you.”

Only if Draco successfully cast the Patronus Charm as part of keeping up the act. But Harry didn’t say that, of course; instead he just grinned slightly, and said, “So either you’ve *really* never read Draco’s mind, or that’s just what you want me to think.”

There was a pause. One of the hands turned over, beckoned a finger.

Harry stepped into the room. The door closed behind him.

“That was not something you should have said aloud in human speech,” said Professor Quirrell’s soft voice. “Legilimency, on Malfoy’s heir? Did Lucius Malfoy learn of it, he would have me assassinated outright.”

“He would *try*,” Harry said. It should have won a crinkle of Professor Quirrell’s eyes, but the Defense Professor’s face was unmoving. “But sorry.”

When the Defense Professor spoke again, his voice had once more become a cold whisper. “I suppose I could, and pity the assassin.” His head fell back against the chair, lolled to one side, the eyes no longer meeting Harry’s. “But these small games hardly hold my interest as they stand. Add Legilimency, and it ceases to be a game at all.”

Harry hardly knew what to say. He’d seen Professor Quirrell in an angry mood once or twice before, but this seemed emptier, and Harry didn’t know what to say to it. *What’s bothering you, Professor Quirrell?* he could not ask.

"What *does* hold your interest?" Harry said a few moments later, after he'd worked it out as a safer-seeming strategy for redirecting Professor Quirrell's attention to positive things. Citing experimental results about keeping a gratitude journal as a strategy for improving life happiness didn't seem like it would be taken well.

"I will tell you what does not hold my interest," said that icy whisper. "Grading Ministry-mandated essays does not hold my interest, Mr. Potter. But I have undertaken the position of Defense Professor at Hogwarts, and I will see it through to its end." Another parchment appeared in front of Professor Quirrell's head, and his eyes began to scan it. "Reese Belka held a high position in my armies before her folly. I will offer her the chance to stay rather than being expelled, if she tells me exactly of the forces which moved her. And I shall make clear to her what will happen if she lies. I do permit myself to read faces."

The Defense Professor's finger pointed past Harry, toward the door.

"But whether you were wrong about human nature," Harry said, "or whether there's some extra force at work in Slytherin House—either way, Hermione Granger is in more danger than you predicted. Last time it was three strong fighters, so what happens after—"

"She wishes not my help, nor yours," said a soft cold voice. "I no longer find your concerns so entertaining as I once did, Mr. Potter. Go."

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Somehow, even though they were all equals and she definitely wasn't in charge, it was always Hermione who ended up speaking first in this sort of situation.

The four tables of Hogwarts, the four Houses having breakfast, were glancing over at where they, the eight members of SPHEW, had gathered off to one side.

Professor Flitwick was also staring sternly at all of them from the Head Table. Hermione wasn't looking there, but she could feel Professor Flitwick's gaze on the back of her neck. *Literally* feel it. It was really creepy.

SELF ACTUALIZATION IX:
ESCALATION OF CONFLICTS

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"Why'd you tell Tracey you wanted to talk to us, Mr. Potter?" said Hermione, her tone crisp.

"Professor Quirrell expelled Reese Belka from her army last night," Harry Potter said. "And from all her other after-school Defense activities. Do any of you see the significance of that? Miss Greengrass? Padma?"

Harry's eyes swept over them, as Hermione exchanged a puzzled glance with Padma, and Daphne shook her head.

"Well," Harry said quietly, "I wouldn't actually expect you to. But what it means is that you're in danger, and I don't know how much danger." The boy squared his shoulders, looking straight into Hermione's eyes. "I wasn't going to say this, but... I just wanted to offer to put you under whatever protection I could give. Make it clear to everyone that anyone who messes with you, is messing with the Boy-Who-Lived."

"Harry!" said Hermione sharply. "You *know* I don't want—"

"Some of them are *my* friends too, Hermione." Harry didn't take his eyes from hers. "And it's their decision, not yours. Padma? You told me that I owed you no debt for what I did, and that's the sort of thing a friend would say."

Hermione broke her gaze from Harry, to look at where Padma was shaking her head.

"Lavender?" Harry said. "You fought well in my army, and I'll fight for you if you wish it."

"Thank *you*, General!" Lavender said crisply. "I mean Mr. Potter. No, though. I'm a heroine and a Gryffindor, and I can fight for myself."

There was a pause.

"Parvati?" Harry said. "Susan? Hannah? Daphne? I don't know any of you so well, but it's something I would offer anyone who came to ask it of me, I think."

One by one, the other four girls shook their heads.

Hermione realized what was coming, then, but she didn't see a single thing she could do about it.

"And my loyal soldier, Chaotic Tracey?" said Harry Potter.

"*Really?*" gasped Tracey, oblivious to the stabbing glares that Hermione and every other girl were directing at her. Tracey's hands flew artfully to her cheeks, though she didn't actually manage to blush, not that Her-

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CHAPTER 74

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mione could see; and her brown eyes were, if not shining, at least opened very wide. “You’d do that? For *me*? I mean—I mean, of course, absolutely, General Chaos—”

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And so it was on that very morning that Harry Potter went over to the Gryffindor table, and then the Slytherin table, and told both Houses that anyone who hurt Tracey Davis, regardless of what she was doing at the time, would, quote, learn the true meaning of Chaos, unquote.

It was with considerable restraint that Draco Malfoy managed to prevent himself from slamming his head repeatedly into his plate of toast.

They weren’t exactly scientists, the bullies of Hogwarts.

But even *they*, Draco knew, were going to want to test it.

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The Society for the Promotion of Heroic Equality for Witches hadn’t *announced* it, it didn’t seem like it would do any good to *announce* it. But they had all quietly decided (or, in the case of Lavender, been shouted into it by all seven other girls) to take a break from fighting bullies for a while, at least until their Heads of House weren’t looking at them quite so sharply anymore, and older students had stopped bumping Hermione into walls.

Daphne had *told* Millicent that they were taking a break.

And so it was with some puzzlement, a few days later, that Daphne looked at the parchment delivered to her at lunch, drawn in a hand so shaky it was almost unreadable, saying:

2 this afternoon at the top of the stairs going up from the library REALLY IMPORTANT everyone has to be there—Millicent

Daphne looked around, but she couldn’t see Millicent anywhere in the Great Hall.

“A message from your informant?” said Hermione, when Daphne told her. “That’s odd— *I* didn’t—”

“You didn’t what?” said Daphne, after the Ravenclaw girl had stopped in mid-sentence.

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* SELF ACTUALIZATION IX: **
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The Sunshine General shook her head and said, "Listen, Daphne, I think we need to know where these messages come from before we keep following them. Look at what happened last time, how could anyone have *known* where those three bullies would be, unless they were in on it?"

"I can't say—" Daphne said. "I mean, I can't say anything, but I know where the messages come from, and I know how anyone can know."

Hermione gave Daphne a *look* that, for a moment, made the Ravenclaw girl look scarily like Professor McGonagall.

"Uh huh," said Hermione. "And do you know how Susan suddenly turned into Supergirl?"

Daphne shook her head, and said, "No, but I think it might be *really important* that if we get a message saying we should be somewhere, *everyone has to be there.*" Daphne hadn't *seen* what had happened with Susan, after Daphne had tried to avert the prophecy by keeping Susan away. But she'd been *told* about it afterward, and now Daphne was afraid that...

She might have possibly...

Might possibly have Broken Something...

"Uh huh," said Hermione, who was doing the McGonagall Stare again.

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Nobody seemed to know where it had started, who had started it. If you'd tried tracing it afterward, tracked it back word by word and mutter by mutter, you probably would have found it all going in a huge circle.

Peregrine Derrick was tapped on his shoulder as he left Potions that morning.

Jaime Astorga heard a whisper in his ear at lunch.

Robert Jugson III discovered a tiny folded note under his plate.

Carl Sloper overheard two older Gryffindors whispering about it, and they gave him significant glances as they walked past.

Nobody seemed to know where the word began, or who had first spoken it, but it named the place, and it named the time, and it said that the color would be white.

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“Every single one of you had better be absolutely clear on this,” said Susan Bones. The Hufflepuff girl, or whatever strange power had possessed her, wasn’t even *pretending* to act normal anymore. The round-faced girl was striding through the halls with a firm, confident gait. “If we get there and it’s just one bully, that’s fine, you can fight them the regular way. My mysterious superpowers won’t activate if there are no innocents in danger. But if five seventh-year bullies jump out of a closet, you know what you do? That’s right, you *run away* and let me fight them. Finding a teacher is optional, the important thing is that you *run away* as soon as I create an opening. In a fight like that you are *liabilities*. You are *civilian targets* I have to worry about protecting. So you will get away as fast as possible and you *will not try* to do *anything* heroic or so help me, the hour you get out of your healer’s beds I will *personally* show up and *kick your asses* right back in. Are we all clear on that?”

“Yes,” squeaked most of the girls, though in Hannah’s case it came out, “Yes, Lady Susan!”

“*Don’t* call me that,” snapped Susan. “And *I don’t think I heard you, Miss Brown!* I’m warning you, I have friends who write plays and if you do anything dumb, posterity will remember you as Lavender, the Amazing Stupid Hostage.”

(Hermione was beginning to worry about just how many other Hogwarts students besides Harry had mysterious dark sides, and whether *she* was likely to develop one if she kept hanging out with them.)

“Alright, Captain Bones,” said Lavender in an unusually respectful tone, as they turned another corner along the shortest way to the library, passing through a rather large corridor studded with six sets of double doors, three sets on either side. “Can I ask if there’s any way for *me* to become a double witch?”

“Sign up for the Auror preparation program in your sixth year,” said Susan. “It’s the next best thing. Oh, and if a famous Auror offers to oversee your summer internship, just ignore anyone who warns you that he’s a terrible influence or that you’re almost certainly going to die.”

Lavender was nodding rapidly. “Got it, got it.”

(Padma, who hadn't actually been there last time, was giving Susan very skeptical looks.)

Then Susan suddenly stopped in place and her wand snapped up and she said, "*Protego Maximus!*"

A jolt of adrenaline went through Hermione, she was instantly drawing her wand and spinning around—

But she couldn't see anything wrong, through the greater blue haze now surrounding them all.

The other girls, who had likewise pulled into formation, were also looking puzzled.

"Sorry!" said Susan. "Sorry, girls. Give me a moment to check this place out. Thinking of a certain person has just reminded me that this hall we're in right now, with all those doors, would be an *excellent* place for an ambush."

There was a moment of silence.

"Now," said a harsh male voice, blurred into unidentifiability by a buzzing undertone.

All six sets of double doors slammed open.

White robes filed silently forward, all-concealing white robes without marks of House affiliation and white cloth hiding the faces beneath the hoods. They marched out, and marched out, crowding the great corridor in numbers too high to count easily. Less than fifty robes, probably. Certainly more than thirty. All of them already surrounded by blue haze.

Susan said some Extremely Bad Words, so awful that at almost any other time, Hermione would have noticed.

"That message!" Daphne cried in sudden horror. "It *wasn't* from—"

"Millicent Bulstrode?" said the voice and its buzzing undertone. "No, it wasn't. You see, Miss Greengrass, if the same girl sends off a Slytherin message every day you fight a bully, pretty soon someone else will notice. We'll have a talk with her after we're done with you."

"Miss Susan," said Hannah in a voice just starting to quaver, "can you be super enough to—"

Wands rose in many hands. There came a series of blinding flashes of green light, a massive volley of shieldbreakers, at the end of which

there was no more protective blue dome surrounding them, and Susan had fallen to her knees, clutching her head.

Barriers of solid blackness had sprung into being at both ends of the corridor. Behind the double doors that Hermione could see into, there were only unused classrooms, very dead ends.

"No," said the male voice with that buzz overlaid, "she can't. In case you haven't noticed, you've gotten quite a lot of people very angry at you and we have no intention of losing this time. All right everyone, prepare to fire."

The wands around the perimeter aimed again, low enough that their enemies wouldn't hit each other if they missed.

And then another male voice, with a similar buzz accompanying it, suddenly said "*Homenum Revelio!*"

An instant later there was another massive volley of shieldbreakers and hexes, fired on reflex at the suddenly revealed figure, shattering the shields which had almost immediately begun to form around it—

And then, as that same figure fell to the ground, a stunned silence.

"Professor Snape?" said the second voice. "He's the one who's been interfering?"

It was the Potions Master of Hogwarts who now lay unconscious on the stone floor, the dirt-spotted robes stirring for a final moment before they settled in place, his fallen hand outstretched toward where his wand was slowly rolling away.

"No," said the first male voice, now sounding a bit more uncertain. Then it rallied, "No, that can't possibly be it. He heard us passing the word, of course, and came along to make sure nobody screwed it up again. We'll wake him up afterward and apologize and he'll Memory-Charm the children so they don't remember, he's a Professor so he can do that. Anyway, we should make sure we're *really* alone now. *Veritas Oculum!*"

Fully two dozen different Charms must have been spoken, then, but no more invisible people showed up. One of them in particular made Hermione's heart sink; she recognized it as the Charm which had been listed alongside the description of the True Cloak of Invisibility, which would not reveal the Cloak, but would tell you whether it or certain other artifacts were nearby.

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"Girls?" whispered Susan. She was slowly pushing herself to her feet, though Hermione could see her limbs swaying and quivering. "Girls, I'm sorry for what I said before. If you've got anything clever and heroic to try, you might as well try it."

"Oh, yeah," Tracey Davis said then, her voice trembling. "I almost forgot." The Slytherin girl raised her voice, and spoke.

"Hey, all of you!" yelled Tracey in a high-pitched shaky shout. "Hey, are you planning to hurt me too?"

"Yes, actually," said the buzzing voice of the leader. "We are."

"I'm under Harry Potter's protection, you know! Anyone who tries to hurt me will learn the true meaning of Chaos! So are you going to let me go?" It should have sounded defiant. It came out sounding terrified.

There was a pause. Some of the hoods of the robes turned to face each other, then turned back to face the girls.

"Hm..." said the buzzing male voice. "Hm... no."

Tracey Davis put her wand away into her robes.

Slowly, deliberately, she raised her right hand high in the air, and pressed her thumb and forefingers together.

"Go ahead," said that voice.

Tracey Davis snapped her fingers.

There was a long, awful pause.

Nothing happened.

"Yes, well," said the voice—

Tracey said, her voice sounding even higher and shakier, "*Acatthla, mundatus sum.*" Her hand, stretching up still further, snapped its fingers a second time.

A nameless chill went down Hermione's spine then, a frisson of fear and disorientation like she'd just felt the floor tilt beneath her, threatening to spill her into some darkness lying beneath.

"What's she—" began a buzzing female voice.

Tracey's face looked pale, twisted with fear, but her lips moved, spilled forth sound in a high chant, "*Mabra, brahoring, mabra...*"

A chill wind seemed to spring up within the confines of the corridor, a dark breath that caressed their faces and touched their hands with ice.

"Fire at her on my count!" shouted the leading voice. "One, two, *three!*" and maybe-forty voices roared spells, creating a huge concentric array of fiery bolts that lit the wide corridor brighter than the Sun—

—for the short moment before the bolts struck and vanished upon a dark red octagon that appeared in the air around the girls, and then disappeared a moment later.

Hermione saw it, she saw it but she still couldn't imagine it; she couldn't imagine a Shielding Charm that powerful, a spell that would withstand an army.

And Tracey's voice went on chanting, her voice sounding louder and more confident, and her face screwed up like she was trying to remember something *very exactly*.

*"Shuffle, duffle, muzzle, muff.
Fista, wista, mista-cuff."*

Now all those present could feel it, heroines and bullies alike, the sensation of some dark will pressing down on them, a tingling in the air as something built and built and built. All the blue hazes around the white robes, all the shielding spells, had died out without any visible hex touching them. There were more flashes of light as more desperate spells were fired, but they fizzled out in midair like candle-flames touching water.

The black barriers at the two ends of the corridor had dissipated like smoke beneath the growing pressure, but their evaporation revealed the exits sealed, blocked by tiled slats of dark metal that looked stained as though with blood; and as Tracey chanted "*Lemarchand, Lament, Lemarchand,*" a dreadful blue light began to shine out from beneath the metal slats and between them; and the six sets of double doors slammed shut all at once, as panicked white-robed bullies began to pound on them and howl.

Then Tracey's hand slashed to her left, and she cried "*Khornath!*", then her hand pointed below her and "*Slaaneth!*", above her "*Nurgolth!*", and then, to her right, "*TZINTCHI!*"

Tracey paused, took a deep breath; and Hermione found her voice and cried, "*Stop! Tracey, stop!*"

But there was a strange wild smile on Tracey's face. She raised her hand still higher, and snapped her fingers a third time; and when she

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spoke again, beneath her high girlish voice there was an undertone as though some lower chorus were chanting along with her.

"Darkness beyond darkness, deeper than pitchest black.

Buried beneath the flow of time...

From darkness to darkness, your voice echoes in the emptiness,

Unknown to death, nor known to life."

"What are you doing?" shrieked Parvati, and the Gryffindor girl stretched out a hand as though to pull down the Slytherin, who was now starting to float upward into the air; and both Daphne and Susan grabbed Parvati's arm at the same time and Daphne cried out, "Don't, we don't know what will happen if the ritual is interrupted!"

"Well what happens if it gets COMPLETED?" screamed Hermione, as close as she'd ever come to total brain meltdown.

Susan's face was white as chalk, and she whispered, "I'm sorry, Mad-Eye..."

And Tracey spoke on, her body floating higher and higher off the floor, her black hair whipping wildly around her in the chill winds.

"You who know the gate, who are the gate, the key and guardian of the gate: I bid you open the way for him, and manifest his power before me!"

The corridor was plunged then into utter darkness and silence, so that only Tracey could be seen and heard, like there was nothing left in the universe except her and the light illuminating her from some nameless source.

The shining girl raised her hand one final time, and with dreadful gravity, pressed her thumb and forefinger together.

And within the darkness Hermione looked at Tracey's face and saw that the Slytherin girl's eyes were now, to the exact shade, the green of Harry Potter's.

"Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres!

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres!

HARRY JAMES POTTER-EVANS-VERRES!"

There was a snap like thunder, and then—

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Harry had chosen to assume a rather relaxed posture, as he sat in a low chair before the mighty desk of the Headmaster of Hogwarts: one leg cocked over his knee, and his arms sprawling casually to either side. Harry was doing his best to disregard the noise from the surrounding devices, although the one directly behind him that sounded like an owl hooting desperately as it was put through a woodchipper was pretty difficult to ignore.

"Harry," the old wizard said from behind the desk, the aged voice level as the blue eyes stared out at him from beneath the shining half-moon spectacles. Headmaster Dumbledore had garbed himself in robes of midnight purple; not true formal black, but dark enough to come close indeed to deadly seriousness, as the wizarding world counted the meaning of fashions. "Were you... *responsible* for this?"

"I cannot deny that my influence was at work," Harry said.

The old wizard took off his glasses, leaned forward to stare at Harry directly, blue eyes to green. "I will ask you one question," the Headmaster said in a quiet voice. "Do you think that what you did today was—*appropriate*?"

"They were bullies and they came to that hallway with the direct intent of hurting Hermione Granger and seven other first-year children," Harry said levelly. "If I am not too young for moral judgment, then neither are they. No, Headmaster, they didn't deserve to die. But they *did* deserve to be stripped naked and glued to the ceiling."

The old wizard put his glasses back on. For the first time that Harry had seen of him, the Headmaster seemed to be at a loss for words. "As Merlin himself is my witness," said Dumbledore, "I haven't the faintest notion of how I ought to react to this."

"That's pretty much the effect I was aiming for," said Harry. He felt like he ought to be whistling a merry tune, but unfortunately he had never learned how to whistle reliably.

"I need not ask you who is *directly* responsible," said the Headmaster. "Only three wizards within Hogwarts might be powerful enough. I myself did not do it. Severus has assured me he was not involved. And the third..." The Headmaster shook his head in some dismay. "You loaned the Defense Professor your Cloak, Harry. I do not think that was wise. For

now that he has escaped detection by simple Charms, he surely knows that it is a Deathly Hallow—if, indeed, he did not know from its first touch upon his flesh.”

“Professor Quirrell had already deduced my possession of an invisibility cloak,” Harry said. “And knowing him, he has probably guessed that it is a Deathly Hallow. But in *this* case, Headmaster, it so happens that Professor Quirrell was under one of those face-concealing white robes.”

There was another pause.

“How very cunning,” said the Headmaster. He leaned back in his throne and sighed. “I have spoken to the Defense Professor. Just before you, indeed. I did not quite know what to say. I told him that this was not the approved Hogwarts policy for dealing with infractions of hallway discipline, and that I did not feel it was appropriate for a Hogwarts professor to do what he had done.”

“And what did Professor Quirrell say to that?” said Harry, who was not impressed with Hogwarts’s current policies for enforcing hallway discipline.

The Headmaster wore a look of resignation. “He said: *Fire me.*”

Somehow Harry managed not to cheer out loud.

The Headmaster frowned. “But *why* did he do it, Harry?”

“Because Professor Quirrell doesn’t like school bullies and I asked very politely,” said Harry. *And he was feeling bored and I thought this might cheer him up.* “Either that or it’s part of some incredibly deep plot.”

The Headmaster rose up from behind the desk, began to pace back and forth before the hatstand that held the Sorting Hat and the red slippers. “Harry, do you not feel that all of this has gotten a bit...”

“Awesome?” offered Harry.

“*Utterly and completely out of hand* would say it better,” said Dumbledore. “I am not sure there has ever been a time in the whole history of this school when things have become so, so... I don’t have a word for this, Harry, because things have never become like this before, and so no one has ever needed to invent a word for it.”

Harry would have tried to invent words to express how deeply complimented he felt, if he hadn’t been snerkling too hard to speak.

The Headmaster was regarding him with increasing graveness. "Harry, do you understand *at all* why I find these events concerning?"

"Honestly?" said Harry. "No, not really. I mean, of course Professor McGonagall would object to anything that breaks up the dull monotony of the Hogwarts school experience. But then Professor McGonagall wouldn't set a chicken on fire."

The frown lines deepened on Dumbledore's wrinkled face. "That, Harry, is not what disturbs me," the Headmaster said quietly. "There was a full battle fought in these halls!"

"Headmaster," Harry said, trying to keep his voice carefully respectful, "Professor Quirrell and I did not choose for that battle to happen. The bullies did that. We just decided to have the Light side win. I know there are times where the boundaries of morality are uncertain, but in this case the line separating the villains and the heroines was twenty meters tall and drawn in white fire. Our intervention may have been *weird*, but it certainly wasn't *wrong*—"

Dumbledore had gone back to his desk, sat down in his padded throne with a dull thump, and was now covering his face with both his hands.

"Am I missing something here?" Harry said. "I thought you'd be secretly on our side, Headmaster. It was the Gryffindor thing to do. The Weasley twins would approve, *Fawkes* would approve—" Harry glanced at the golden perch, but it was empty; either the phoenix had more important things to do, or the Headmaster hadn't invited him to today's meeting.

"That," said the Headmaster in an old and tired and somewhat muffled voice, "is precisely the problem, Harry. There is a reason why courageous young heroes are not put in charge of schools."

"All right," Harry said. He couldn't quite keep the skepticism out of his voice. "What am I missing this time?"

The old wizard lifted his head, his face now solemn, and calmer. "Listen, Harry," said Dumbledore, "hear me well; for all who wield power must learn this in time. Some things in this world are, indeed, truly simple. If you pick up a stone and drop it again, the earth will be no heavier for it, the stars will not move from their paths. I say this, Harry, so that you know I am not pretending to be wise, when I tell you that even

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as some things are simple, others are complex. There are greater wizardries which leave marks upon the world, and marks upon those who wield them, as a simple Charm would *not*. Those wizardries demand hesitation, consideration of consequence, a moment to weigh the meaning of their marks. And yet the most intricate magics known to me are simpler than the simplest soul. *People*, Harry, people are always marked, by what they do and by what is done to them. Do you, then, understand how to say, 'Here is the line between hero and villain!' is not enough to say that what you did was right?"

"Headmaster," Harry said evenly, "this is not a decision I made at random. No, I don't know what exact effect this will have on every single one of the bullies present. But if I always waited for perfect information before I acted, I would never do anything. When it comes to the future psychological development of, say, Peregrine Derrick, beating up eight first-year girls probably wouldn't have been good for him. And it wasn't enough to just stop them quietly and quickly, since then they would just try again later; they had to see that there was a protective power worth fearing." Harry's voice stayed level. "But of course, since I *am* a good guy, I didn't want to permanently injure them or even cause them any pain; and yet the penalty had to be enough to weigh on the minds of anyone thinking about trying it again. So, after weighing the expected outcomes as best I could with my boundedly rational intellect, I thought it would be wisest to strip the bullies naked and glue them to the ceiling."

The young hero stared directly into the old wizard's gaze, unflinching green eyes locked with the blue behind the spectacles.

And since I wasn't there and didn't do anything personally, there's no lawful way to punish me under the Hogwarts school rules; the only one who acted was Professor Quirrell, and he's fireproof. And just breaking the rules to get at me wouldn't be a wise thing to do to the hero you're grooming to fight Lord Voldemort... This time Harry actually *had* tried to think through all the ramifications in advance, before he'd made the suggestion to Professor Quirrell; and for once the Defense Professor hadn't called him a fool, just slowly smiled and then begun to laugh.

"I understand your intentions, Harry," the old wizard said. "You think you have taught the bullies of Hogwarts a lesson. But if Peregrine Derrick

could learn that lesson, he would not be Peregrine Derrick. He will only be provoked more by what you do—it is not fair, it is not right, but that is the way it is.” The old wizard closed his eyes, as though in brief pain, and then opened them again. “Harry, the most painful truth any hero must learn is that the right cannot, should not, must not win every battle. All of this began when Miss Granger fought three older enemies and won. If she had been content with this, the echoes of her deed would have died away in time. Yet instead she banded together with her classmates and raised her wand in open challenge to Peregrine Derrick and all his kind; and his kind cannot but raise their own wands in answer. So Jaime Astorga went hunting her, and in the natural course he would have beaten her; it would have been a sad day, but it would have ended there. There is not enough magic in eight first-year witches all together to defeat such a foe. But you could not accept that, Harry, could not let Miss Granger learn her own lessons; and so you sent the Defense Professor to watch over them invisibly, and pierce Astorga’s shields when Daphne Greengrass struck at him—”

What? thought Harry.

The old wizard went on speaking. “Each time you intervened, Harry, it escalated matters further and yet further. Soon Miss Granger was facing Robert Jugson himself, the son of a Death Eater, with two strong allies at his side. Painful indeed it would have been for her, if Miss Granger had lost that battle. And yet again by your will and Quirinus’s hand, this time shown more openly, she won.”

Harry was still struggling with the notion of the Defense Professor watching invisibly over SPHEW, guarding the heroines from harm.

“And so,” the old wizard finished, “that is how we came to today, Harry, to forty-four students attacking eight first-year witches. A full battle in these halls! I know it was not your intent, but you must accept some measure of responsibility. Such things did not happen before you came to this school, not through all my decades in Hogwarts; neither when I was a student nor when I was a Professor.”

“Thank you very much,” Harry said evenly. “Though I think Professor Quirrell deserves more credit than me.”

The blue eyes widened. “Harry...”

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“Those bullies were attacking victims long before this year,” Harry said. Despite his best efforts, his voice was starting to rise. “But nobody seems to have taught the students that they’re allowed to fight *back*. I know it’s much harder to *ignore* a two-sided fight than some helpless victims getting hexed or almost pushed out of windows, but it’s not exactly *worse*, is it? I wish I’d read more of Godric Gryffindor’s writings so I could quote him, there’s got to be something in there about this. Open battle may be *louder* than the victims suffering in silence, it may be harder to pretend that nothing is happening, but the final result is better—”

“No, it is not,” Dumbledore said. “It is not, Harry. To *always* fight the darkness, to *never* let evil pass unchallenged—that is not heroism, but simple pride. Even Godric Gryffindor did not think that every war was worth fighting, though he went his whole life from one battle to another.” The old wizard’s voice went quieter. “In truth, Harry, the words you speak—they are not evil. No, not evil, and yet they have frightened me. You are one who might someday wield great power, over wizardry, over your fellow wizards. And if, come that day, you still think that evil must never pass unchallenged—” Now a note of real worry had entered the Headmaster’s voice. “The world has grown more fragile since the age when Hogwarts was raised; I fear it cannot bear the fury of another Godric Gryffindor. And he was slower to his wrath than you.” The old wizard shook his head. “You are too ready to fight, Harry. Much too ready to fight, and Hogwarts itself is becoming a more violent place around you.”

“Well,” Harry said carefully, after weighing his words. “I don’t know if it will help to say this, but I think you’re getting the wrong impression of what I’m all about. I don’t like real fighting either. It’s scary, and violent, and somebody might get hurt. But I *didn’t* fight today, Headmaster.”

The Headmaster frowned. “You sent the Defense Professor in your place—”

“Professor Quirrell didn’t do any fighting either,” Harry said calmly. “There wasn’t anyone there strong enough to fight him. What happened today wasn’t fighting, it was winning.”

It was a while then before the old wizard spoke. “That may be as it may be,” the Headmaster said, “but all these conflicts must end. I can hear the

strain in the air, and with each of these clashes, it rises. All this must end, decisively and soon; you must not stand in the way of its ending.”

The old wizard gestured toward the great oaken door of his office, and Harry departed through it.

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It was with some surprise that Harry stepped out from between the huge grey gargoyles which had made way for him, and saw that Quirinus Quirrell was still slumped against the stone of the corridor wall, a thick thread of spittle drooling from his slack mouth onto his Professorial robes, in just the same position he'd occupied when Harry had first gone up into the Headmaster's office.

Harry waited, but the slumped man didn't rise up; and after long awkward seconds, Harry began to walk down the corridor again.

“Mr. Potter?” came a soft call, after Harry had turned two corners; a quiet voice carrying unnaturally through the halls.

When Harry had returned he found Professor Quirrell still slumped against the wall, but the pale eyes now watched him with keen intelligence.

I'm sorry to have tired you out—

It was something that Harry couldn't say. He'd noticed the correlation between the effort Professor Quirrell expended and the time he had to spend 'resting'. But Harry had reasoned that if the effort was too painful or detrimental, surely Professor Quirrell would just say no. Now Harry was wondering if that reasoning had actually been correct, and if not, how to apologize...

The Defense Professor spoke in a quiet voice, the rest of the body unmoving. “How went your meeting with the Headmaster, Mr. Potter?”

“I'm not sure,” Harry said. “Not the way I predicted. He seems to believe the Light should lose a lot more often than I'd consider wise. Plus I'm not sure he understands the difference between trying to fight and trying to win. It explains a lot, actually...” Harry hadn't read much about the Wizarding War, but he'd read enough to know that the good guys probably *had* acquired a pretty accurate picture of who most of the worst

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ESCALATION OF CONFLICTS

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Death Eaters were, and *hadn't* just owed them all hand grenades over the course of five minutes.

A soft, soft laugh from the pale lips. "Dumbledore does not comprehend the enjoyment of winning, just as he does not comprehend the enjoyment of the game. Tell me, Mr. Potter. Did you suggest this little plan with the deliberate intention of relieving my tedium?"

"That was among my many motives," Harry said, because some instinct had warned that he couldn't just say *Yes*.

"Do you know," the Defense Professor said in soft reflective tones, "there are those who have tried to soften my darker moods, and those who have indeed participated in brightening my day, but you are the first person ever to succeed in doing it deliberately?" The Defense Professor seemed to straighten up from the wall with a peculiar motion which might have included magic as well as muscle; and the Defense Professor began to walk away without a look back in Harry's direction. Only a single small gesture of one finger indicated that Harry was to follow.

"I particularly enjoyed that chant you composed for Miss Davis," said Professor Quirrell after they had walked a short distance. "Though you might have been wiser to consult me in advance, before giving it to her to memorize." One hand bestirred itself to within the Defense Professor's robes and drew forth a wand, which traced a small gesture in the air, after which all the faraway sounds of the castle Hogwarts fell silent. "Tell me honestly, Mr. Potter, have you somehow acquired a familiarity with the theory of Dark rituals? That is not the same as confessing an intent to cast them; many wizards know the principles."

"No..." Harry said slowly. He had decided some time ago against trying to sneak into the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts library, for much the same reason he'd decided a year earlier *not* to look up how to make explosives out of common household materials. Harry prided himself on at least having *more* sense than people thought he did.

"Oh?" said Professor Quirrell. The man was walking more normally now, and the lips curved about in a peculiar smile. "Why, perhaps you possess a natural talent for the field, then."

"Yes, well," Harry said wearily. "I suppose Dr. Seuss also has a natural talent for Dark rituals, because the part about *shuffle, duffle, muzzle, muff*

came from a children's book called *Bartholomew and the Oobleck*—"

"No, not that part," said Professor Quirrell. His voice grew a little stronger, took on some of its normal lecturing tone. "An ordinary Charm, Mr. Potter, can be cast merely by speaking certain words, making precise motions of the wand, expending some of your own strength. Even powerful spells may be invoked in this way, if the magic is efficient as well as efficacious. But with the greatest of magics, speech alone does not suffice to give them structure. You must perform specific actions, make significant choices. Nor is the temporary expenditure of your own strength sufficient to set them in motion; a ritual requires permanent sacrifice. The power of such a greater spell, compared to ordinary Charms, can be like day compared to night. But many rituals—indeed, most—happen to demand at least one sacrifice which might inspire squeamishness. And so the entire field of ritual magic, containing all the furthest and most interesting reaches of wizardry, is widely regarded as Dark. With a few exceptions carved out by tradition, of course." Professor Quirrell's voice took on a sardonic tinge. "The Unbreakable Vow is too useful to certain wealthy Houses to be outlawed entirely—even though to bind a man's will through all his days is indeed a dread and terrible act, more fearsome than many lesser rituals that wizards shun. A cynic might conclude that which rituals are prohibited is not so much a matter of morality, as habit. But I digress..." Professor Quirrell made a brief coughing sound, a clearing of his throat. "The Unbreakable Vow requires three participants and three sacrifices. The one who receives the Unbreakable Vow must be one who could have come to trust the Vower, but chooses instead to demand the Vow from them, and they sacrifice that possibility of trust. The one who makes the Vow must be someone who could have chosen to do what the Vow demands of them, and they sacrifice that capacity for choice. And the third wizard, the binder, permanently sacrifices a small portion of their own magic, to sustain the Vow forever."

"Ah," Harry said. "I'd *wondered* why that spell wasn't used all over the place, every time two people have difficulty trusting each other... although... why don't wizards on their deathbeds charge money to bind Unbreakable Vows, and use that to leave an inheritance for their children—"

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"Because they are stupid," said Professor Quirrell. "There are hundreds of useful rituals which could be performed if men had so much sense; I could name twenty without stopping to draw breath. But in any case, Mr. Potter, the thing about such rituals—whether or not you choose to term them Dark—is that they are shaped to be magically efficacious, not to appear impressive when performed. I suppose there is a certain tendency for the more powerful rituals to require more dreadful sacrifices. Even so, the most terrible ritual known to me demands only a rope which has hanged a man and a sword which has slain a woman; and that for a ritual which promised to summon Death itself—though what is truly meant by that I do not know and do not care to discover, since it was also said that the counterspell to dismiss Death had been lost. The most dread chant I have encountered does not sound even a hundredth as fearsome as the chant you composed for Miss Davis. Those among the bullies who had a passing familiarity with Dark rituals—and I am certain that there were some—must have been terrified beyond the capacity of words to describe. If there existed a true ritual which appeared that impressive, Mr. Potter, it would melt the Earth."

"Um," said Harry.

Professor Quirrell's lips twisted further. "Ah, but the truly amusing thing was this. You see, Mr. Potter, the chant of every ritual names that which is to be sacrificed, and that which is to be gained. The chant which you gave to Miss Davis spoke, first, of a darkness beyond darkness, buried beneath the flow of time, which knows the gate, and is the gate. And the second thing spoken of, Mr. Potter, was the manifestation of your own presence. And always, in each element of the ritual, *first* is named that which is sacrificed, and *then* is said the use commanded of it."

"I... see," said Harry, as he trod through the halls of Hogwarts after Professor Quirrell, following him toward the Defense Professor's office. "So my chant, the way I wrote it, implies that the Outer God, Yog-Sothoth—"

"Was permanently sacrificed in a ritual which but briefly manifested your presence," said Professor Quirrell. "I suppose we will discover tomorrow whether anyone took that seriously, when we read the newspapers and see whether all the magical nations of the world are banding

together in a desperate effort to seal off your incursion into our reality.”

They walked on, as the Defense Professor began chuckling, odd throaty sounds.

The two of them didn’t talk after that until they came to the Defense Professor’s office, and then the man halted with his hand upon the door.

“It is a very strange thing,” the Defense Professor said, his voice now soft again, almost inaudible. The man was not looking at Harry, and Harry saw only his back. “A very strange thing... There was a time when I would have sacrificed a finger from my wand hand, to work upon the bullies of Hogwarts as we have worked upon them this day. To make them fear me as they now fear you, to have the deference of all the students and the adoration of many, I would have given my finger for that. You have everything now that I wanted then. All that I know of human nature says that I should hate you. And yet I do not. It is a very strange thing.”

It should have been a touching moment, but instead Harry felt a coldness traveling down his spine, as though he were a little fish in the sea, and some vast white shark had just looked him over and decided after a visible hesitation not to eat him.

The man opened the door to Defense Professor’s office, and passed within, and was gone.

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AFTERMATH:

Her fellow Slytherins were looking at Daphne like... like they didn’t have the faintest idea of how to look at her.

The Gryffindors were looking at her like they didn’t have the faintest idea of how to look at her.

Showing no fear, Daphne Greengrass strode into the Potions classroom, wrapped in the imperious dignity of a Noble and Most Ancient House. Inside she was feeling much the same way everyone else probably did.

It had been two hours since the *What?* when the *What?* had happened and Daphne’s brain was still going: *What? What? What?*

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The classroom was quiet as they all waited for Professor Snape to arrive. Lavender and Parvati sat near a cluster of other Gryffindors, surrounded by silent stares. The two of them were looking over each other's homework before class started, and nobody else was helping them or talking to them. Even Lavender, who Daphne would have sworn could never be fazed by anything, seemed subdued.

Daphne sat down at her desk, and took *Magical Draughts and Potions* out of her bag, and began looking over her own homework, doing her very best to act normal. People stared at her, and said nothing—

A gasp went through the whole classroom. Girls and boys flinched back, leaning away from the door like they were stalks of wheat touched by a gust of wind.

In the door stood Tracey Davis, wrapped in a black tattered cloak which had been draped over her Hogwarts uniform.

Tracey walked slowly into the classroom, swaying slightly with each step, looking like she was trying to *drift*. She sat down at her accustomed desk, which happened to be right next to Daphne's.

Slowly Tracey's head turned to stare at Daphne.

"See?" the Slytherin girl said in a low, sepulchral tone. "I told you I'd get him before she did."

"What?" blurted Daphne, who immediately wished she hadn't said anything.

"I got Harry Potter before Granger did." Tracey's voice was still low, but her eyes were gleaming with triumph. "See, Daphne, what General Potter wants in a girl isn't a pretty face or a pretty dress. He wants a girl willing to channel his dread powers, that's what he wants. Now I'm his—and he's mine!"

This announcement produced a frozen silence through the whole classroom.

"Excuse me, Miss Davis," said the cultured voice of Draco Malfoy, who seemed unconcerned as he shuffled through his own Potions parchments. The other scion of a Most Ancient House didn't so much as glance up from his desk, even as everyone else turned to look at him. "Did Harry Potter actually *tell* you that? Using those words?"

"Well, no..." Tracey said, and then her eyes flashed angrily. "But he'd *better* take me in, now that I've sacrificed my soul to him and everything!"

"*You sacrificed your soul to Harry Potter?*" gasped Millicent. There was a clatter from the other side of the room as Ron Weasley dropped his inkwell.

"Well, I'm pretty sure I did," said Tracey, sounding briefly uncertain before she rallied. "I mean, I looked at myself in a mirror and I look paler now, and I can always feel darkness surrounding me, and I was a conduit for his dread powers and everything... Daphne, you also saw my eyes go green, right? I didn't see it myself but that's what I heard afterward."

There was a pause, broken only by the sounds of Ron Weasley trying to clean up his desk.

"Daphne?" said Tracey.

"I don't believe it," said an angry voice. "There's no way the next Dark Lord would take *you* to be his bride!"

Slowly, and with considerable disbelief, heads turned to stare at Pansy Parkinson.

"Hush, you," said Tracey, "or I'll..." The Slytherin girl paused. Then Tracey's voice went even lower, and she said, "Hush, you, or I'll devour your soul."

"You can't do that," said Pansy, in the confident tones of a hen which had worked out a perfectly good pecking order where she was at the top, and wasn't about to go updating that belief based on mere evidence.

Slowly, like she was trying to float, Tracey got up from her desk. There were more gasps. Daphne felt like she'd been Petrified in place within her chair.

"Tracey?" said Lavender in a small voice. "Please don't do all that again. Please?"

Now Pansy was showing definite nervousness as Tracey swayed toward her desk. "What d'you think you're doing?" Pansy said, not quite managing to sound indignant.

"I told you," Tracey said menacingly. "I'm going to devour your soul."

Tracey bent down over Pansy, who sat frozen at her desk; and, with their lips almost touching, made a loud inhaling noise.

"There!" said Tracey as she straightened. "I ate your soul."

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"No you didn't!" said Pansy.

"Did too!" said Tracey.

There was a very slight pause—

"Merlin, she *did*!" cried Theodore Nott. "You look all pale now, and your eyes seem empty!"

"*What?*" screeched Pansy, turning pale. The girl leapt up from her desk and began frantically rummaging through her bookbag. After Pansy drew out a mirror and looked at herself, she turned even paler.

Daphne abandoned all pretense of aristocratic poise and let her head fall to the desk with a dull thud, as she wondered whether going to the same school as all the other important families was really worth going to the same school as the Chaos Legion.

"Ooh, you're in trouble now, Pansy," said Seamus Finnigan. "I don't know exactly what happens when a Dementor Kisses you, but if Tracey Davis kisses you that's probably even worse."

"I've heard about people without souls," Dean Thomas said gloomily. "They have to dress all in black, and they write awful poetry, and nothing ever makes them happy. They're all *angsty*."

"I don't want to be *angsty*!" cried Pansy.

"Too bad," said Dean Thomas. "You've got to be, now that your soul's gone."

Pansy turned, and stretched out a begging hand toward Draco Malfoy's desk. "Draco!" she said pleadingly. "Mr. Malfoy! Please, make Tracey give me back my soul!"

"I can't," said Tracey. "I *ate* it."

"Make her throw it up!" yelled Pansy.

The heir of Malfoy had slumped forward, resting his head in both hands, so that nobody could see his face. "Why is my life like this?" said Draco Malfoy.

A wild babble of whispers started up as Tracey returned to her desk, now smiling in satisfaction, while Pansy stood in the midst of the classroom, wringing her hands and tears starting from her eyes—

"*Be. Quiet.*"

The soft, lethal voice seemed to fill the whole classroom as Professor Snape stalked in through the door. His face was angrier than Daphne

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had ever seen it, sending a jolt of genuine fear down her spine. Hastily she looked down at her homework.

“Sit down, Parkinson,” the Potions Master hissed, “and you, Davis, take off that ridiculous cloak—”

“*Professor Snaaaaaape!*” wailed Pansy Parkinson in tears. “*Tracey ate my soooooouul!*”

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE

SELF ACTUALIZATION, PART X: RESPONSIBILITY

It was a looping, meandering alley in the midst of Hogwarts, wandering like a stray lock of hair; sometimes crossing itself, it seemed, but you couldn't ever get to the end if you gave into the temptation of apparent shortcuts.

At the end of the tangle, six students leaned against rough stones, robes black against the grey walls and trimmed in green, eyes darting from one to each other. Torches burned in the windowless sconce, casting light to ward off the darkness and heat to ward off the chill of the Slytherin dungeons.

"I am *certain*," Reese Belka snapped, "absolutely *certain*, that was no true ritual. Little firstie witches can't do that kind of magic, and even if they could, who's ever heard of a Dark ritual which *sacrifices* a sealed horror for—*that*?"

"Were you—" said Lucian Bole. "I mean—after that girl snapped her fingers—"

Belka's glare should have melted him. "No," she spat, "I was *not*."

"That is, she wasn't naked," drawled Marcus Flint, his broad shoulders leaning back in apparent relaxation against the lumpy stone surface. "Covered in chocolate frosting, yes, but not naked."

"This day Potter has offered great insult to our Houses," said the grim voice of Jaime Astorga.

"Yes, well, I'm sorry to be blunt," Randolph Lee said evenly. The seventh-year duelist rubbed at his chin, where a faint fuzz of beard had been allowed to grow. "But when someone sticks you to the ceiling, it's a message, Astorga. It's a message which says: I'm an incredibly powerful Dark Wizard who could've done anything to you I damn well pleased, and I don't care if your House is offended, either."

Robert Jugson III gave a soft, low laugh at this, a chuckle that sent chills down several spines. "It makes you wonder if you picked the wrong side, doesn't it? I've heard tales about *messages* like that, sent at the old Dark Lord's bidding..."

"I'm not ready to kneel to Potter just yet," said Astorga, staring hard into Jugson's eyes.

"Neither am I," said Belka.

Jugson was holding his wand, and he turned it idly back and forth in his fingers, pointing it up and then downward. "Are you a Gryffindor or a Slytherin?" said Jugson. "Everyone's got a price. Everyone smart."

This statement produced a moment of silence.

"Shouldn't Malfoy be here?" Bole said tentatively.

Flint gave a dismissive flick of his fingers. "Whatever Malfoy's plotting, he wants to put on an air of innocence. He can't be seen missing at the same time as us."

"But everyone *knows* that already," said Bole. "Even in the other Houses."

"Yes, very clumsy," said Belka. She snorted. "Malfoy or no, he's just a little firstie and we don't need him here."

"I will owl my father," Jugson said softly, "and *he* will speak to Lord Malfoy himself—" Abruptly, Jugson stopped speaking.

"I don't know about *you*, dearies," Belka said with fake sweetness, "but *I* don't plan on running scared from a false ritual, and *I'm* not done with Potter and his pet mudblood."

Nobody answered. All their gazes were looking past her.

Slowly, Belka turned around to see what the others were staring at.

"You will do *nothing*," hissed their Head of House. Severus Snape's face was enraged, when he spoke small spots of spittle flew from his mouth, further dotting his already-dirtied robes. "You fools have done

enough! You have embarrassed my House—*lost* to first-years—now you speak of embroiling noble Lords of the Wizengamot in your *pathetic* childish squabbles? *I* shall deal with this matter. *You* will not embarrass this House again, you will not *risk* embarrassing this House again! You are *done* with fighting witches, and if I hear otherwise—”

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If you thought they'd be sitting next to each other at dinnertime, after that, you'd be quite mistaken.

“What does she *want* from me?” came the plaintive cry of a boy who, for all his extensive reading in the scientific literature, was still a bit naive about certain things. “Did she *want* to get beaten up?”

The upper-year Ravenclaw boys who'd sat down next to him at the dinner-table exchanged swift glances with each other until, by some unspoken protocol, the most experienced of their number spoke.

“Look,” said Arty Grey, the seventh-year who was leading in their competition by three witches and a Defense Professor, “the thing you've got to understand is, just because she's *angry* doesn't mean you lost points. Miss Granger is angry because she got all frightened and you're *there to be blamed*, you understand? But at the same time, even though she won't admit it, she'll be touched that her boyfriend went to such ridiculous and frankly insane lengths to protect her.”

“This is not about *points*,” ground out Harry Potter, the words visibly escaping from between his clenched teeth. Dinner sat ignored on the table in front of him. “This is about *justice*. And *I. Am. Not. Her. Boyfriend!*”

This was met by a certain amount of sniggering from all present.

“Yeah, well,” said a sixth-year Ravenclaw boy, “I think after she kisses you to bring you out of Dementation and you stick forty-four bullies to the ceiling for her, we've gone way past ‘she's not my girlfriend, really’ and into the question of what your kids will be like. Wow, that's a scary thought...” The Ravenclaw trailed off and then said, in a smaller voice, “Please don't look at me like that.”

"Look," said Arty Grey, "I'm sorry to be blunt about this, but you can have justice or you can have girls, you can't have both at the same time." He clapped a companionable hand on Harry Potter's shoulder. "You've got potential, kid, more potential than any wizard I've ever seen, but you've got to learn how to *use* it, you know? Be a bit sweeter to them, learn some spells to clean up that mess you call hair. Above all, you need to hide your evilness better—not *too* well, but better. Nice well-groomed boys get girls, and Dark Wizards also get girls, but nice well-groomed boys suspected of being *secretly* Dark get more girls than you can imagine—"

"Not interested," Harry said flatly, as he picked up the boy's hand from his shoulder and unceremoniously dropped it.

"But you will be," said Arty Grey, his voice low and foreboding. "Ah, you will be!"

Elsewhere along the same table—

"*Romantic?*" shrieked Hermione Granger, so loudly that some of the girls next to her winced. "*What part of that was romantic?* He didn't *ask*! He never *asks*! He just sends ghosts after people and glues them to ceilings and does whatever he wants with *my* life!"

"But don't you see?" said a fourth-year witch. "It means that even though he's evil, he *loves* you!"

"You're not helping," said Penelope Clearwater a little further down the table, but she was ignored. Several older witches had started toward Hermione, after she'd sat down at the extreme opposite end of the table from Harry Potter, but then a swifter cloud of younger girls had surrounded Hermione in an impenetrable barrier.

"Boys," said Hermione Granger, "should not be allowed to love girls without asking them first! This is true in a number of ways and especially when it comes to gluing people to the ceiling!"

This was also ignored. "It's just like a play!" sighed a third-year girl.

"A play?" said Hermione. "I'd like to see the play where anything like *this* happens!"

"Oh," said the third-year girl, "I was thinking of that really *romantic* one where there's this very nice, sweet boy who makes a Floo call, only he mispronounces his destination and stumbles out into this room full

of Dark Wizards who are performing a forbidden ritual that should've stayed forever lost to time, and they're sacrificing seven victims in order to unseal this ancient horror which is supposed to grant someone a wish if it's freed, so of course the boy's presence interrupts the ritual, and as the horror is eating all the Dark Wizards and everyone is dying the boy's last thought is that he wishes he could've had a girlfriend, and the next thing you know the boy is lying in the lap of this beautiful woman whose eyes are burning with a dreadful light, only she doesn't understand anything about being human so the boy always has to stop her eating people. This is just like that play, only you're the boy and Harry Potter is the girl!"

"That..." Hermione said, feeling quite surprised. "That actually *does* sound something like—"

"It *does*?" blurted a second-year girl sitting across the table, who was now leaning forward, looking horrified and yet even more fascinated.

"No!" said Hermione. "I mean—he's *not my boyfriend!*"

Two seconds later, Hermione's ears caught up with what her lips had just said.

The fourth-year witch put her hand on Hermione's shoulder and gave her a comforting squeeze. "Miss Granger," she said in a soothing voice, "I think if you're really honest with yourself, you'll admit that the real reason you're angry with your dark master is that he channeled his unspeakable powers through Tracey Davis instead of you."

Hermione's mouth opened but her throat locked up before the words came out, which was probably a good thing, because if she'd actually yelled that loudly it would've broken something.

"How's that possible, actually?" said the third-year girl. "I mean for Harry Potter to work through another girl even though he's bound himself to you? Do the three of you have one of those, you know, arrangements?"

"Gaaaaack," said Hermione Granger, her throat still locked, her brain halted, and her vocal cords spontaneously making a noise like she was coughing up a yak.

(LATER.)

"I don't understand why you're being so *unreasonable*," said another second-year witch, who'd replaced the third-year-girl after Hermione had threatened to ask Tracey to eat her soul. "I mean, really, if someone like Harry Potter rescued *me*, I'd be—sending him thank-you cards, and hugging him, and," the girl's face was a bit red, "well, kissing him, I'd hope."

"Yeah!" said the other second-year witch. "I've never understood why girls in plays get *angry* when the main character goes out of his way to be nice to them. I wouldn't act like that if the hero liked *me*."

Hermione Granger had dropped her head to the dinner table, her hands slowly pulling at her hair.

"You just don't understand male psychology," the fourth-year witch said in an authoritative voice. "Granger's got to make it *look* like she can mysteriously resist his seductive charm."

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(EVEN LATER.)

And so before long Hermione Granger had turned to the only person left she could talk to, the only person guaranteed to understand her point of view—

"They're all mad," said Hermione Granger as she strode vigorously toward Ravenclaw tower, having left dinner a bit early. "Everyone except you and me, Harry, I mean *everyone* except us in this whole school of Hogwarts, they're all entirely *mad*. And Ravenclaw girls are the *worst*, I don't know *what* Ravenclaw girls go reading when they get older, but I'm certain they ought not to be reading it. One witch asked me if the two of us had soul-bonded, which I'm going to look up in the library tonight, but I'm pretty sure has never actually happened—"

"I don't even know a *name* for this kind of fallacious reasoning," said Harry Potter. The boy was walking normally, which meant he often had

to skip forward a few steps to match her own indignation-fueled speed. "I seriously think if it was up to *them*, they'd be dragging us off this minute to get our names changed to Potter-Evans-Verres-Granger... Ugh, saying that out loud makes me realize how awful it sounds."

"You mean *your* name would be Potter-Evans-Verres-Granger and *mine* would be Granger-Potter-Evans-Verres," said Hermione. "It's too horrible to imagine."

"No," said the boy, "House Potter is a Noble House, so I think that name stays in front—"

"*What?*" she said indignantly. "Who says *we* have to—"

There was a sudden awful silence, broken only by the thuds of their shoes.

"*Anyhow*," Hermione said hastily, "some of the crazy things they said at dinner got me thinking, so I just want to say, Harry, that I really am grateful to you for saving me and everybody from getting beat up, and even though some parts of this afternoon upset me, I'm sure we can just talk about it calmly."

"Ah..." Harry said with a faint and tentative smile, his eyes showing a mixture of befuddlement and apprehension, "that's... good, I guess?"

To be specific, there'd been the fourth-year witch explaining that, since Harry was the evil wizard who'd fallen in love with Hermione, and Hermione was the pure and innocent girl who would either redeem him or get seduced by the Dark Arts herself, it followed that Hermione *had* to be perpetually indignant at anything Harry did, even if it was him heroically saving her from certain doom, just so that their romance wouldn't resolve itself before the end of Act IV. And *then* Penelope Clearwater, who Hermione had really thought was smarter than that, had remarked in a loud voice that for identical reasons it was *impossible* for Hermione to just go over and talk sensibly with Harry about why she was feeling hurt, and anyway Dark Wizards were attracted to passionate defiance in a woman, not logic. This was the point at which Hermione had shoved herself up from the benches, stomped furiously over to where Harry was sitting, and asked him in a reasonable voice if the two of them could go for a walk and sort things out.

"So in other words," Hermione said in her calmest voice ever, "you're not really in trouble with me, I'm still talking to you, we're still friends, and we're still studying together. We're *not* having a fight. Right?"

Somehow this only seemed to increase Harry Potter's apprehension. "Right," said the Boy-Who-Lived.

"Great!" said Hermione. "So, *have* you worked out why I was upset, Mr. Potter?"

There was a pause. "You wanted me to keep out of your affairs?" Harry said cautiously. "I mean—I know you wanted to do things on your own. And I *was* staying out of your way, until I'd heard you'd gotten ambushed by three junior Death Eaters and, honestly, I wasn't expecting that. *Professor Quirrell* wasn't expecting that. I started to worry you'd gotten in over your head and then, no offense Hermione, forty-four bullies in a massed ambush is way beyond what *anyone* could handle without help. That's why I thought you really needed help just that once—"

"No, that part's fine," said Hermione. "We *were* in over our heads, honestly. Please guess again, Mr. Potter."

"Um," said Harry. "What Tracey did... startled you?"

"Startled me, Mr. Potter?" There might have been a touch of acidity in her voice. "No, Mr. Potter, I was *scared*. I was *frightened*. I wouldn't want to admit to being afraid of just *dragons* or something, people might think I was *cowardly*, but when you can hear distant voices crying 'Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!' and there's pools of blood seeping out from under all the doors, then it's okay to be scared."

"I *am* sorry," Harry said with what sounded like genuine regret. "I thought you'd realize it was me."

"And the *reason* we all got scared like that, Mr. Potter, was that *you didn't ask first!*" Despite her intentions, Hermione found her voice was rising again. "You should've *asked* me before you did something like that, Harry! You should've said very specifically, 'Hermione, can I make blood come out from under the doors?' It's important to be specific when you're asking about that sort of thing!"

The boy rubbed the back of his neck as he walked. "I... honestly, I just thought you'd *have* to say no."

"Yes, Mr. Potter, *I could've said no*. That's *the whole point of asking first*, Mr. Potter!"

"No, I mean you'd have *had* to say no, whether or not it was what you *really* wanted. And then all of you would've gotten beaten up and it would've been *my* fault for asking first."

Hermione's eyebrows went up in a bit of surprise, and she kept walking for a few steps while she tried to understand this. "What?" she said.

"Well..." the boy said a bit slowly. "I mean... you're the Sunshine General, aren't you? You *couldn't* say yes to me scaring people, not even bullies, not even to save your friends from getting beaten up. You would've *had* to say no, and then you would've gotten hurt. This way, you can tell people honestly that you had no idea and that it wasn't your fault. That's why I didn't warn you."

Hermione stopped walking, turned to face Harry full on instead of just turning her head. Her voice was carefully even as she said, "Harry, you've *got* to stop coming up with clever reasons for doing stupid things."

Harry's eyebrows flew up. After a moment he said, "Look... I know what you mean, of course, but there's still the question of whether it's actually *is* a good idea, not just a clever one—"

"I understand why you did what you did today," Hermione said. "But I want you to promise that from now on, you'll ask me first, always, even if you can come up with a reason why you shouldn't."

There was a pause that stretched, and Hermione could feel her heart sinking.

"Hermione—" Harry started to say.

"*Why?*" The frustration burst out into her voice. "*Why is it so awful? All you have to do is ask!*"

Harry's eyes were very serious. "Who in SPHEW do you try hardest to defend, Hermione? Who are you most afraid for, when you fight?"

"Hannah Abbott," Hermione said without having to think about it, and then felt a little bad, because Hannah *was* trying hard and she *had* improved a lot—

"Would you feel okay about trusting someone else, like Tracey, with *final* responsibility for protecting Hannah? If you knew Hannah was about to walk into an ambush, and you came up with a plan for protecting her,

would you feel good about letting Tracey say whether or not you were allowed to do it?"

"Well... no?" said Hermione, puzzled.

The green eyes of the Boy-Who-Lived were steady on hers. "Would you trust *Hannah* to have the final say in whether she needed protecting?"

"I—" said Hermione, and then paused. It was strange, she knew the right answer and she also knew the right answer wasn't actually true. Hannah was trying so hard to prove she wasn't afraid, even though she *was*, and it was easy to see how the Hufflepuff girl might try *too* hard—

Then Hermione realized the implication. "You think I'm like *Hannah*?"

"Not... exactly..." Harry ran his hands through his mess of hair. "Listen, Hermione, what would *you* have suggested doing, if I'd warned you about an ambush by forty-four bullies?"

"I would've done the *responsible* thing and told *Professor McGonagall* and let *her* take care of it," Hermione said promptly. "And *then* there wouldn't have been darkness and people screaming and horrible blue light—"

But Harry just shook his head. "That's *not* the responsible thing to do, Hermione. It's what someone playing the *role* of a responsible girl would do. Yes, I thought of going to Professor McGonagall. But she would've only stopped the disaster *once*. Probably before any disturbance happened in the first place, like by telling the bullies she knew. If the bullies got punished just for plotting, it would be by losing House points, or at worst a day's detention, not anything that would really scare them. And then the bullies would have *tried again*. Fewer of them, with better operational security so I didn't hear about it. They would probably ambush *one* of you, alone. Professor McGonagall doesn't have the *authority* to do something scary enough to protect you—and *she* wouldn't have overstepped her authority, because she's not really responsible."

"*Professor McGonagall* isn't responsible?" Hermione said incredulously. She jammed her hands on her hips, now openly glaring at him. "Are you *nuts*?"

The boy didn't blink. "You could call it heroic responsibility, maybe," Harry Potter said. "Not like the usual sort. It means that whatever hap-

pens, no matter what, it's *always* your fault. Even if you tell Professor McGonagall, she's not responsible for what happens, *you* are. Following the school rules isn't an excuse, someone else being in charge isn't an excuse, even trying your best isn't an excuse. There just aren't any excuses, you've got to *get the job done no matter what*." Harry's face tightened. "That's why I say you're not thinking responsibly, Hermione. Thinking that your job is done when you tell Professor McGonagall—that isn't heroine thinking. Like Hannah being beat up is *okay* then, because it isn't *your fault* anymore. Being a heroine means your job isn't finished until you've done *whatever it takes* to protect the other girls, *permanently*." In Harry's voice was a touch of the steel he had acquired since the day Fawkes had been on his shoulder. "You can't think as if just following the rules means you've done your duty."

"I think," Hermione said evenly, "that you and I might disagree about some things, Mr. Potter. Like whether you or Professor McGonagall is more *responsible*, and whether being *responsible* usually involves people running around and screaming, and how much it's a good idea to follow school rules. And just because we disagree, Mr. Potter, doesn't mean that *you* get the final say."

"Well," said Harry, "you asked what was *so* awful about having to ask you first, and it was a surprisingly good question, so I examined my mind and that's what I found. I think my real fear is that if Hannah is in trouble and I come up with a way to save her that seems weird or dark or something, you might not weigh the consequences to Hannah. You might not accept the heroine's responsibility of coming up with *some* way to save her, somehow, no matter what. Instead you'd just carry out the *role* of Hermione Granger, the sensible Ravenclaw girl; and the *role* of Hermione Granger automatically says no, whether or not she has a better plan in mind. And then forty-four bullies will take turns beating up Hannah Abbott, and it'll all be my fault because I *knew*, even if I didn't want reality to be that way, I knew that was how it would go. I'm pretty sure that was my secret, wordless, unutterable fear."

The frustration was building up inside her again. "It's *my* life!" Hermione burst out. She could imagine what it would be like with Harry messing with her all the time, constantly inventing justifications not to ask

her first and not to listen to her objections. She shouldn't have to *win an argument* just to—"There'll *always* be some reason, you can *always* say I'm not thinking right! I want my *own life*! Otherwise I'll walk away, I really will, I mean it Harry."

Harry sighed. "This is exactly where I didn't want things to end up, and here we are. You're afraid of just the same thing I am, aren't you? Afraid that if *you* let go of the steering wheel, we'll crash." The corners of his lips twisted, but it didn't look like a real smile. "That's something I can understand."

"I don't think you understand *at all*!" Hermione said sharply. "You said we'd be *partners*, Harry!"

That stopped him, she could see it stop him.

"How about this?" Harry said at last. "I'll promise to ask you first before I do anything that could be interpreted as meddling in your affairs. Only *you've* got to promise *me* to be reasonable, Hermione. I mean *really*, genuinely, stop and think for twenty seconds first, treat it as a real choice. The sort of reasonableness where you realize I'm offering a way to protect the other girls, and that if you automatically say *no* without considering it properly, there's this *actual consequence* where Hannah Abbott ends up in the hospital."

Hermione stared at Harry, as his recitation wound down.

"Well?" said Harry.

"I shouldn't have to make promises," she said, "just to be *consulted* about *my own life*." She turned from Harry and began walking toward the Ravenclaw tower, not looking at him. "But I'll think about it, anyway."

She heard Harry sigh, and after that they walked in silence for a while, passing through an archway of some reddish metal like copper, into a corridor that was just like the one they'd left except that it was tiled in pentagons instead of squares.

"Hermione..." said Harry. "I've been watching you and thinking, since the day you said you were going to be a hero. You've *got* the courage. You'll fight for what's right, even in the face of enemies that would scare other people away. You've certainly got the raw intelligence for it, and you're probably a better person inside than I am. But even so... well, to be hon-

est, Hermione... I can't quite see you filling Dumbledore's shoes, leading magical Britain's fight against You-Know-Who. Not yet, anyway."

Hermione had turned her head to stare at Harry, who just went on walking, as though lost in thought. Fill *those* shoes? She'd never tried to imagine herself that way. She'd never *imagined* imagining herself that way.

"And maybe I'm wrong," Harry said as they walked. "Maybe I've just read too many stories where the heroes never do the sensible thing and follow the rules and tell their Professor McGonagalls, so my brain doesn't think you're a proper storybook hero. Maybe it's you who's the sane one, Hermione, and me who's just being silly. But every time you talk about following rules or relying on teachers, I get that same feeling, like it's bound up with this one last thing that's stopping you, one last thing that puts your PC self to sleep and turns you into an NPC again..." Harry let out a sigh. "Maybe that's why Dumbledore said I should have wicked step-parents."

"He said *what*?"

Harry nodded. "I still don't know whether the Headmaster was joking or... the thing is, he was *right* in a way. I *had* loving parents, but I never felt like I could trust their decisions, they weren't *sane* enough. I always knew that if I didn't think things through myself, I might get hurt. Professor McGonagall will do whatever it takes to get the job done *if* I'm there to nag her about it, she doesn't break rules on her own without heroic supervision. Professor Quirrell really *is* someone who gets things done no matter what, and he's the only other person I know who notices stuff like the Snitch ruining Quidditch. But *him* I can't trust to be *good*. Even if it's sad, I think that's part of the environment that creates what Dumbledore calls a hero—people who don't have anyone else to shove final responsibility onto, and that's why they form the mental habit of tracking everything themselves."

Hermione didn't say anything to that, but she was thinking back to something Godric Gryffindor had written near the end of his very short autobiography. Briefly and without any explanation, because the scroll had been meant to be copied by hand, centuries before the Muggle printing press had inspired wizards to invent the Reading-Writing Quill.

No rescuer hath the rescuer, Godric Gryffindor had written. No Lord hath the champion, no mother and no father, only nothingness above.

If *that* was the price of being a hero, Hermione wasn't sure she wanted to pay it. Or maybe—though it wasn't the sort of thing she would have thought, before she started hanging around Harry—maybe Godric Gryffindor had gotten it *wrong*.

"Do you trust *Dumbledore*?" Hermione said. "I mean, he's right here in our school and he's the most legendary hero in the whole world—"

"He *was* the most legendary hero," said Harry. "Now he sets chickens on fire. Honestly, does *Dumbledore* seem reliable to *you*?"

Hermione didn't answer.

Side by side, the two of them began to climb huge wide spiral stairs, the steps alternating between bronze metal and blue stone; the final approach to where the Ravenclaw portrait waited to guard their dorm with silly riddles.

"Oh, and I just thought of something I should tell you," Harry said when they were about halfway up. "Since it affects your life and all. Think of it as a sort of down payment—"

"What is it?" said Hermione.

"I predict SPHEW is about to retire."

"*Retire*?" Hermione said, almost stumbling on one of the stairs.

"Yeah," Harry said. "I mean, I could be wrong, but I suspect the teachers are about to clamp down hard on fighting in the corridors." Harry was grinning as he spoke, a glint in his eyes behind the glasses hinting at secret knowledge. "Cast new wards to detect offensive hexes, or start verifying reports of bullying using Veritaserum—I can think of several ways they might shut it down. But if I'm right, it's something to celebrate, Hermione, you and all of you. You kicked up enough public ruckus that you got them to actually *do* something about the bullying. *All* the bullying."

Slowly, then, a smile began to creep up her lips, and as she reached the top of the stairs and began walking toward the Ravenclaw portrait for her riddle, Hermione felt rather lighter on her feet, a wonderful lifting feeling spreading through her like she'd been pumped full of helium.

Somehow, despite all the effort the eight of them had put in, she hadn't expected *that* much, she hadn't expected it to actually *work*.

They'd made a *difference*...

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It was the end of breakfast-time on the next morning.

The students from every year sat very still in their benches, all heads turned in the same direction, toward the Head Table, before which one lone first-year girl stood rigid and motionless, her head tilted back to stare up at the Head of House Slytherin.

Professor Snape's face was twisted with fury and triumph, vindictive as any painting of a Dark Wizard; and behind him the other Professors sat at the Head Table, watching with faces as though carved from stone.

"—permanently disbanded," spat the Potions Master. "Your self-proclaimed Society is *outlawed* within Hogwarts, by my decision as a Professor! If your Society or any member of it is discovered fighting in the hallways again, Granger, you will be *personally* held responsible and expelled, by me, from the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!"

That first-year girl stood there, before the Head Table where she'd been called before only to receive commendations and smiles; stood there with her spine held tall and upright in its curve like a centaur's bow, giving nothing to the enemy.

That first-year witch stood there with all tears and anger bottled, her face still, nothing changing of her outward appearance, while something slowly broke inside her, she could feel it breaking.

It broke further when Professor Snape gave her two weeks detention for the crime of violence in school, sneering with the contemptuous face he'd shown them all on the first day of Potions, and with a little twist in the corner of his smile that said the Potions Master knew exactly how unfair he was being.

Whatever-it-was inside her cracked all the way through, from top to bottom, when Professor Snape took one hundred points from Ravenclaw.

It ended, then, and Snape told her she was dismissed.

She turned around and saw that at the Ravenclaw table, Harry Potter was sitting still in his place, she couldn't see his expression from here, she saw his fists on the table but she couldn't see if they were clenched white

like her own. She had whispered to him, when Professor Snape had called her, that he wasn't to do anything without asking first.

Hermione wheeled back again to look at the Head Table, just as Snape was turning away from her to resume his place.

"I said you're dismissed, girl," said the sneering voice, but there was a pleased smile on Snape's face, like he was waiting for her to do something—

Hermione strode forward another five steps toward the Head Table and said in a breaking voice, "Headmaster?"

Utter silence filled the Great Hall.

Headmaster Dumbledore said nothing, didn't move. It was as though he, too, was just carved from stone.

Hermione turned her gaze to look at Professor Flitwick, whose head, barely visible above the table, seemed to be staring down into his lap. Beside him, Professor Sprout's face was very tight, she seemed to be forcing herself to watch, and her lips were trembling, but she said nothing.

Professor McGonagall's chair was empty, the Deputy Headmistress hadn't shown up to breakfast that morning.

"Why aren't any of you saying anything?" said Hermione Granger. Her voice was trembling with the last of her hope, the last desperate reach for help from that place inside her. "You *know* what he's doing is wrong!"

"Two more weeks' detention, for insolence," Snape said silkily.

It shattered.

She looked at the Head Table for a few seconds longer, at Professor Flitwick and Professor Sprout and the empty place where Professor McGonagall should've been. Then Hermione Granger turned and began walking toward the Ravenclaw table.

There was a babble of voices starting up, as the students came unfrozen from where they'd sat.

And then, as she was almost to the Ravenclaw table—

The dry voice of Professor Quirrell cut through everything, and that voice said, "One hundred points to Miss Granger for doing what is right."

Hermione almost fell over her own feet; and then she continued forward, even as Snape shouted something furious, even as Professor Quirrell leaned back in his chair and began to laugh, even as Dumbledore's

voice was saying something she didn't catch and then she was sitting down at the Ravenclaw table again next to Harry Potter.

Harry Potter was frozen beside her, he looked like someone who didn't dare move.

"It's all right," her voice said to him, automatically without there being any choice or thought involved, although really it wasn't right at all. "But can you see if you can get me out of Snape's detentions, like you did yourself that time?"

Harry Potter nodded, a single jerky motion of his head. "I—" said Harry. "I—I'm sorry, this—this is all my fault—"

"Don't be *ridiculous*, Harry." It was odd how her voice was coming out all normal, and without her thinking about what to say. Hermione looked down at her breakfast plate, but eating seemed to be clearly out of the question, there was a roiling and churning in her stomach which suggested that she was already on the verge of throwing up, which was odd because she could have sworn her whole body felt numb, like she wasn't feeling anything, at the same time.

"And," her voice said, "if you want to break school rules or something, you can ask me about it, I promise I won't just say no."

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Non est salvatori salvator,
neque defensori dominus,
nec pater nec mater,
nihil supernum.
—Godric Gryffindor,
1202 C.E.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SIX

INTERLUDE WITH THE CONFESSOR: SUNK COSTS

Rianne Felthorne descended the stairs of roughened stone and crude mortar, keeping a *Lumos* lit through the distances between firescones, holding aloft her wand through the gaps from light to light.

She came to the empty rock cavern pierced by many dark openings, lit by a torch of ancient style that fired as she entered.

There was no one else there, as yet, and after long minutes of nervous standing, she began the spell to Transfigure a cushioned sofa large enough for two people to sit, or maybe even lie down on. A simple wooden stool would have been easier, she could have done that in fifteen seconds, but—well—

Even when the sofa was fully conjured, Professor Snape still hadn't arrived, and she sat down on the left side of her sofa with her pulse hammering in her throat. Somehow she was only becoming more nervous, not less, as the delay stretched.

She knew this was the last time.

The last time before all these memories went away, and Rianne Felthorne found herself in a mysterious cavern, wondering what was going on.

There was something about it that felt like dying.

The books said a properly done Obliviation wasn't harmful, people forgot things all the time. People dreamed, and then woke up without remembering their dreams. Obliviation didn't even involve that much discontinuity, just a brief instant of disorientation; it was like being distracted by a loud noise and losing track of a thought you couldn't seem

to remember afterward. That was what the books said, and why Memory Charms were fully approved by the Ministry for all authorized governmental purposes.

But still, *these thoughts*, the thoughts she was thinking right now; soon nobody would have them anymore. When she looked ahead in the future, there was nobody to complete the thoughts she wasn't finished thinking. Even if she managed to tie up all the loose ends in her mind over the next minute, there wouldn't be anything left of it afterward. Wasn't that exactly what you would find yourself reflecting on, if you were going to die in the next minute?

There came the sound of muffled steps...

Severus Snape emerged into the cavern.

His eyes moved to her sitting on the sofa, and a strange expression crossed his face; strange because it wasn't sardonic, or angry, or cold.

"Thank you, Miss Felthorne," Snape said quietly, "that was considerate of you." The Potions Master took out his wand and performed the usual privacy Charms, and then he moved toward her, and sat down heavily beside her on the Transfigured sofa.

Her pulse was now pounding for another reason entirely.

She slowly turned to look at Professor Snape, and saw that his head was leaning back against the sofa, and his eyes were closed. Not sleeping, though. His face appeared tense, unrelaxed, bearing pain.

She knew—she was suddenly certain—that she was only allowed to see this sight because she wouldn't remember it afterward; and that nobody before her had ever been allowed to see it.

The frantic conversation going on inside Rianne Felthorne's mind sounded something like this: *I could just lean over and kiss him, you are completely out of your tiny mind, his eyes are closed I bet he wouldn't stop me in time, I bet it would be years before anyone found your body—*

But Professor Snape opened his eyes then (to her inner disappointment and relief), and said, in a more normal voice, "Your payment, Miss Felthorne." From his robe he took a ruby, cut to Gringotts standard, and held it out toward her. "Fifty facets. I will not mind if you count them."

She held out a trembling hand, hoping that Snape would press the ruby into her fingers, that she would feel a touch of his skin alive against

hers—

But instead Snape raised his hand slightly and dropped the ruby into her hand, then leaned back against the couch. “You will remember finding it lying on the ground of this cavern, where you came exploring,” said Snape. “And since nobody except you will actually believe that, you will remember thinking that it would be less troublesome if you deposited the money into a separate box in Gringotts.”

For a stretch there was only the faint crackling of the torch.

“Why—” Rianne Felthorne said. *He knows I won’t remember.* “Why did you do it? I mean—you said to tell you where bullies would be, and who they would be, but not whether Granger would be there. And I know, the way the Time-Turner works, if you want to *make* Granger be there, you can’t be told whether it’s already happened. So I did work out that *we* were the ones telling her where to go. We were, weren’t we?”

Snape nodded without speaking. He had closed his eyes again.

“But,” said Rianne, “I didn’t understand *why* you were helping her. And now—after what you did to Granger in the Great Hall—I just don’t understand at all.” Rianne had never thought of herself as particularly nice. She’d taken little notice of the controversy over the Sunshine General. But something about *helping* Granger fight bullies had... well, she’d gotten used to thinking of that as the good side, and thinking of *herself* as being on the good side. And she’d found she actually liked it. It was hard, to just let that go. “Why’d you do that, Professor Snape?”

Snape shook his head, his face tightened.

“Is—” Rianne said falteringly. “I mean—so long as we’re here—is there anything you do want to talk about?” There was something *she* wanted to say, but she couldn’t make the words pass her own lips.

“I can think of one matter,” Snape said after a pause. “If you are interested, Miss Felthorne.”

Snape’s eyes were still shut, so she couldn’t just nod her head. Her voice almost broke, when she forced herself to say “Yes.”

“There’s a certain boy in your class who likes you, Miss Felthorne,” Snape said from behind his closed eyes. “I won’t say his name. But he watches you every time you walk across the room, when he thinks you

aren't looking. He dreams about you and desires to possess you, but he's never asked you for so much as a kiss."

Her heart started hammering even harder.

"Please tell me the honest truth, Miss Felthorne. What do you think of that boy?"

"Well—" she said. She was stumbling over her words. "I think—to never even ask for one kiss—would be—"

Sad.

Just too pitiful.

"Weakness," she said, her voice trembling.

"I agree," said Snape. "Suppose that boy had helped you, though. Would you think that you owed him a kiss, if he asked?"

She inhaled sharply—

"Or would you think," Snape continued, his eyes still closed, "that he was just being bothersome?"

The words stabbed into her like a knife and she couldn't help gasping out loud.

Snape's eyes flew open, and his gaze met hers across the sofa.

Then the Potions Master began to laugh, small sad chuckles.

"No, not *you*, Miss Felthorne!" Snape said. "Not *you*! We really *are* talking about a boy. One who attends your Potions class, in fact."

"Oh," she said. She tried to remember what Snape had said before, now feeling rather unnerved as she thought of some boy watching her, always silently watching. "Well, um, in that case. That's kind of *creepy*, actually. Who is it?"

The Potions Master shook his head. "It doesn't matter," said Snape. "Out of curiosity, what would you think if that boy were still in love with you years later?"

"Um," she said, feeling a bit confused, "that would be totally pathetic?"

The torch crackled a bit in the cavern.

"It's strange," Snape said quietly. "I have had two mentors, over the course of my days. Both were extraordinarily perceptive, and neither one ever told me the things I wasn't seeing. It's clear enough why the first said nothing, but the second..." Snape's face tightened. "I suppose I would have to be naive, to ask why he stayed silent."

The quiet stretched, while Rianne tried frantically to think of something to say.

"It is an odd thing," Snape said, his voice still softer, "to look back after only thirty-two years, and wonder when your life was ruined past all rescuing. Was it determined when the Sorting Hat cried 'Slytherin!' for me? It seems unfair, since I was offered no choice; the Sorting Hat spoke the moment it touched upon my head. Yet I cannot claim it named me untruly. I never treasured knowledge for its own sake. I was not loyal to the one person I called friend. I was never one for righteous fury, then or now. Courage? There is no bravery in risking a life already ruined. My little fears have always mastered me, and I never turned aside from any of the paths I walked down, for those little fears. No, the Sorting Hat could never have put me in her House. Perhaps my final loss was determined, even then. Is that fair, I ask, even if the Sorting Hat speaks truly? Is it fair that some children should possess more courage than others, and thus a man's life be judged?"

Rianne Felthorne was starting to realize that she'd never had the tiniest inkling of who her Potions Master was inside, and unfortunately all these dark hidden depths weren't helping her with her problem.

"But no," Snape said. "I know where it went wrong for the last time. I could point to the very day and hour I missed my final chance. Miss Felthorne, did the Sorting Hat offer you Ravenclaw?"

"Y-yes," she said without thinking.

"Have you ever been any good at riddles?"

"Yes," she said again, because whatever Professor Snape was about to say, she wouldn't hear it if she said *no*.

"I am terrible at riddles," Snape said in a distant voice. "I was once given a riddle to solve, and I did not understand even the simplest part until too late. I did not even realize the riddle was meant for *me* until too late. I thought I had merely happened to overhear it, when in truth it was I who was overheard. So I sold my riddle to another, and that is when the wreckage of my life passed beyond retrieval." Snape's voice was still distant, sounding more abstracted than sorrowful. "And even now, I understand nothing of importance. Tell me, Miss Felthorne, suppose a man were carrying a knife, and he tripped over a baby and stabbed himself.

Would you say that the baby had,” Snape’s voice lowered, as though he were imitating some still deeper voice, “THE POWER TO VANQUISH him?”

“Um... no?” she said hesitantly.

“Then what *does* it mean to have the power to vanquish someone?”

Rianne considered the puzzle. (Wishing, not for the first time in her life, that she had chosen Ravenclaw and to perdition with her parents’ disapproval; but the Sorting Hat had never offered her Gryffindor.) “Well...” Rianne said. She was having trouble putting her thoughts into words. “It means you’ve got the *power*, but you don’t *have* to do it. It means you could do it if you tried—”

“Choice,” the Potions Master said in the same faraway voice, as though he wasn’t really talking to her at all. “There will be a choice. That is what the riddle seems to imply. And that choice is not a foregone conclusion to the chooser, for the riddle does not say, *will vanquish*, but rather *the power to vanquish*. How would a grown man mark a baby as his equal?”

“What?” said Rianne. She didn’t understand that at all.

“*Marking* a baby is simple. Any strong Dark curse would produce a lasting scar. But such may be done to any child. What mark would signify that a baby was your *equal*?”

She answered with the first thought that came to mind. “If you signed a betrothal contract, that would mean you’d be equals with them someday, when they grew up and you got married.”

“That...” said Snape. “That’s probably not it, Miss Felthorne, but thank you for trying.” The long delicate fingers, honed by stirring potions to unimaginably fine tolerances, reached up and rubbed at the temples of the man’s forehead. “It is enough to drive me to madness, so much hinging on such fragile words. Power he knows not... it *must* be more than some unknown spell. Not something *he* could acquire simply by practice and study. Some innate talent? No one can learn to be a Metamorphmagus... and yet that hardly seems like a power he *knows not*. Nor can I see how *either* could destroy all but a remnant of the other; I can see it in one direction, but not the reverse...” The Potions Master sighed. “And none of this means anything to you, does it, Miss Felthorne? The words are

nothing. The words are shadows. It is her *intonation* which carries the meaning and that is something I've never been able to..."

The Potions Master trailed off, while Rianne stared at him.

"A *prophecy*?" Rianne said in a high squeak. "You heard a *prophecy*?" She'd taken Divination for a couple of months before dropping it in disgust, and she knew that much about how it worked.

"I will try one last thing," said Snape. "Something I have not tried before. Miss Felthorne, listen to the *sound* of my voice, the *way* I say it, not the words themselves, and tell me what you think it means. Can you do that? Good," said Snape, as she nodded obediently, though she wasn't sure at all what she was supposed to do.

And Severus Snape drew a breath, and intoned, "FOR THOSE TWO DIFFERENT SPELLETS CANNOT EXIST IN THE SAME VULD."

It sent shivers down her spine, all the worse for knowing the hollow words had been spoken in imitation of a true prophecy. Unnerved, she blurted out the first thing which came to mind, which might have been influenced by her present company. "Those two different ingredients cannot exist in the same cauldron?"

"But why *not*, Miss Felthorne? What is the *meaning* of a statement like that? What are we really being told?"

"Ah..." she hazarded. "If the two ingredients mix, they'll catch fire and burn the cauldron?"

Snape's face did not change expression in the slightest.

"Perhaps," Snape finally said, after they'd sat on the sofa in awful silence for what seemed like minutes. "It would explain the word *must*. Thank you, Miss Felthorne. Once again you have been most helpful."

"I—" she said, "I was glad to—" and the words stuck in her throat. The Potions Master had thanked her with a tone of finality, and she knew that the time of the Rianne Felthorne who remembered these moments was drawing to an end. "I wish I didn't have to forget this, Professor Snape!"

"I wish," Severus Snape said in a whisper so low she could hardly hear it, "that everything had been different..."

The Potions Master stood up from the sofa, the weight of his presence vanishing from beside her. He turned and drew his wand from his robes, pointing it at her.

“Wait—” she said. “Before that—”

Somehow it was unbelievably hard to take the first step from fantasy to reality, from imagining to doing. Even if it was only one step and would never go any further. The gap stretched like the distance between two mountains.

The Sorting Hat had never offered her Gryffindor...

...was it fair that thus a woman's life be judged?

If you can't say it now, when you won't even remember it afterward—when nothing will continue from this moment, just as if you were to die—then when will you ever say it, to anyone?

“Can I have a kiss first?” said Rianne Felthorne.

Snape's black eyes studied her so intensely that her blush started to reach all the way to her chest, and she wondered if he knew perfectly well that she was still being weak, and it wasn't a kiss she'd truly wanted.

“Why not,” the Potions Master said quietly, and he leaned his head down over the sofa and kissed her.

It was nothing like she'd imagined. In her fantasies Snape's kisses were fierce, seized from her, but this was—it was just *awkward*, actually. Snape's lips pressed down too hard on hers, forcing them back against her teeth, and the angle wasn't right and their noses were sort of bending and his lips were too *tight* and—

Only as the Potions Master straightened back up again, raising his wand once more, did she realize.

“That wasn't—” she said in a wondering voice, looking up at him. “That wasn't—was it—your *first*—”

Rianne Felthorne blinked at the stone cavern she'd discovered, still holding the extraordinary ruby she'd found embedded in the dirt of one corner. It was an incredible windfall, and she didn't know why looking at the ruby made her feel so sad, like she'd forgotten something, something that had been precious to her.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN

SELF-ACTUALIZATION, AFTERMATHS: SURFACE APPEARANCES

AFTERMATH: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE AND—

The old wizard sat alone at his desk, in the unsilence of the Headmaster's office, amid the innumerable and unnoticed devices; his robes a gentle yellow, of soft fabric, not such clothing as he ordinarily wore before others. His wrinkled hand held a quill scratching away at an official-looking parchment. If you had somehow been there to watch his lined face, you would have been unable to deduce anything more about the man himself than you understood of the enigmatic devices. You might have observed that the face looked a little sad, a little tired, but then Albus Dumbledore always looked like that when he was alone.

In the Floo hearth there were only scattered ashes without a hint of flame, a magical door that had been shut so solidly as to stop existing. On the material plane, the great oaken door to the office had been closed and locked; beyond that door, the Endless Stairs stayed motionless; at the bottom of those stairs, the gargoyles that blocked the entrance did not flow, their pseudo-life withdrawn to leave solid rock.

Then, even as the quill was in the middle of penning a word, even as it was in the middle of scratching a letter—

The old wizard shot to his feet with a speed that would have shocked anyone watching, abandoning the quill in mid-letter to fall onto the

parchment; like lightning he spun on the oaken door, his yellow robes whirling around him and a wand of dread power leaping into his hand—

And as abruptly, the old wizard paused, halting his motion even as the wand came to bear.

A hand struck upon the oaken door, three times knocking.

More slowly, now, that grim wand went back into the dueling holster strapped beneath the old wizard's sleeve. The ancient man moved forward a few paces, drew himself up into a more formal stance, composed his face. Nearby upon the desk, the quill moved to the side of the parchment, as though it had been carefully placed there rather than dropped in haste; and the parchment itself flipped over to show blankness.

With a silent twitch of his will, the oaken door swung open.

Hard as stones, the green eyes glared at him.

"I admit that I am impressed, Harry," the old wizard said quietly. "The Cloak of Invisibility would have let you evade my lesser means of vision; but I did not sense my golems step aside, nor the stairs turning. How did you come here?"

The boy walked into the office, step by deliberate step until the door closed smoothly behind him. "I can go anywhere I choose, with or without permission," that boy said. His voice seemed calm; too calm, perhaps. "I am in your office because I decided to be here, and to hell with passwords. You are greatly mistaken, Headmaster Dumbledore, if you think that I stay in this school because I am a prisoner here. I simply have not chosen, *yet*, to leave. Now keeping that in mind, why did you command your agent, Professor Snape, to break the agreement we made in this office, that he would not torment any student in her fourth year or below?"

The old wizard looked at the angry young hero for a long moment. Then, slowly enough not to alarm the boy, those wizened fingers drew open one of the manifold drawers of the desk, lifted out a sheet of parchment, laid it upon the desk. "Fourteen," the old wizard said. "It is not the number of all the owls sent last night. Only the owls sent to families with a seat on the Wizengamot, or families of great wealth, or families already allied with your foes. Or, in the case of Robert Jugson, all three; for his father, Lord Jugson, is a Death Eater, and his grandfather a Death Eater who died by Alastor Moody's wand. What the letters said, I do not know,

but I can guess. Do you *still* not understand, Harry Potter? Each time Hermione Granger *won*, as you put it, the danger to her from Slytherin grew again, and yet again. But now the Slytherins have triumphed over her, easily and safely, without violence or lasting harm. They have won, and need fight no more..." The old wizard sighed. "So I had planned. So I had hoped. So it would have been, if the Defense Professor had not taken it upon himself to intervene. Now the dispute goes to the Board of Governors, where Severus will seem to conquer the Defense Professor; but that will not feel the same to the Slytherins, it will not have been over and finished in a moment, to their satisfaction."

The boy advanced further into the room, his head tilting back further to look up at the half-moon glasses; and somehow it was like the boy was looking down at the Headmaster, rather than up. "So this Lord Jugson is a Death Eater?" the boy said softly. "Good. His life is already bought and paid for, then, and I can do anything I want to him without ethical problems—"

"Harry!"

The boy's voice was clear as ice, frozen of purest water from some untouched spring. "You seem to think that the Light should live in fear of the darkness. I say it should be the other way around. I'd prefer not to kill this Lord Jugson, even if he is a Death Eater. But one hour of brainstorming with the Defense Professor would be plenty of time to come up with some creative way to wreck him financially, or get him exiled from magical Britain. That would serve to make the point, I think."

"I confess," the old wizard said slowly, "that the thought of ruining a five-hundred-year-old House, and challenging a Death Eater to war to the finish, over a scuffle in a Hogwarts hallway, had not occurred to me, Harry." The old wizard lifted a finger to push back his half-moon glasses from where they had slid a little down his nose, during his sudden motion earlier. "I daresay it would not occur to Miss Granger either, nor to Professor McGonagall, nor to Fred and George."

The boy shrugged. "It wouldn't *be* about the hallways," the boy said. "It would be justice for his past crimes, and I'd only do it if Jugson made the first move. The point isn't to make people scared of me as a wild card, after all. It's to teach them that neutrals are perfectly safe from me, and

poking me with a stick is incredibly dangerous.” The boy smiled in a way that didn’t reach his eyes. “Maybe I’ll buy an ad in the *Daily Prophet*, saying that anyone who wants to carry on this dispute with me will learn the true meaning of Chaos, but anyone who leaves me alone will be fine.”

“No,” the old wizard said. His voice was deeper now, showing something of his true age and power. “No, Harry, that must not be. You have not yet learned the meaning of fighting, what truly happens when foes meet in battle. And so you dream, as young boys do, of teaching your foes to fear you. It frightens me that you, at far too young an age, might already have enough power to make some part of your dreams into reality. There is *no* turning of that road which does not lead into darkness, Harry, none. That is the way of a Dark Lord, for certain.”

The boy hesitated, then, and his eyes flickered to the empty golden platform where Fawkes sometimes rested his wings. It was a gesture that few would have caught, but the old wizard knew it very well.

“All right, forget the part about teaching them to fear me,” the boy said then. His voice was no less hard, but some of the cold had gone from it. “I still don’t think you should let children get hurt out of fear of what someone like Lord Jugson *might* do. Protecting them is the whole point of your job. If Lord Jugson really does try to get in your way, then do whatever it takes to stop him. Give me full access to my vaults, and I’ll take personal responsibility for dealing with any fallout from banning bullies in Hogwarts, whether it’s Lord Jugson or anyone else.”

Slowly the old wizard shook his head. “You seem to think, Harry, that I need merely use my full power, and all foes will be swept aside. You are wrong. Lucius Malfoy controls Minister Fudge, through the *Daily Prophet* he sways all Britain, only by bare margins does he not control enough of the Board of Governors to oust me from Hogwarts. Amelia Bones and Bartemius Crouch are allies, but even they would step aside if they saw us acting wantonly. The world that surrounds you is more fragile than you seem to believe, and we must walk with greater care. The old Wizarding War never ended, Harry, it only continued in a different form; the black king slept, and Lucius Malfoy moved his chesspieces for a time. Do you think Lucius Malfoy would lightly permit you to take a pawn of his color?”

The boy smiled, now with a touch of coldness again. “Okay, I’ll figure

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out some way to set it up so that it looks like Lord Jugson betrayed his own side.”

“Harry—”

“Obstacles mean you *get creative*, Headmaster. It doesn’t mean you abandon the children you’re supposed to protect. Let the Light win, and if trouble comes of it—” The boy shrugged. “Let Light win again.”

“So might phoenixes speak, if they had words,” the old wizard said. “But you do not understand the *phoenix’s price*.”

The last two words were spoken in a peculiarly clear voice that seemed to echo around the office, and then a huge rumbling noise seemed to come from all around them.

Between the ancient shield on the wall and the Sorting Hat’s hatrack, the stone of the walls began to flow and move, pouring itself into two framing columns and revealing a gap between them, an opening that showed a set of stone stairs leading upward into darkness.

The old wizard turned and strode toward those stairs, and then looked back at where Harry Potter stood. “Come!” said the old wizard. There was no twinkle now in those blue eyes. “Since you have already gone so far as to force your way here uninvited, you may as well go further.”

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There were no railings on those stone steps, and after the first few steps Harry drew his wand and cast *Lumos*. The Headmaster did not look back, did not seem to be looking downward, as though he had climbed the steps often enough to have no need of vision.

The boy knew that he should have been curious, or frightened, but there was no spare brain capacity for that. It was taking all his control not to let the fury simmering inside him boil over any further than it already had.

The stairs went on for only a short distance, one straight rising flight without turns or curves.

At the top was a door of solid metal, looking black in the blue light cast from Harry's wand, meaning that the metal itself was either black or perhaps red.

Albus Dumbledore lifted up his long wand like a brandished symbol, and again spoke in that strange voice which seemed to echo in Harry's ears, as though burning itself into his memory: "*Phoenix's fate.*"

That last door opened, and Harry followed Dumbledore inside.

The room beyond seemed to be made of black metal like the door that led to it. The walls were black, the floor was black. The ceiling above was black, but for a single globe of crystal that hung down from the ceiling on a white chain, and shone with a brilliant silver light that looked like it had been cast in imitation of Patronus light, though you could tell it wasn't the real thing.

Within the room were pedestals of black metal, each bearing a moving picture, or an upright cylinder half-filled with some faintly shining silver liquid, or a lone small object; a scorched silver necklace, a crushed hat, an untouched golden wedding ring. Many pedestals bore all three, the moving picture and the silver liquid and the item. There seemed to be a good many wizards' wands upon those pedestals, and many of those wands were broken, or burned, or looked like the wood had somehow melted.

It took that long for Harry to realize what he was seeing, and then his throat suddenly choked; it was like the rage inside him had been hit a hammerblow, maybe the hardest hammerblow of his entire existence.

"These are not all the fallen of all my wars," Albus Dumbledore said. His back was to Harry, only his grey locks and yellowish robes showed. "Not even nearly all of them. Only my closest friends, and those who died of my worst decisions, there is something of them here. Those I regret most of all, this is their place."

Harry couldn't count how many pedestals were in the room. It might have been around a hundred. The room of black metal was not small, and there was clearly more space left in it for future pedestals.

Albus Dumbledore turned and regarded Harry, the deep blue eyes set like steel in his brow, but his voice, when he spoke, was calm. "It seems to me that you know nothing of the phoenix's price," Albus Dumbledore

said quietly. "It seems to me that you are not an evil person, but most terribly ignorant, and confident in your ignorance; as I once was, a long time ago. Yet I have never heard Fawkes so clearly as you seemed to, that day. Perhaps I was already too old and full of grief, when my phoenix came to me. If there is something I do not understand, about how ready I should be to fight, then tell me of this wisdom." There was no anger in the old wizard's voice; the impact that drove out your breath like falling off a broomstick was all in the scorched and shattered wands, gleaming gently in their death beneath the silver light. "Or else turn and go from this place, but then I wish to hear no more of it."

Harry didn't know what to say. There had been nothing in his own life that was like this, and all the words seemed to fall away. He would find something to say if he looked, but he couldn't believe, in that moment, that the words would be meaningful. You shouldn't be able to win any possible argument, just from people having died of your decisions, and yet even knowing that it felt like there was nothing to be said. That there was nothing Harry had any right to say.

And Harry almost did turn and go from that place, except for the understanding which came to him then: that there was probably a part of Albus Dumbledore which always stood in this place, always, no matter where he was. And that if you stood in a place like this you could do anything, *lose* anything, if it meant that you didn't have to fight another time.

One of the pedestals caught Harry's eye; the photograph on it did not move, did not smile or wave, it was a Muggle photograph of a woman looking seriously at the camera, her brown hair twisted into braids of an ordinary Muggle style that Harry hadn't seen on any witch. There was a cylinder of silvery liquid beside the photograph, but no object; no melted ring or broken wand.

Harry walked forward, slowly, until he stood before the pedestal. "Who was she?" Harry said, his voice sounding strange in his own ears.

"Her name was Tricia Glasswell," said Dumbledore. "The mother of a Muggleborn daughter, who the Death Eaters killed. She was a detective of the Muggle government, and after that she fed information from the Muggle authorities to the Order of the Phoenix, until she was—betrayed—into the hands of Voldemort." There was a catch in the old

wizard's voice. "She did not die well, Harry."

"Did she save lives?" Harry said.

"Yes," the wizard said quietly. "She did."

Harry lifted his gaze from the pedestal to look at Dumbledore. "Would the world be a better place if she hadn't fought?"

"No, it would not," said the old wizard. His voice was tired, and grieving. He seemed more bent now, as though he were folding in on himself. "I see that you still do not understand. I think you will not understand until the day that you—oh, Harry. So very long ago, when I was not much older than you are now, I learned the true face of violence, and its cost. To fill the air with deadly curses—for any reason—for *any* reason, Harry—it is an ill thing, and its nature is corrupted, as terrible as the darkest rituals. Violence, once begun, becomes like a Lethifold that strikes at any life near it. I... would spare you that lesson the way I learned it, Harry."

Harry looked away from the blue eyes, cast his gaze down at the black metal of the floor. The Headmaster was trying to tell him something important, that was clear; and it wasn't something that Harry thought was stupid, either.

"There was a Muggle once named Mohandas Gandhi," Harry said to the floor. "He thought the government of Muggle Britain shouldn't rule over his country. And he refused to fight. He convinced his whole country not to fight. Instead he told his people to walk up to the British soldiers and let themselves be struck down, without resisting, and when Britain couldn't stand doing that any more, we freed his country. I thought it was a very beautiful thing, when I read about it, I thought it was something higher than all the wars that anyone had ever fought with guns or swords. That they'd really done that, and that it had *actually worked*." Harry drew another breath. "Only then I found out that Gandhi told his people, during World War II, that if the Nazis invaded they should use nonviolent resistance against them, too. But the Nazis would've just shot everyone in sight. And maybe Winston Churchill always felt that there should've been a better way, some clever way to win without having to hurt anyone; but he never found it, and so he had to fight." Harry looked up at the Headmaster, who was staring at him. "Winston Churchill was the one who tried to convince the British government *not* to give Czechoslo-

vakia to Hitler in exchange for a peace treaty, that they should fight right away—”

“I recognize the name, Harry,” said Dumbledore. The old wizard’s lips twitched upward. “Although honesty compels me to say that dear Winston was never one for pangs of conscience, even after a dozen shots of Firewhiskey.”

“The point is,” Harry said, after a brief pause to remember exactly who he was talking to, and fight down the suddenly returning sense that he was an ignorant child gone insane with audacity who had no right to be in this room and no right to question Albus Dumbledore about anything, “the point is, saying violence is evil isn’t an *answer*. It doesn’t say when to fight and when not to fight. It’s a hard question and Gandhi refused to deal with it, and that’s why I lost some of my respect for him.”

“And your own answer, Harry?” Dumbledore said quietly.

“One answer is that you shouldn’t ever use violence except to stop violence,” Harry said. “You shouldn’t risk anyone’s life except to save even more lives. It *sounds* good when you say it like that. Only the problem is that if a police officer sees a burglar robbing a house, the police officer *should* try to stop the burglar, even though the burglar might fight back and someone might get hurt or even killed. Even if the burglar is only trying to steal jewelry, which is just a *thing*. Because if nobody so much as *inconveniences* burglars, there will be *more* burglars, and *more* burglars. And even if they only ever stole *things* each time, it would—the fabric of society—” Harry stopped. His thoughts weren’t as ordered as they usually pretended to be, in this room. He should have been able to give some perfectly logical exposition in terms of game theory, should have at least been able to *see* it that way, but it was eluding him. Hawks and doves—“Don’t you see, if evil people are willing to risk violence to get what they want, and good people always back down because violence is too terrible to risk, it’s—it’s not a good society to live in, Headmaster! Don’t you realize what all this bullying is doing to Hogwarts, to Slytherin House most of all?”

“War is too terrible to risk,” the old wizard said. “And yet it will come. Voldemort is returning. The black chesspieces are gathering. Severus is one of the most important pieces our own side possesses, in that war. But our evil Potions Master must, as the saying goes, keep up appearances. If

Severus can pay that keep by hurting the feelings of children, only their feelings, Harry,” the old wizard’s voice was very soft, “you would have to be most terribly innocent in the ways of war, to think he had made a poor bargain. Hard decisions do not look like *that*, Harry. They look—like this.” The old wizard did not gesture. He simply stood where he was, among the pedestals.

“You shouldn’t be Headmaster,” Harry said through the burning in his throat. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, but you shouldn’t try to be a school principal and run a war at the same time. Hogwarts shouldn’t be part of this.”

“The children will survive,” the old wizard said with tired old eyes. “They would not survive Voldemort. Have you wondered why the children of Hogwarts do not speak much of their parents, Harry? It is because there is always, within earshot, someone who has lost their mother or father or both. That is what Voldemort left behind, the last time he came. *Nothing* is worth that war beginning again even one day earlier than it must, or lasting one day longer than it must.” The old wizard did gesture now, as though to indicate all the shattered wands. “We did not fight because it seemed righteous to do so! We fought when we had to, when there was no other way left. That was our answer.”

“Is that why you waited so long to confront Grindelwald?”

Harry had uttered the question without quite thinking—

There was a slow time while the blue eyes searched him.

“Who have you been talking to, Harry?” said the old wizard. “No, do not answer. I already know.” Dumbledore sighed. “Many have asked me that question, and always I have turned them aside. Yet in time you must learn the full truth of that matter. Will you swear never to speak of it to another, until I give you leave?”

Harry would have liked to be allowed to tell Draco, but—“I swear,” Harry said.

“Grindelwald possessed an ancient and terrible device,” said Dumbledore. “While he held it, I could not break his defense. In our duel I could not win, only fight him for long hours until he fell in exhaustion; and I would have died of it afterward, if not for Fawkes. But while his Muggle allies yet made blood sacrifice to sustain him, Grindelwald would *not*

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have fallen. He was, during that time, truly invincible. Of that grim device which Grindelwald held, none must know, none must suspect, there must be not a single hint. And therefore you must not speak of it, and I will say no more for now. That is all, Harry. There is no moral to it, and no wisdom. That is all there is.”

Harry slowly nodded. It wasn’t entirely implausible, by the standards of magic...

“And then,” Dumbledore’s voice went on, even quieter, almost as though he were speaking to himself, “since it was I who felled him, they obeyed me when I said he should not die, though they cried by the thousands for his blood. So he was imprisoned in Nurmengard, in the prison that he built, and he abides there until this day. I went to that duel without any intent to kill him, Harry. Because, you see, I had tried to kill Grindelwald once before, a long time ago, and that... that was... it proved to be... a mistake, Harry...” The old wizard was staring now at his long dark-grey wand where he held it in both hands, as though it were a crystal ball out of Muggle fantasy, a scrying pool within which answers could be found. “And I thought, then... I thought that I should never kill. And then came Voldemort.”

The old wizard looked back up at Harry, and said, in a hoarse voice, “He is not like Grindelwald, Harry. There is nothing human left in him. *Him* you must destroy. You must not hesitate, when the time comes. To him alone, of all the creatures in this world, you must show no mercy; and when you are done you must forget it, forget that you ever did such a thing, and go back to living. Save your fury for that, and that alone.”

In that office there was silence.

It lasted for some many long seconds, and finally was broken by a single question.

“Are there Dementors in Nurmengard?”

“What?” said the old wizard. “No! I would not have done that even to him—”

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The old wizard stared at the young boy, who had straightened, and his face changed.

"In other words," the boy said, as though talking to himself without any other people in the room, "it's already known how to keep powerful Dark Wizards in prison, without using Dementors. People *know* they know that."

"Harry...?"

"No," the boy said. The boy looked up, and his eyes were blazing like green fire. "I do not accept your answer, Headmaster. Fawkes gave me a mission, and I know now why Fawkes gave that mission to me, and not to you. You are willing to accept balances of power where the bad guys end up winning. I am not."

"That too is not an answer," the old wizard said; his face showed nothing of his hurt, he had long practice in concealing pain. "Refusing to accept something does not change it. I wonder now if you are simply too young to understand this matter, Harry, despite your outward airs; only in children's fantasies can all battles be won, and not a single evil tolerated."

"And that's why I can destroy Dementors and you can't," said the boy. "Because I believe that the darkness can be broken."

The old wizard's breath stopped in his throat.

"The phoenix's price isn't inevitable," the boy said. "It's not part of some deep balance built into the universe. It's just the parts of the problem where you haven't figured out yet how to cheat."

The old wizard's lips parted, and no words came forth.

Silver light falling on shattered wands.

"Fawkes gave me a mission," the boy repeated, "and I will carry out that mission if I must break the entire Ministry to do it. That's the part of the answer that you're missing. You don't stop and say, *oh well, guess I can't possibly figure out any way to stop bullying in Hogwarts*, and leave it at that. You just keep looking until you figure out how to do it. If that requires breaking Lucius Malfoy's entire conspiracy, *fine*."

"And the true fight, the fight against Voldemort?" the old wizard said in an unsteady voice. "What will you do to win *that*, Harry? Will you break the whole world? Even if someday you gain such power, you are not yet

beyond prices, and perhaps you never will be! For you to act this way *now* is nothing short of madness!"

"I asked Professor Quirrell why he'd laughed," the boy said evenly, "after he awarded Hermione those hundred points. And Professor Quirrell said, these aren't his exact words, but it's pretty much what he said, that he'd found it tremendously amusing that the great and good Albus Dumbledore had been sitting there doing nothing as this poor innocent girl begged for help, while *he* had been the one to defend her. And he told me then that by the time good and moral people were done tying themselves up in knots, what they usually did was nothing; or, if they did act, you could hardly tell them apart from the people called bad. Whereas *he* could help innocent girls any time he felt like it, because he wasn't a good person. And that I ought to remember that, any time I considered growing up to be good."

The old wizard did not show the force of the blow. Only a slight widening of his eyes would have betrayed it, if you had been watching him very closely.

"Don't worry, Headmaster," said the boy. "I haven't gotten my wires crossed. I know that I'm supposed to learn goodness from Hermione and Fawkes, not from Professor Quirrell and you. Which brings me to the actual reason why I came here. Hermione's time is too valuable to waste in detentions. Professor Snape will revoke it, claiming that I blackmailed him."

After a hesitation the old wizard nodded his head, the silver beard swaying slowly beneath. "That would not be best for *her*, Harry," the old wizard said. "But the detention can be put down as being served with Professor Binns, and you and she can study together in his classroom."

"Fine," the boy said. "I think that was all the business we had together, in the end. You may expect, the next time you seem to be working on the side of the bad guys or letting them win, that I will do whatever I think Fawkes would tell me to, regardless of how much trouble comes of it. I hope we're both clear on that."

Without another word, the boy turned and walked out of the room, through the open door of black metal, the words "*Lumos!*" and the light of his wand following a moment later.

The old wizard stood there silent, silent amid the ruins of the lives which his own life had left behind. His wrinkled hand rose, shaking, to touch at his half-moon glasses—

The boy poked his head back in. “Would you mind switching on the stairs, Headmaster? I’d rather not go through all the work again to leave the same way I came.”

“Go, Harry Potter,” the old wizard said. “The stairs will receive you.”

(Some time later, an earlier version of Harry, who had invisibly waited next to the gargoyles since 9PM, followed the Deputy Headmistress through the opening that parted for her, stood quietly behind her on the turning stairs until they came to the top, and then, still under the Cloak, spun his Time-Turner thrice.)

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AFTERMATH: PROFESSOR QUIRRELL AND—

In a shadowy clearing the Defense Professor waited, his back leaned negligently against the rough grey bark of a towering beech tree as yet unleaved in the late March days, so that its trunk and crown seemed like a pale arm reaching up from the ground and exploding into a hand of a thousand fingers. Around the Defense Professor and above him were branches so dense that even in the earliest spring, with few trees so much as budding, you could have hardly seen the sky from the ground. The strands of the wooden net crossed and proliferated so many times that if you were on a broomstick above, searching for someone below, you would have found it easier to follow your ears than your eyes. Nor would it have helped that it was almost dark amid the prohibited woods, the unseen sun almost set, so that only a few glows of fading sunlight illuminated the tops of the tallest trees.

Then came the faintest sound of footsteps, almost inaudible even on the forest ground; the gait of a man accustomed to passing unseen. No twig snapped, nor leaf rustled—

“Good afternoon,” said Professor Quirrell. The Defense Professor did not trouble to move his eyes, or his hands from where they rested negligently at his side.

A figure clad in a black cloak shimmered into existence, his head turning to look left and then right. In the figure’s right hand, gripped low, was a wand of wood so grey it was almost silver.

“I do not know why you wished to meet *here* of all places,” said Severus Snape, his voice cool.

“Oh,” Professor Quirrell said idly, as though the whole matter was of the least importance, “I thought you would prefer privacy. The walls of Hogwarts have ears, and you would not wish the Headmaster to know of your role in yesterday’s affair, would you?”

The March chill seemed to grow deeper, the temperature further fall. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the Potions Master said icily.

“You know perfectly well what we’re talking about,” said Professor Quirrell in an amused voice. “Really, my good Professor, you should not meddle in the affairs of idiots unless you are ready to defend yourself upon the instant from all their violence.” (The Defense Professor’s hands still lay relaxed and open at his side.) “And yet none of those idiots seem to remember the sight of you falling, nor do the young ladies recall your presence. Which raises the fascinating question of why you would go to the extraordinary length, I dare say the *desperate* length, of casting *fifty-two* Memory Charms.” Professor Quirrell tilted his head. “Would you fear so much the opinions of mere students? I think not. Would you dread the matter becoming known to your good friend, Lord Malfoy? But those fools, upon the very spot, invented a quite satisfactory excuse for your presence. No, there is only one person who holds so much power over you, and who would be most perturbed to find you executing any plot without his knowledge. Your true and hidden master, Albus Dumbledore.”

“*What?*” hissed the Potions Master, the anger plain upon his face.

“But now, it seems, you are moving on your own; and so I find myself most intrigued as to what you could *possibly* be doing, and why.” The Defense Professor regarded the black-clad silhouette of the Potions Master with the scrutiny a man might give an exceptionally interesting bug, even if it was still ultimately just a bug.

"I am no servant of Dumbledore's," the Potions Master said coldly.

"Really? What astonishing news." The Defense Professor smiled slightly. "Do tell me all about it."

There was a long pause. From some tree an owl hooted, the sound huge in the silence; neither man startled or flinched.

"You don't want me as your enemy, Quirrell," Severus Snape said, his voice very soft.

"I don't?" said Professor Quirrell. "How would you know?"

"On the other hand," the Potions Master continued, voice still soft, "my friends enjoy many advantages."

The man leaning against the grey bark raised his eyebrows. "Such as?"

"There is much that I know of this school," said the Potions Master. "Things you might not think I knew."

There was an expectant pause.

"How incredibly fascinating," said Professor Quirrell. The man was examining his fingernails with a bored look. "Do go on."

"I know you have been... *investigating*... the third-floor corridor—"

"You know nothing of the sort." The man's back straightened against the wood. "Do not bluff against me, Severus Snape; I find it annoying, and you are in no position to annoy me. A single glance would tell any competent wizard that the Headmaster has laced that corridor with a ridiculous quantity of wards and webs, triggers and tripwires. And more: there are Charms laid there of ancient power, magical constructs of which I have heard not even rumors, techniques that must have been disgorged from the hoarded lore of Flamel himself. Even He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named would have had trouble passing those without notice." Professor Quirrell tapped a thoughtful finger on his cheek. "And for the actual lock, a *Colloportus* laid on an ordinary doorknob, cast so weakly that it could not have kept out Miss Granger on the day she entered Hogwarts. Never before in my existence have I encountered such a blatant trap." Now the Defense Professor narrowed his eyes. "I know of no one left in the world against whom such fantastic feats of detection would serve any useful purpose. If there is some wizard possessed of ancient lore, of whom I know nothing, against whom this trap is set—you may trade

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that information for as much silence as you like, my dear Professor, and a good serving of my favor left over afterward.”

You could have sworn that Professor Quirrell was watching Severus Snape with keen interest. Not the faintest trace of a smile crossed the man’s lips.

There was another long silence in the clearing.

“I do not know *who* Dumbledore fears,” Snape said. “But I know what bait he has set out, and somewhat of how it is truly guarded—”

“As to that,” said Professor Quirrell, sounding bored again, “I stole it months ago, and left a fake in its place. But thank you kindly for asking.”

“You’re lying,” said Severus Snape after a pause.

“Yes, I am.” Professor Quirrell leaned back against the grey wood again, his eyes drifting up to the dense net of branches, the falling night scarcely visible between the complex crossings. “I simply wished to learn whether you would call me on it, since you are pretending to know so little.” The Defense Professor smiled to himself.

The Potions Master looked like he was about to choke on his own fury. “*What do you want?*”

“Nothing, really,” said the Defense Professor, continuing to gaze at the forest ceiling. “I was only curious. I suppose I shall just watch and see where your plotting goes, and meanwhile I will say nothing to the Headmaster—so long as you are willing to do me a favor now and then, of course.” A dry smile crossed the face. “You are dismissed for now, Severus Snape. Though I wouldn’t mind having another little chat soon, if you’re willing to speak with me honestly of where your loyalties lie. And I do mean *honestly*, not the false faces you’ve shown today. You might find you have more allies than you thought. Take some time to think it over, my friend.”

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AFTERMATH: DRACO MALFOY AND—

A rainbow hemisphere, a dome of solid force with little chromaticity of its own which sent back the infringing light in splintered reflections, iridescent in many colors, as it fractured the shine of the many-splendored chandeliers of the Slytherin common room.

Sheltered beneath the rainbow hemisphere, the terrified face of a young witch who had never fought bullies, who had not joined any of Professor Quirrell's armies, who was getting Acceptable marks at best in her Defense class, who could not have cast a Prismatic Barrier even to save her own life.

"Oh, stop it," said Draco Malfoy, making his voice sound bored despite the sweat that had broken out underneath his robes, as he kept his wand pointed at the barrier that was sheltering Millicent Bulstrode.

He couldn't remember making the decision, there'd just been the two older boys about to hex Millicent, the common room silently staring, and then Draco's hand had just drawn his wand and cast the barrier, leaving his heart to pump itself full of shocked adrenaline while his poor sad brain frantically racked itself for explanations—

The two older boys were straightening up from where they'd been looming over Millicent, turning to Draco, looking at him with a mixture of shock and anger. Gregory and Vincent beside him had already drawn their own wands, but weren't pointing them. All three of them together couldn't have won, anyway.

But the older boys wouldn't hex him. Nobody could possibly be stupid enough to hex the next Lord Malfoy.

It wasn't fear of being hexed that was making Draco sweat beneath his robes, as he desperately hoped the beads of water weren't visible on his forehead.

Draco was sweating because of the dawning and sickening certainty that even if he got away with this now, if he kept down this path, there would come a time when it would all come crashing down; and then he might not be the next Lord Malfoy anymore.

"Mr. Malfoy," said the oldest-looking boy. "Why are you protecting her?"

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"So you've located the mistress of the conspiracy," Draco said with a Number Two Sneer, "and it's, let me get this straight now, a first-year girl named Millicent Bulstrode. She's just a *conduit*, you *niddlewit*!"

"So?" demanded the older boy. "She still helped them!"

Draco lifted his wand and the Prismatic Sphere winked out. Still talking in a bored voice, Draco said, "*Did* you know what you were doing, Miss Bulstrode?"

"N-no," Millicent stammered from where she was still sitting at her desk.

"Did you know where the Slytherin messages you were passing on were going to?"

"No!" said Millicent.

"Thank you," Draco said. "All of you please leave her alone, she's just a pawn. Miss Bulstrode, you may consider the favor you did me in February to have been repaid." And Draco turned back to his Potions homework, hoping to Merlin and back again that Millicent didn't say anything incredibly stupid like 'What favor?'—

"Then why," a voice said clearly from across the room, "did those witches go where a note from Millicent told them to go?"

Sweating even more, Draco lifted his head again to look at where Randolph Lee had spoken. "What did the fake note say exactly?" said Draco. "Was it, 'I command you to go forth in the name of the Dark Lady Bulstrode' or 'Please meet me here, sincerely Millicent?'"

Randolph Lee opened his mouth, hesitated for a fractional second—

"I thought so," said Draco. "That wasn't a very good test, Mr. Lee, it—it can—" A frantic, nerve-racking moment while he figured out how to say it without using Harry-words like *false positive*. "It can get the witches to go there if any of them is just *friends* with Millicent."

As though the matter had been entirely settled, Draco looked down again at his Potions homework, ignoring (except for the feeling of sick dread in his stomach) the whispers from around the room.

It was only out of the corner of his eye that he caught Gregory staring at him.

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Draco's eyes rested on his Astronomy homework, but he couldn't make his mind focus there. If you were trying not to think about things Harry Potter had said, pretty much the worst possible thing you could do was look at your textbook's pictures of the night sky, and try to remember what you *weren't* supposed to know about how the planets wandered. Astronomy, a noble and prestigious art, a sign of learning and knowledge; only Muggles possessed secret modern artifacts which could do it a million billion times better using methods that Harry had tried to explain and which Draco still couldn't begin to understand except that apparently it didn't even take *magic* to make *things* do *Arithmancy*.

Draco looked at the pictures of constellations, and wondered if it was like this in the other Houses, if people were always threatening each other in Ravenclaw.

Harry Potter had told him once that soldiers on a battlefield didn't really fight for their country. Patriotism might get them to the battlefield in the first place, but once they were there, they fought to protect *each other*, the friends they'd trained with who were right in front of them. And Harry had observed, and Draco had known that it was true, that you couldn't use loyalty to a leader to power a Patronus Charm, it wasn't *quite* the right kind of warm and happy thought. But thinking of protecting someone beside you—

That, Harry Potter had said thoughtfully, was probably why the Death Eaters had fallen apart the moment the Dark Lord had departed. They hadn't been warm enough to *each other*.

You could recruit a group that included Bellatrix Black and Amicus Carrow alongside Lord Malfoy and Mr. MacNair, and keep them in line with the Cruciatus Curse. But the instant the master of the Dark Mark was gone, you didn't have an army anymore, you had a circle of acquaintances. That was why Father had failed. It hadn't even really been his fault. There'd been nothing Father *could* have done, after inheriting Death Eaters who weren't really *friends* with each other.

And even though it was Slytherin House he was supposed to defend—Slytherin House which he and Harry had formed a pact to *save*—sometimes Draco couldn't help but think that it was just less *wearisome* when he was leading army practices. When he was working with

students from the other three Houses that weren't Slytherin. Once you saw and named the problems, you couldn't *stop* seeing them, it just got more *annoying* every day.

"Mr. Malfoy?" said the voice of Gregory Goyle, from where he was lying on the floor beside Draco's desk, in the small but private bedroom; Gregory was doing his Transfiguration homework, on which he often needed help.

Any distraction was welcome at this point. "Yes?" said Draco.

"You weren't really plotting against Granger at all," said Gregory. "Were you?"

The sensation spreading through Draco's stomach felt just like Gregory's voice sounded, sickened and afraid.

"You actually were helping Granger, that day you picked her up off the floor," said Gregory. "And before, that time you kept her from falling off the roof. You *helped* a *mudblood*—"

"Yeah, right," said Draco sarcastically, without the slightest hesitation or delay, looking back down at his Astronomy homework like he wasn't the least bit nervous. It was all happening the way Draco had feared it would, but at least that meant he'd played this conversation in his head over and over, coming up with the right opening gambit. "Come on, Gregory, you've dueled General Granger, you *know* how strong her spells are. Like a real Muggle-spawn is going to be more powerful than you, more powerful than Theodore, more powerful than every single pureblood in our whole school year except me? Don't you actually *believe* in anything Father says? She's *adopted*. Her parents died in the war and someone stuck her with a couple of Muggles to hide her. No *way* is General Granger a real mudblood."

A slow pulse of silence through Draco's bedroom. Draco wanted to know, needed to know what look was on Gregory's face. But he *couldn't* look up from his desk, not yet, not until Gregory spoke first.

And then—

"Is *that* what Harry Potter said to you?" said Gregory.

The voice wavered, and broke. When Draco looked up from his homework, he saw that tears were leaking out of Gregory's eyes.

Apparently that hadn't worked.

"I don't know what to do," Gregory said in a whisper. "I don't know what to do now, Mr. Malfoy. Your father isn't—when he finds out—he's not going to like it, Mr. Malfoy!"

It's not your job to decide what Father will like, Goyle—

Draco could hear the words in his head; they sounded in Father's voice, with the same sternness. It was the sort of thing Father had *told* him to say, if Vincent or Gregory ever questioned him; and if that didn't work he was to hex them. They were *not* equal friends, Father had said, and he wasn't ever to forget it. Draco was in charge, they were his servants, and if Draco couldn't keep it that way then he wasn't fit to inherit House Malfoy...

"It's all right, Gregory," Draco said, as gently as he could. "All you've got to do is worry about protecting me. Nobody's going to blame you for following my orders, not my father, not yours." Putting all the warmth he could into his voice, like trying to cast a Patronus Charm. "And anyway, the next war isn't going to be the same as the last one. House Malfoy was around long before the Dark Lord, and not every Lord Malfoy does the same thing. Father knows that."

"Does he?" said Gregory in trembling voice. "Does he *really*?"

Draco nodded. "Professor Quirrell knows it too," said Draco. "That's what the armies are about. The Defense Professor's right, when the next war comes, Father won't be able to unite the whole country, they'll remember the *last* war. But anyone who's fought in Professor Quirrell's armies will remember who the strongest generals were, they'll know who's worthy to lead them. They'll proclaim Harry Potter their Lord, and I'll be his right hand, and House Malfoy will come out on top, like always. People might even turn to *me*, if Potter isn't there, so long as they think I'm trustworthy. That's what I'm setting up now. Father will understand."

Gregory reached up and wiped his eyes, looking down again at his Transfiguration homework. "Okay," Gregory said in a shaky voice. "If you say so, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco nodded again, ignoring the hollow feeling inside himself at the lies he'd just told his friend, and turned back to the stars.

AFTERMATH: HERMIONE GRANGER AND—

Being invisible should've been more *interesting* than this, the corridors of Hogwarts should have been outlined in strange colors or something. But actually, Hermione thought, being under Harry's invisibility cloak was exactly like *not* being under an invisibility cloak, except for the cloak part. When you pulled the veil of soft black cloth down from the hood and over your face, you couldn't even see it stretching in front of you, and afterward it didn't seem to impede your breathing. And the world looked just the same, except that when you walked past things of metal, you didn't see any small reflections of yourself. Portraits never looked at you, only did whatever strange things they did when they were alone. Hermione hadn't tried walking past a mirror yet, she wasn't sure she *wanted* to. Most of all, there was no *you* anymore as you walked around, no hands, no feet, just a changing point of view. It was an unnerving feeling, not so much of being *invisible* as of *not existing*.

Harry hadn't questioned her at all, she'd just got out the word 'invisibility' and then Harry was drawing his invisibility cloak from his pouch. She hadn't even been given a chance to explain about her extremely secret meeting with Daphne and Millicent Bulstrode, or that she thought it would help protect the other girls, Harry had just handed over what was probably a Deathly Hallow. If you were fair, and she *did* try to be fair, she had to admit that sometimes Harry could be a very true, true friend.

The secret meeting itself had been a great big failure.

Millicent had claimed to be a seer.

Hermione had carefully explained to Millicent and Daphne at considerable length that this could not possibly be true.

She and Harry had looked up Divination early on in their research; Harry had insisted that they read everything they could find about prophecies that wasn't in the Restricted Section. As Harry had observed, it would save a lot of effort if they could just get a seer to prophesy everything they would figure out thirty-five years later. (Or to put it in Harry's

terms, any means of obtaining information transmitted from the distant future was potentially an instant global victory condition.)

But, as Hermione had explained to Millicent, prophesying wasn't controllable, there was no way to *ask* for a prophecy about anything in particular. Instead (the books had said) there was a sort of *pressure* that built up in Time, when some huge event was trying to happen, or stop itself from happening. And seers were like weak points that let out the pressure, when the right listener was nearby. So prophecies were only about big, important things, because only that generated enough pressure; and you almost never got more than one seer saying the same thing, because afterward the pressure was gone. And, as Hermione had further explained to Millicent, the seers themselves didn't remember their prophecies, because the message wasn't for *them*. And the messages would come out in riddles, and only someone who heard the prophecy in the seer's original voice would hear all the meaning that was in the riddle. There was no *possible* way that Millicent could just give out a prophecy *any time she wanted*, about *school bullies*, and then *remember* it, and if she *had* it would've come out as 'the skeleton is the key' and not 'Susan Bones has to be there'.

Millicent had been looking rather frightened at this point, so Hermione had relaxed her fists where they'd been jammed on her hips, calmed herself down, and stated carefully that she was glad Millicent had helped them, but they *had* sometimes walked into traps following what Millicent said, and so Hermione really did want to know where the messages had *actually* come from.

And Millicent had said in a small voice:

But, but she told me that she was a seer...

Hermione had told Daphne not to press it, after Millicent had refused to give up her source. It wasn't just that Hermione had felt awful about the scared look on Millicent's face. It was that Hermione had a strong feeling that if they *did* find the person who'd been telling Millicent things, why, *they* would turn out to just be finding envelopes under their pillow in the morning.

She was getting that same despairing feeling she'd gotten in the battle before Christmas, looking at Zabini's charts with all the colored lines and boxes and... and she had only just now realized what it meant that *Zabini*

had been the one showing her that chart.

Even for a Ravenclaw, she felt, there was such a thing as having your life get overly complicated.

Hermione began ascending a short spiral of yellow marble steps protruding from a central spine, a poorly-kept “secret” staircase that was actually one of the fastest ways up from the Slytherin dungeons to the Ravenclaw tower, but which only witches could traverse. (Why girls in particular needed a quick way to move from Ravenclaw to Slytherin and back was something Hermione found a bit puzzling.) At the top of the staircase, now that she was away from Slytherin places and back into the main parts of Hogwarts, Hermione stopped and took off Harry’s invisibility cloak.

After her pouch had swallowed the cloak, Hermione turned right and started to walk down a short passageway, now automatically keeping an eye out in all directions without really thinking about it, and her constantly-scanning eyes glanced into a shadowy alcove—

(fleeting disorientation)

—and then a rush of shock and fear hit her like a Stunning Hex over her whole body, she found that without any thought or any conscious decision her wand had leaped into her hand and was already pointed at...

...a black cloak so wide and billowing that it was impossible to determine whether the figure beneath was male or female, and atop the cloak a broad-brimmed black hat; and a black mist seemed to gather beneath it and obscure the face of whoever or whatever might lie beneath.

“Hello again, Hermione,” whispered a sibilant voice from beneath the black hat, from behind the black mist.

Hermione’s heart was already pounding hugely inside her chest, her witch’s robes felt already sweat-dampened against her skin, there was a taste of fear already in her mouth; she didn’t know why she was so suddenly filled up with adrenaline but her hand gripped harder on her wand. “Who are you?” Hermione demanded.

The hat tilted slightly; the whispery voice, when it came forth from the black mist, sounded dry as dust. “The last ally,” spoke the sibilant whisper. “The one who finally answers, when no other will answer you. I

am perhaps the only *true* friend you have in all Hogwarts, Hermione. For you have now seen how the others stayed silent when you were in need—”

“What’s your *name*?”

The black cloak rotated slightly, back and forth, it didn’t *look* like shoulders shrugging, but it conveyed a shrug. “That is the riddle, young Ravenclaw. Until you solve it, you may call me whatever you wish.”

She could feel her palm already sweaty and was thankful for the spiral grooves on her wand that helped her hand keep a steady grip on the wood. “Well, Mister Incredibly Suspicious Person,” Hermione said, “what do you want with me?”

“That is the wrong question,” came the whisper from black mist. “You should ask, rather, what *I* can offer *you*.”

“No,” the young girl said quite steadily, “I don’t think I *should* be asking that, actually.”

A high-pitched chuckle from behind the black mist. “Not power,” whispered the voice, “not wealth, you care little for such things, do you, young Ravenclaw? *Knowledge*. That is what I possess. I know what is unfolding within this school, all the hidden plans and players, the answers of the riddle. I know the true reason for the coldness you see in Harry Potter’s eyes. I know the true nature of Professor Quirrell’s mysterious illness. I know who Dumbledore truly fears.”

“Good for you,” said Hermione Granger. “But do you know how many licks it takes to get to the Tootsie Roll center of a Tootsie Pop?”

The black mist seemed to darken slightly, the voice sounded lower when it spoke, disappointed. “So you are not even curious, young Ravenclaw, about the truths behind the lies?”

“One hundred and eighty-seven,” she said. “I tried it once and that’s how many it came out to.” Her hand was almost slipping on her wand, there was a sense of fatigue in her fingers like she’d been holding the wand for hours instead of minutes—

The voice hissed, “Professor Snape is a hidden Death Eater.”

Hermione almost dropped her wand.

“Ah,” the voice whispered in satisfaction. “I thought that might interest you. So, Hermione. Is there anything else you would like to know about your enemies, or those you call friends?”

She stared up at the black mist that topped the towering black cloak, frantically trying to order her thoughts. Professor Snape was a Death Eater? Who would tell *her* something like that, *why*, what was going *on*? “That’s—” Hermione said. Her voice was quavering. “That’s extremely serious business, if it’s really true. Why are you telling something like that to *me*, and not to Headmaster Dumbledore?”

“Dumbledore did nothing to stop Snape,” the black mist whispered. “You saw it, Hermione. The rot at Hogwarts begins at the top. Everything that is wrong with this school, it all begins with the mad Headmaster. You alone dared to call him out for it—and therefore I speak to you.”

“And have you also spoken to Harry Potter, then?” Hermione said, keeping her voice as even as she could. If *this* was his helpful ghost—

The black mist darkened and lightened, like a shake of the head. “I am frightened of Harry Potter,” it whispered. “Of the coldness in his eyes, of the darkness that grows behind them. Harry Potter is a killer, and anyone who is an obstacle to him will die. Even you, Hermione Granger, if you dare truly oppose him, the darkness behind his eyes will reach out and destroy you. This I know.”

“Then you don’t know half of what you pretend to know,” Hermione said, her voice a little firmer. “I’m scared of Harry too. But not because of what he might ever do to *me*. I’m scared of what he might do to *protect* me—”

“Wrong.” The whisper was flat, and hard, as if to brook no possibility of denial. “Harry Potter *will* turn against you in time, Hermione, when the darkness takes him fully. He will not shed a tear, he will not even notice, on the day his footsteps finally crush you underneath.”

“*Double* wrong!” she said back in a rising voice, even though there were chills going down her spine. One of Harry’s phrases came to her. “Just what do you think you know, and how do you think you know it, anyway?”

“Time—” The voice seemed to catch itself. “Time enough for that later. For now, for today, indeed Harry Potter is not your enemy. And yet you are in gravest danger.”

“I can believe *that*,” said Hermione Granger. She desperately wanted to shift her wand to her other hand, she felt like she needed to grab her

right arm just to keep it up, her head ached like she'd been staring at the black mist for days; she didn't know why she'd gotten tired so quickly.

"Lucius Malfoy has taken notice of you, Hermione." The whisper had risen, departed from its tonelessness, taken on a note of audible concern. "You have humiliated Slytherin House, you have defeated his son in battle. Even before then you were an embarrassment to all who stand with the Death Eaters; for you are a Muggleborn and yet you possess a power of wizardry greater than any pureblood. And now you are becoming known, the eyes of the world on you. Lucius Malfoy seeks to crush you, Hermione, to hurt you and perhaps even kill you, and he has the means to do it!" The whisper had grown urgent.

There was a pause.

"Is that all?" Hermione said. If she was ex-Colonel Zabini or Harry Potter, she'd probably be asking clever questions to gather more information; but her mind felt slow and fatigued. She really needed to get out of here and go lie down for a while.

"You don't believe me," the whisper said, softer and sadder now. "Why not, Hermione? I *am* trying to help you."

Hermione took a step backward, away from the shadowy alcove.

"*Why not, Hermione?*" demanded the voice, rising to a hiss. "You owe me that much! Tell me, and then—" The voice caught, and came back quieter. "And then you can go, I suppose. Only tell me—*why*—"

Maybe she shouldn't've answered; maybe she should've just turned and fled, or better yet, cast a Prismatic Wall first and then screamed at the top of her lungs as she ran; but it was the note of real pain in the voice that caught her, and so she answered.

"Because you look incredibly dark and scary and suspicious," Hermione said, keeping her voice polite, as her wand stayed level on the towering black cloak and the faceless black mist.

"That's *all*?" whispered the voice incredulously. Sadness seemed to infuse it. "I hoped for better from you, Hermione. Surely such a Ravenclaw as you, the most intelligent Ravenclaw to grace Hogwarts in a generation, knows that appearances can be misleading."

"Oh, I know it," said Hermione. She took another step back, her tired fingers tightening on the wand. "But the thing that people forget some-

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times, is that even though appearances *can* be misleading, they're usually *not*."

There was a pause.

"You *are* the clever one," said the voice, and the black mist evaporated away, no longer obscuring; she saw the face beneath, and recognition sent a jolt of terrified adrenaline bursting through her—

(fleeting disorientation)

—and then a rush of shock and fear hit her like a Stunning Hex over her whole body, she found that without any thought or any conscious decision her wand had leaped into her hand and was already pointed at...

...a shining lady, her long white dress billowing about her as though in invisible winds; neither her hands nor her feet were visible, her face hidden beneath a white veil; and she was glowing all over, not like a ghost, not transparent, just surrounded by soft white light.

Hermione stared open-mouthed at the gentle sight, wondering why her heart was already hammering, and why she felt so scared.

"Hello again, Hermione," the kindly whisper emanated from the white glow behind the veil. "I've been sent to help you, so please don't be afraid. I am your servant in all things; for you, my Lady, are the bearer of a most marvelous destiny—"

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT

TABOO TRADEOFFS PRELUDE: CHEATING

It was Saturday, on the 4th of April, in the year 1992.

Mr. and Mrs. Davis looked rather nervous, as they sat in a certain special section of the Hogwarts Quidditch stands—though today the cushioned benches did not look upon flying broomsticks, but rather viewed a gigantic square of something like parchment; a great white blankness soon to flicker with windows into grass and soldiers. For now it showed only the reflected dull gray color of the surrounding overcast skies. (Looking rather stormy, though the weather-wizards had promised that the rain wouldn't break before nightfall.)

Ordinarily it was the ancient tradition of Hogwarts that mere parents were to Stay Out—for much the same reason that impatient children are told to get out of the kitchen and not meddle in the cook's affairs. The only reason for a parent-teacher conference was if a teacher felt that a parent wasn't shaping up properly. It took an exceptional circumstance to make the Hogwarts administration feel that it had to justify itself to *you*. On any given occasion, generally speaking, the Hogwarts administration was backed up by eight hundred years of distinguished history and you were not.

Thus it had been with some trepidation that Mr. and Mrs. Davis had insisted on an audience with Deputy Headmistress McGonagall. It was hard to muster a proper sense of indignation when you were confronting the same dignified witch who, twelve years and four months earlier, had given both of you two weeks' detention after catching you in the act of conceiving Tracey.

On the other hand, Mr. and Mrs. Davis's courage had been helped by angrily waving about a copy of *The Quibbler* whose headline showed, in bright bold text for all the world to see:

PACTS WITH POTTER?
BONES, DAVIS, GRANGER
IN LOVE RECTANGLE OF FEAR

And so Mr. and Mrs. Davis had argued their way into the Faculty Box of the Hogwarts Quidditch stands, where they were now ensconced with an excellent view of Professor Quirrell's enchanted screens, so that the two of them could see for themselves "Just what the Fiddly-Snocks has been going on in this school, if you'll pardon the expression, Deputy Headmistress McGonagall!"

Seated to the left of Mr. Davis was another concerned parent, a white-haired man in elegant black robes of unmatched quality, one Lucius Malfoy, political leader of the strongest faction of the Wizengamot.

To the left of Lord Malfoy, a sneeringly aristocratic man with a scarred face who had been introduced to them as Lord Jugson.

Then an elderly but sharp-eyed fellow named Charles Nott, rumored to be nearly as wealthy as Lord Malfoy, seated on Lord Jugson's left.

On the right of Mrs. Davis, one would find the comely Lady and yet handsomer Lord of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Greengrass. Young they were as wizards counted age, garbed in grey silken robes set with tiny dark emeralds embroidered into the shape of grass blades. The Lady Greengrass was considered a key swing vote on the Wizengamot, her own mother having retired from the body with surprising speed. Her charming husband, though his family was not noble or wealthy of itself, had taken a seat on the Hogwarts Board of Governors.

To their right, a square-jawed and incredibly tough-looking old witch, who had shaken hands with Mr. and Mrs. Davis without the slightest hint of condescension. This was Amelia Bones, Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

To Amelia's right was a seniorish woman who had set the fashion scene of magical Britain on its ear by integrating a live vulture into her

hat, one Augusta Longbottom. Though she was not addressed as Lady, Madam Longbottom would exercise the full rights of the Longbottom family for so long as their last scion had yet to attain his majority, and she was considered a prominent figure in a minority faction of the Wizengamot.

At the side of Madam Longbottom was seated none other than Chief Warlock Supreme Mugwump Headmaster Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, legendary defeater of Grindelwald, protector of Britain, re-discoverer of the fabled twelve uses of dragon's blood, the most powerful wizard in the world &c.

And finally, on the far right, one would find the enigmatic Defense Professor of Hogwarts, Quirinus Quirrell, who was leaning back on the cushioned benches as though resting; seeming entirely and naturally at ease in the rarefied company of a voting quorum of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, which had dropped by on this fine Saturday to learn just what the Fiddly-Snocks had been going on at Hogwarts in general and with Draco Malfoy, Theodore Nott, Daphne Greengrass, Susan Bones, and Neville Longbottom in particular. The name of Harry Potter had also been much discussed.

Oh, and one mustn't forget Tracey Davis, of course. Director Bones's eyebrows had climbed in some interest upon hearing the young couple introduced as her parents. Lord Jugson had given them a brief, incredulous stare before dismissing them with a snort. Lucius Malfoy had greeted them politely, his smile containing a hint of grim amusement mixed with pity.

Mr. and Mrs. Davis, whose last vote on anything of significance had been touching their wands to the name of Minister Fudge, who had all of three hundred Galleons stored in their Gringotts vault, and who respectively worked at selling cauldrons in a Potions shop and enchanting Omnioculars, were pressed up tightly against each other, sitting rigidly erect upon their cushioned benches, and desperately wishing they'd worn nicer robes.

The sky above was a solid mass of cloud dispersed into darker and lighter grays, grim with the promise of future storms; though no lightning flickered as yet, nor distant rumbles of thunder echoed; and only a

few threatening droplets had fallen.

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To their designated starting place in a certain forest, the Sunshine Regiment marched, though it was really more like a slow walk; you wouldn't want to tire yourself out before the battle even started, and the breezes of April were annoyingly humid, though cool. Ahead of them, a yellow flame wandered slowly through the air, guiding them according to their pace.

Susan Bones kept throwing worried glances toward the Sunshine General as they marched through the grayly illuminated forest. Professor Snape's going after Hermione seemed to have really shaken her. Hermione had even missed her Sunshine Regiment Official Planning Meeting, which seemed understandable enough; but when Susan had offered her sympathy afterward, Hermione had stammered that she'd lost track of time, which wasn't at all a usual thing for her to say, and the girl had looked exhausted and frightened like she'd just spent three days locked in a bathroom stall with a Dementor. Even now, when all the Sunshine General's focus should've been on the coming battle, the Ravenclaw girl's gaze was constantly darting in all directions, as though she expected Dark Wizards to jump out of the bushes and sacrifice her.

"The ban on Muggle artifacts cuts down our options a lot," Anthony Goldstein was saying in the dour tones the boy used to denote deliberate pessimism. "I had the idea of trying to Transfigure nets to throw on people, but—"

"No good," said Ernie Macmillan. The Hufflepuff boy shook his head, looking even more serious than Anthony. "I mean, it's just like throwing a hex, they'd *dodge*."

Anthony nodded. "That's what I figured, too. Do you have any ideas, Seamus?"

The former Chaotic Lieutenant still looked a bit nervous and out-of-place, marching along with his new comrades in the Sunshine Regiment. "Sorry," said the newly minted Captain Finnigan. "I'm more the strategic master type."

"I'm the strategic master type," said Ron Weasley, sounding put-off.

"There are *three* armies," the Sunshine General said acerbically, "which means we fight *two* armies at once, which means we need more than one strategist, which means shut up, Ron!"

Ron gave their General a surprised and worried look. "Hey," the Gryffindor boy said in a calming tone, "you shouldn't let Snape get to you so much—"

"What do *you* think we ought to do, General?" Susan said very loudly and quickly. "I mean, we don't really have a plan at this point." Their official planning session had failed *amazingly* with Hermione gone and both Ron and Anthony thinking they were in charge.

"Do we really need a plan?" the Sunshine General said, sounding a little distracted. "We've got you and me and Lavender and Parvati and Hannah and Daphne and Ron and Ernie and Anthony *and* Captain Finnigan."

"That—" began Anthony.

"Sounds like a pretty good strategy," Ron said with an approving nod. "We've got as many strong soldiers now as both other armies put together. Chaos's only got Potter and Longbottom and Nott left—well, and Zabini too, I suppose—"

"And Tracey," said Hermione.

Several people swallowed nervously.

"Oh, stop it," Susan said sharply. "She's just a battle-hardened member of SPHEW, that's all General Sunshine means."

"Still," Ernie said, turning to look seriously at Susan, "I think you'd better go with whatever group fights Chaos, Captain Bones. I know you can't use your double magical powers except when innocents are in danger, but I mean—just in case Miss Davis *does*, you know, go out of control and try to eat someone's soul—"

"I can handle her," Susan told him, keeping her voice reassuring. Admittedly, Susan hadn't been replaced by a Metamorphmagus at the moment, but then Tracey probably wasn't Polyjuiced Dumbledore or whoever.

Captain Finnigan intoned in a deep, sort-of-rumbling voice, "I find your lack of skepticism disturbing." He raised his hand with his thumb

and forefinger almost touching, pointed at Ernie.

For some reason Anthony Goldstein seemed to be having a sudden choking fit. "What's that supposed to mean?" said Ernie.

"It's just something General Potter says sometimes," said Captain Finnigan. "Funny, when you first join the Chaos Legion it all seems crazy, and then after a couple of months you realize that actually everyone who *isn't* in the Chaos Legion is crazy—"

"I *said*," Ron said loudly, "it sounds like good strategy. We don't Transfigure anything, we don't tire ourselves out, we handle whatever they throw at us, and then we just overrun them."

"Okay," said Hermione. "Let's do that."

"But—" said Anthony, shooting a glare at Ron. "But General, Harry Potter's got *sixteen* people left in his army. Dragon and us each have twenty-eight. Harry knows that, he knows he's got to come up with something incredible—"

"Like what?" demanded Hermione, sounding stressed. "If we don't know what he's planning, we might as well save our magic for doing massed *Finites*. Like we should've done *last time*!"

Susan touched Hermione gently on the shoulder. "General Granger?" said Susan. "I think you should take a break for a bit before the battle."

She'd been expecting Hermione to argue, but Hermione just nodded and then walked a little faster, pulling away from the Sunshine Regiment Official Officer Group, her eyes still watching the forest, and sometimes the sky.

Susan followed her. It wouldn't do, having it look like the Sunshine General was being ejected from her own Official Officer Group.

"Hermione?" Susan said softly, after they'd walked a bit away. "You've got to focus. Professor Quirrell's in charge here, not Snape, and he won't let anything bad happen to you or anyone."

"You're not helping," Hermione said, sounding shaky. "You're not helping at all, Captain Bones."

The two of them walked faster, circling around some of the other soldiers, inspecting the marching perimeter and glancing at the surrounding trees.

"Susan?" Hermione said in a small voice, when they'd gotten further away from all the others. "Do you think Daphne's right about Draco Malfoy plotting something?"

"Yes," Susan said at once, not even thinking about it. "You can tell, because his name's got the letters M-A-L-F-O and Y in it."

Hermione looked around, as if to make sure that nobody was watching, although of course that was a wonderful way to get other people to pay attention to you. "Could Malfoy have been behind what Snape did?"

"Snape could be behind Malfoy," Susan said thoughtfully, remembering dinner-table conversations she'd heard at Auntie's, "or Lucius Malfoy could be behind both of them." A slight chill went down Susan's spine as this last thought occurred to her. Suddenly, telling Hermione to just focus on the coming battle seemed a lot less reasonable. "Why, did you find some sort of clue about that?"

Hermione shook her head. "No," the Ravenclaw girl said, in a voice that sounded almost like she was about to cry. "I was—just thinking about it myself—that's all."

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In their designated place in a forest near Hogwarts, the Dragon General and the warriors of Dragon Army waited where their red flame had led them, beneath grey skies.

At Draco's right side stood Padma Patil, his second-in-command, who had once led all of Dragon Army after Draco had been stunned. At Draco's back was Vincent, the son of Crabbe, a family which had served the Malfoys into the distance of forgotten memory; the muscular boy was watchful as he was always watchful, whether battle had been declared or no. Further back, Gregory of the Goyles stood waiting beside one of the two broomsticks Dragon Army had been given; if the Goyles had not served the Malfoys so long as the Crabbes, yet they had served no less well.

And at Draco's left side, now, stood one Dean Thomas of Gryffindor, a mudblood or possible half-blood who knew nothing of his father.

Sending Dean Thomas to Dragon Army had been a quite deliberate move on Harry's part, Draco was certain. Three other former Chaotics

had also been transferred to Dragon Army, and all were watching Draco hawklike to see if he offered the former Lieutenant the slightest insult.

Some might have called it sabotage, but Draco knew better. Harry had also sent Lieutenant Finnigan to the Sunshine Regiment, even though Professor Quirrell's mandate had only required that Harry give up *one* Lieutenant. That too had been a deliberate move, making crystal clear to everyone that Harry *wasn't* dumping his least-favored soldiers.

In one sense, it might have been easier for Draco to win the true loyalties of his new soldiers if they'd thought Harry hadn't wanted them. In another sense... well, it wasn't easy to put into words. Harry had given him good soldiers with their pride intact, but it was more than that. Harry had showed kindness toward his soldiers, but it was more than *that*. It wasn't just Harry playing fair, it was something that... that you couldn't help but contrast with the way the game was played in Slytherin House.

So Draco hadn't offered the slightest insult to Mr. Thomas, but brought him straight to his side, subordinate to himself and Padma but no one else. It was a test, Draco had told Mr. Thomas and everyone, not a promotion. Mr. Thomas would have to show himself worthy of rank within Dragon Army—but he would be given a chance, and the chance *would* be fair. Mr. Thomas had looked surprised at the ceremony of it (the Chaos Legion, from what Draco had heard, didn't stand on formality) but the Gryffindor boy had stood a little straighter, and nodded.

And then, after Mr. Thomas had done well enough in one of Dragon Army's training sessions, he'd been brought into the strategy session in Dragon Army's huge military office. And a few minutes into the session, Padma had happened to ask—as though it was a perfectly normal question—whether Mr. Thomas had any ideas about how to defeat the Chaos Legion.

The Gryffindor boy had said cheerfully that Harry had predicted that General Malfoy would get one of his soldiers to ask him that, and that Harry had given him the message that General Malfoy should ask himself where his relative advantage lay—what Draco Malfoy could do, or what Dragon Army could do, that the Chaos Legion couldn't match—and then try to exploit it for all it was worth. Dean Thomas couldn't think of what that advantage might be, but if he *did* come up with any ideas for beating

Chaos, he'd share them. Harry had ordered him to, after all.

Sigh, Draco had thought, since he couldn't actually sigh out loud. But it was good advice, and Draco had followed it, sitting at his bedroom desk with quill and parchment listing out everything that might be a relative advantage.

And, almost to Draco's own surprise, he'd had an idea, a real one. In fact he'd had *two*.

The hollow bell sounded through the forest, somehow sounding more ominous than ever before. On the instant, the two pilots cried "*Up!*" and leapt onto their broomsticks, heading into the gray sky.

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Mr. and Mrs. Davis had now slumped slightly against each other, more from sheer muscle exhaustion than from any decrease of tension. Before them, the vast blank white parchment flickered with three great windows, as though holes had been cut through into the forest, showing three armies on the march. Lesser windows showed the six riders upon their broomsticks, and the corner of the parchment showed a view of the entire forest, with glowing dots to indicate armies and scouts.

The window into Sunshine showed General Granger and her Captains marching in the center of the Sunshine Regiment, protected by *Contego* screens along with a number of other young witches. The Sunshine Regiment, the Defense Professor had remarked, knew well that it had now acquired a strong advantage in experienced soldiers, and it meant to protect those soldiers from a surprise attack. Aside from that, the Sunshine Soldiers were moving forward at a steady march, conserving their strength.

The soldiers in General Malfoy's army, at least those with higher Transfiguration scores, were picking up leaves and Transfiguring them into... well, if you looked at Padma Patil, who was almost done with hers, it looked like her leaf was becoming a left-handed glove bearing a dangling strap. (The window had zoomed in to show this.)

Lord Jugson was watching the screen with a flat expression; his voice, when he spoke, seemed to ooze and drip with disdain. "What is your son doing, Lucius?"

The foreign-born witch who stood at Draco Malfoy's right side had finished Transfiguring her glove, and was now bringing it before the Dragon General like a sacrifice.

"I do not know," said Lucius Malfoy, his tone calm though no less aristocratic, "but I must trust that he has good reason for doing it."

All Dragon Army stopped for a moment as Padma slid the glove over her left hand, strapped it in place, and presented it before Draco Malfoy; who also stopped in place, took several deep breaths, raised his wand, executed a precise set of eight movements and bellowed "*Colloportus!*"

The Dragon Warrior raised her gloved hand, flexed it, and gave a small bow to Draco Malfoy, who returned it more shallowly, though the Dragon General was staggering slightly. Padma then returned to her place at Draco's side, and the Dragons began marching once more.

"Well," remarked Augusta Longbottom. "I don't suppose someone would care to explain?" Amelia Bones was frowning slightly as she gazed at the screen.

"For some reason or other," said the amused voice of Professor Quirrell, "it seems that the scion of Malfoy is able to cast surprisingly strong magic for a first-year student. Due to the purity of his blood, of course. Certainly the good Lord Malfoy would not have openly flouted the underage magic laws by arranging for his son to receive a wand before his acceptance into Hogwarts."

"I suggest you be careful in your implications, Quirrell," Lucius Malfoy said coldly.

"Oh, I am," Professor Quirrell said. "A *Colloportus* cannot be dispelled by *Finite Incantatem*; it requires an *Alohomora* of equal strength. Until then, a glove so Charmed will resist lesser material forces, deflect the Sleep Hex and the Stunning Hex. And as neither Mr. Potter nor Miss Granger can cast a counterspell powerful enough, that Charm is invincible upon this battlefield. It is not the original intent of the Charm, nor the intent of whoever taught Mr. Malfoy an emergency spell for evading his enemies. But it would seem that Mr. Malfoy has been learning creativity."

Lucius Malfoy had straightened as the Defense Professor spoke; he now sat erect upon his cushioned bench, his head held perceptibly higher than before, and when he spoke it was with quiet pride. "He will be the greatest Lord Malfoy that has yet lived."

"Faint praise," Augusta Longbottom said under her breath; Amelia Bones chuckled, as did Mr. Davis for a tiny, fatal fraction of a second before he stopped with a strangled gargle.

"I quite agree," said Professor Quirrell, though it wasn't clear to whom he spoke. "Unfortunately for Mr. Malfoy, he is still new to the art of creativity, and so he has committed a classic error of Ravenclaw."

"And what might that be?" said Lucius Malfoy, his voice now turned chill once more.

Professor Quirrell had leaned back in his seat, the pale blue eyes briefly unfocusing as one of the windows shifted its viewpoint within the greater screen, zooming in to show the sweat now on Draco Malfoy's forehead. "It is such a beautiful idea that Mr. Malfoy has quite overlooked its pragmatic difficulties."

"Would someone care to explain that?" said Lady Greengrass. "Not all of us present are experts at such... affairs."

Amelia Bones spoke, the old witch's voice somewhat dry. "It will tempt them to try to catch hexes that they would be wiser to simply dodge. The more so, if they have had little practice catching them. And the casting of so many Charms will tire their strongest warrior."

Professor Quirrell gave the DMLE Director a half-nod of acknowledgment. "As you say, Madam Bones. Mr. Malfoy is new to the business of having ideas, and so when he has one, he becomes proud of himself for having it. He has not yet had enough ideas to unflinchingly discard those that are beautiful in some aspects and impractical in others; he has not yet acquired confidence in his own ability to think of better ideas as he requires them. What we are seeing here is not Mr. Malfoy's best idea, I fear, but rather his only idea."

Lord Malfoy simply turned to watch the screens again, as though the Defense Professor had used up his right to exist.

"But—" said Lord Greengrass. "But what in Merlin's name is Harry Potter—"

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Sixteen remaining soldiers of the Chaos Legion—or fifteen plus Blaise Zabini, rather—marched confidently through the forest, their shoes thudding over the still-dry ground. Their camouflage uniforms blended into the forest even more than usual, all colors washed out by the tints of an overcast day.

Sixteen Chaos Legionnaires, against twenty-eight Dragon Warriors and twenty-eight Sunshine Soldiers.

The common consensus had been that, with odds that bad, it was practically impossible for them to lose. After all, General Chaos was bound to come up with something really *spectacular*, facing odds like that.

There was something almost nightmarish about how everyone seemed to now expect Harry to pull miracles out of his hat, on demand, any time one was needed. It meant that if you couldn't do the impossible, you were *disappointing your friends* and *failing to live up to your potential*...

Harry hadn't bothered complaining to Professor Quirrell about 'too much pressure'. Harry's mental model of the Defense Professor had predicted him looking severely annoyed, saying things along the lines of *You are perfectly capable of solving this problem, Mr. Potter; did you even try?* and then deducting several hundred Quirrell points.

From above, from where two broomsticks watched their march, the high young voice of Tess Walsh cried "Friend!" and after another moment, "Gingersnap!"

A handful of seconds later, the soldier who'd code-named herself Gingersnap returned bearing a double handful of acorns, sweating slightly in the cool but humid air from the jog that had taken her to the oak tree Neville had spotted. Gingersnap approached to where Shannon was holding a uniform-shirt with the neck tied off, in lieu of anyone having to Transfigure a bag. When Gingersnap brought her hands forward to try and dump her acorns into the holding-shirt, Chaotic Shannon, giggling, jerked the shirt to the right, then to the left again as Gingersnap made another effort to dump the acorns, until a sharp "Miss Friedman!" from

Lieutenant Nott caused Shannon to sigh and hold the shirt still. Ginger-snap dumped her acorns into those accumulated, and then headed out for more.

Somewhere in the background, Ellie Knight was singing her very own version of the Chaos Legion's marching song, and around half the other soldiers were trying to step along with it despite not knowing the tune in advance. Nearby, Nita Berdine, who had a high Transfiguration score, finished creating yet another pair of green sunglasses, and handed them to Adam Beringer, who folded up the sunglasses before tucking them into his uniform pocket. Other soldiers were already wearing their own green sunglasses, despite the cloudy day.

You might guess that there was some sort of incredibly complicated and fascinating explanation behind this, and you would be right.

Two days earlier Harry had been sitting amid his bookcases in the comfy rocking-chair he'd obtained for his trunk's cavern level, pondering silently in the quiet span between classes and dinnertime, thinking about power.

For sixteen Chaotics to defeat twenty-eight Sunnies and twenty-eight Dragons they would need a force amplifier. There were limits to what you could do with maneuver. There *had* to be a secret weapon and it had to be invincible, or at least moderately unstoppable.

Muggle artifacts were now illegal in Hogwarts's mock battles, banned by Ministry edict. And the trouble with finding some other clever and unusual spell was that an army twice your own size could brute-force *Finite* almost anything you tried. The Sunshine Regiment might have missed that tactic with the Transfigured chainmail, but nobody would miss it again now that Professor Quirrell had pointed it out. And *Finite Incantatem* was a brute-force counterspell which required at least as much magic as the spell being canceled... which, if you were severely outnumbered, made it a whole new order of military challenge. The enemy could *Finite* anything you tried, and still have enough magic left over for shields and volleys of Sleep Hexes.

Unless, somehow, you could invoke potencies beyond the ordinary strength of first-year Hogwarts students, something too powerful for the enemy to *Finite*.

So Harry had asked Neville if he'd ever heard of any *small, safe* sacrificial rituals—

And then, after the screaming and the shouting had subsided, after Harry had stopped trying to argue about Unbreakable Vows and just given up the whole thing as impossible from a public relations standpoint, Harry had realized that he hadn't even needed to go there. They taught you how to invoke potencies far beyond your own strength in ordinary Hogwarts classes.

Sometimes, even though you were looking straight at something, you didn't realize *what* you were looking at until you happened to ask exactly the right question.

Defense. Charms. Transfiguration. Potions. History of Magic. Astronomy. Broomstick Flying. Herbology...

"Foe!" screamed the voice from above.

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It was a good thing that Neville Longbottom hadn't the tiniest idea that his grandmother was watching; or he would've been more self-conscious about screaming scary battlecries at the top of his lungs while casting *Luminos* every three seconds as he rocketed through a dense forest of trees, hot on the tail of Gregory Goyle.

("But—" Augusta Longbottom said, her expression showing almost as much astonishment as worry. "But Neville is afraid of heights!")

("Not all fears last," said Amelia Bones. The old witch was favoring the great screen before them with a measuring gaze. "Or perhaps he has found courage. It is much the same, in the end.")

A glimmer of red—

Neville dodged, very nearly into a tree but he did dodge; and then Neville somehow also managed to dodge *almost* all of the branches before they smacked him in the face.

Now Mr. Goyle's broomstick was pulling further and further away—even though the two of them were riding exactly the same broomstick and Mr. Goyle weighed more, somehow Neville was still falling behind. So

Neville slowed down, pulled back, angled up out of the forest and began to accelerate back toward where the Chaos Legion still marched.

Twenty seconds later—it hadn't been a long chase, just an *exciting* one—Neville was back among his fellow Chaotics, and dismounted his broom to walk on the ground for a little bit.

"Neville—" said General Potter. Harry's voice was a little distant, as he walked carefully and steadily through the forest, his wand still applied to the almost-finished Form of the object he was slowly Transfiguring. Beside him, Blaise Zabini, working a smaller version of the same Transfiguration, looked like a shambling Inferi as he stumbled forward. "I told you—Neville—you don't have to—"

"Yes, I do," said Neville. He looked down at where his fingers grasped the broomstick, and saw that not just his hands, but his whole arms were shaking. But unless anyone else in Chaos had been practicing dueling for an hour a day with Mr. Diggory, and then practicing their aim in private for another hour afterward, Neville was probably the best shot from a broomstick even after taking into account that he wasn't a very good flyer.

"Good show, Neville," Theodore said from where he was walking ahead of them all, leading the Chaos Legion forward through the forest while wearing only his undershirt.

(Augusta Longbottom and Charles Nott exchanged brief astonished glances and then wrenched their gazes away from one another as though stung.)

Neville took a few deep breaths, trying to steady his hands, trying to think; Harry might not be good for deep strategic thinking while he was in the middle of an extended Transfiguration. "Lieutenant Nott, do you have any idea why Dragon Army just did that? They lost a broom—" The Dragons had started the combat with a feint to provide a distraction for Mr. Goyle's approach through the forest; Neville hadn't realized there were *two* brooms attacking until almost too late. But the Chaos Legion had *gotten* the other pilot. That was why broomsticks usually didn't attack before armies met, it meant a whole army would concentrate fire on the broomstick. "And the Dragons didn't even get anyone, did they?"

"Nope!" Tracey Davis said proudly. She too was now marching by

General Potter's side, her wand gripped low and watchful as her eyes scanned the surrounding forest. "I threw up a Prismatic Sphere like a split second before Mr. Goyle's hex got Zabini, and the way Mr. Goyle had his other arm stretched out I think he planned to knock down the General, too." The Slytherin witch smiled with vicious confidence. "Mr. Goyle tried a Breaking Drill Hex, but learned to his dismay that his weak magic was no match for my newfound dark powers, hahahaha!"

Some Chaotics laughed with her, but a queasy sensation was starting in Neville's stomach as he realized how close the Chaos Legion had come to complete disaster. If Mr. Goyle had managed to disrupt both Transfigurations—

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"Report!" snapped the Dragon General, doing his best to conceal the fatigue he felt after casting seventeen Locking Charms, with more yet to come.

Beads of sweat now dotted Gregory's forehead. "The enemy got Dylan Vaughan," Gregory said formally. "Harry Potter and Blaise Zabini were each Transfiguring something dark-grey and roundish, I don't think it was finished but it looked like it would be big and hollow, sort of cauldron-shaped. Zabini's was smaller than Potter's. I couldn't get either of them or disrupt their Transfigurations, Tracey Davis blocked me. Neville Longbottom is on a broomstick and he's still a terrible flyer but his aim is really good."

Draco listened, frowning, and then he glanced at Padma and Dean Thomas, who both shook their own heads, indicating that they also couldn't think of what might be big and grey and shaped like a cauldron.

"Anything else?" said Draco. If that was it, they'd lost a broom for nothing—

"The only other weird thing I saw," Gregory said, sounding puzzled, "was that some Chaotics were wearing... sort of like goggles?"

Draco thought about this, not noticing that he'd stopped marching or that all of Dragon Army had automatically stopped with him.

"Was there anything special about the goggles?" Draco said.

"Um..." Gregory said. "They were... greenish, maybe?"

"Okay," said Draco. Again without thinking, he began walking once more and his Dragons followed. "Here's our new strategy. We're only going to send eleven Dragons against the Chaos Legion, not fourteen. That should be enough to beat them, now that we can neutralize their special advantage." It was a gamble, but you had to take gambles sometimes, if you wanted to come in first in a three-way battle.

"You figured out Chaos's plan, General Malfoy?" said Mr. Thomas with considerable surprise.

"What are they doing?" said Padma.

"I haven't the faintest idea," said Draco, with a smirk of the most refined smugness. "We'll just do the obvious thing."

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Harry, having now finished his cauldron, was carefully scooping acorns into the container while the scouts searched for a nearby source of water that could be used as a liquid base. They'd come across frequent sinkholes and miniature creeks in the forest before, so it ought not to take long. Another scout had brought a straight stick that would serve as a stirrer, so Harry didn't have to Transfigure one.

Sometimes, even though you were looking straight at something, you didn't realize *what* you were looking at until you happened to ask exactly the right question...

How can I invoke magical powers that ought to be beyond the reach of first-year students?

There was a cautionary tale the Potions Master had told them (with much sneers and laughter to make the stupidity seem low-status instead of daring and romantic) about a second-year witch in Beauxbatons who'd stolen some extremely restricted and expensive ingredients, and tried to brew Polyjuiceso she could borrow the form of another girl for purposes better left unmentioned. Only she'd managed to contaminate the potion with *cat hairs*, and then instead of seeking a healer immediately, the witch had hidden herself in a bathroom, hoping the effects would just wear off;

and when she'd finally been found, it had been too late to reverse the transformation completely, condemning her to a life of despair as a sort of cat-girl hybrid.

Harry hadn't realized what that *meant* until the instant of thinking the right question—but what that implied was that a young wizard or witch could do things with Potions-Making that they couldn't even come close to doing with Charms. Polyjuice was one of the most potent potions known... but what made Polyjuice a N.E.W.T.-level potion, apparently, wasn't the required age before you had enough magical power; it was how difficult the potion was to brew precisely and what happened to you if you screwed up.

Nobody in any army had tried brewing any potions up until then. But Professor Quirrell would let you get away with nearly anything, if it was something you could also have done in a real war. *Cheating is technique*, the Defense Professor had once lectured them. *Or rather, cheating is what the losers call technique, and will be worth extra Quirrell points when executed successfully.* In principle, there was nothing unrealistic about Transfiguring a couple of cauldrons and brewing potions out of whatever came to hand, if you had enough time before the armies met.

So Harry had retrieved his copy of *Magical Drafts and Potions*, and begun looking for a safe but useful potion he could brew in the minutes before the battle started—a potion which would win the battle too fast for counterspells, or produce spell effects too strong for first-years to *Finite*.

Sometimes, even though you were looking straight at something, you didn't realize *what* you were looking at until you happened to ask exactly the right question...

What potion can I brew using only components gathered from an ordinary forest?

Every recipe in *Magical Drafts and Potions* used at least one ingredient from a magical plant or animal. Which was unfortunate, because all the *magical* plants and animals were in the Forbidden Forest, not the safer and lesser woods where battles were held.

Someone else might have given up at that point.

Harry had turned the pages from one recipe to another, skimming faster and faster in dawning realization, confirming what he had already

read and was now *seeing* for the first time.

Every single Potions recipe seemed to demand at least one magical ingredient, *but why should that be true?*

Charms required no material components at all; you just said the words and waved your wand. Harry had been thinking about Potions-Making as essentially analogous: Instead of your spoken syllables triggering a spell effect for no comprehensible reason, you collected a batch of disgusting ingredients and stirred four times clockwise, and that arbitrarily triggered a spell effect.

In which case, given that most potions used ordinary components like porcupine quills or stewed slugs, you'd expect to see some potions using *only* ordinary components.

But instead every single recipe in *Magical Drafts and Potions* demanded at least *one* component from a magical plant or animal—an ingredient like silk from an Acromantula or petals from a Venus Fire Trap.

Sometimes, even though you were looking straight at something, you didn't realize *what* you were looking at until you happened to ask exactly the right question...

If making a potion is like casting a Charm, why don't I fall over from exhaustion after brewing a draught as powerful as boil-curing?

The Friday before last, Harry's double Potions class had brewed *potion of boil-curing*... although even the most trivial healing Charms, if you tried to cast them with wand and incantation, were at least fourth-year spells. And afterward, they'd all felt the way they usually felt after Potions class, namely, *not* magically exhausted to any discernible degree.

Harry had shut his copy of *Magical Drafts and Potions* with a snap, and rushed down to the Ravenclaw common room. Harry had found a seventh-year Ravenclaw doing his N.E.W.T. potions homework and paid the older boy a Sickie to borrow *Moste Potente Potions* for five minutes; because Harry hadn't wanted to run all the way to the library to find confirmation.

After skimming through five recipes in the seventh-year book, Harry had read the sixth recipe, for a *potion of fire breathing*, which required Ashwinder eggs... and the book warned that the resulting fire could be no hot-

ter than the magical fire which had spawned the Ashwinder which had laid the eggs.

Harry had shouted “*Eureka!*” right in the middle of the Ravenclaw common room, and been severely rebuked by a nearby prefect, who’d thought Mr. Potter was trying to cast a spell. Nobody in the wizarding world knew or cared about some ancient Muggle named Archimedes, nor the ur-physicist’s realization that the water displaced from a bathtub would equal the volume of the object entering the bathtub...

Conservation laws. They’d been the critical insight in more Muggle discoveries than Harry could easily count. In Muggle technology you couldn’t raise a feather one meter off the ground without the power coming from *somewhere*. If you looked at molten lava spilling from a volcano and asked where the heat came from, a physicist would tell you about radioactive heavy metals in the center of the Earth’s molten core. If you asked where the energy to power the radioactivity came from, the physicist would point to an era before the Earth had formed, and a primordial supernova in the early days of the galaxy which had baked atomic nuclei heavier than the natural limit, the supernova compressing protons and neutrons into a tight unstable package that yielded back some of the supernova’s energy when it split. A light bulb was fueled by electricity, fueled by a nuclear power plant, fueled by a supernova... You could play the game all the way back to the Big Bang.

Magic did *not* appear to work like this, to put it mildly. Magic’s attitude toward laws like Conservation of Energy was somewhere between a giant extended middle finger, and a shrug of total indifference. *Agua-menti* created water out of nothingness, so far as anyone knew; there was no known lake whose water level went down each time. That was a simple fifth-year spell, not considered impressive by wizards, because creating a mere glass of water didn’t seem amazing to them. They didn’t have the wacky notion that mass ought to be conserved, or that creating a gram of mass was somehow equivalent to creating 90,000,000,000,000 joules of energy. There was an upper-year spell Harry had run across whose *literal incantation* was ‘*Arresto Momentum!*’ and when Harry had asked if the momentum went anywhere *else* he’d just gotten a puzzled look. Harry had kept an increasingly desperate eye out for *some* kind of conservation

principle in magic, anywhere whatsoever...

...and the whole time it had been right in front of him in every Potions class. Potions-Making didn't *create* magic, it *preserved* magic, that was why every potion needed at least one magical ingredient. And by following instructions like 'stir four times counterclockwise and once clockwise'—Harry had hypothesized—you were doing something like casting a small spell that reshaped the magic in the ingredients. (And unbound the physical form so that ingredients like porcupine quills dissolved smoothly into a drinkable liquid; Harry strongly suspected that a Muggle following exactly the same recipe would end up with nothing but a spiny mess.) That was what Potions-Making really *was*, the art of transforming existing magical essences. So you were a little tired after Potions class, but not much, because you weren't empowering the potions yourself, you were just reshaping magic that was already there. And that was why a second-year witch could brew Polyjuice, or at least get close.

Harry had kept scanning through *Moste Potente Potions*, looking for something that might disprove his shiny new theory. After five minutes he'd flipped the older boy another Sickle (over his protests) and kept going.

The *potion of giant strength* required a Re'em to trample the mashed Dugbogs you stirred into the potion. It was odd, Harry had realized after a moment, because crushed Dugbogs weren't strong themselves, they were just... very, very crushed after the Re'em got through with them.

Another recipe said to 'touch with forged bronze', i.e., grasp a Knut in pliers so you could skim the potion's surface; and if you dropped the Knut all the way in, the book warned, the potion would instantly superheat and boil over the cauldron.

Harry had stared at the recipes and their warnings, forming a second and stranger hypothesis. Of course it wouldn't be as simple as Potions-Making using magical potentials imbued in the ingredients, like Muggle cars fueled by the combustion potential of gasoline. Magic would never be as sensible as that...

And then Harry had gone to Professor Flitwick—since he didn't want to approach Professor Snape outside of class—and Harry had told Pro-

fessor Flitwick that he wanted to invent a new potion, and he knew what the ingredients ought to be and what the potion should do, but he didn't know how to deduce the required stirring pattern—

After Professor Flitwick had stopped screaming in horror and running in little circles, and Professor McGonagall had been called into the ensuing fierce interrogation to promise Harry that in this case it was both acceptable and important for him to reveal his underlying theory, it had developed that Harry had not made an original magical discovery, but rediscovered a law so ancient that nobody knew who had first formulated it:

A potion spends that which is invested in the creation of its ingredients.

The heat of goblin forges that had cast the bronze Knut, the Re'em's strength that had crushed the Dugbogs, the magical fire that had spawned the Ashwinder: all these potencies could be recalled, unlocked, and restructured by the spell-like process of stirring the ingredients in exact patterns.

(From a Muggle standpoint it was just *odd*, a deranged version of thermodynamics invented by someone who thought life ought to be *fair*. From a Muggle standpoint, the heat expended in forging the Knut hadn't gone into the bronze, the heat had left and dissipated into the environment, becoming permanently less available. Energy was conserved, could be neither created nor destroyed; *entropy* always increased. But wizards didn't think that way: from their perspective, if you'd put some amount of work into making a Knut, it stood to reason that you could get exactly the same work back out. Harry had tried to explain why this sounded a bit odd if you'd been raised by Muggles, and Professor McGonagall had asked bemusedly why the Muggle perspective was any better than the wizarding one.)

The fundamental principle of Potions-Making had no name and no standard phrasing, since then you might be tempted to write it down.

And someone who wasn't wise enough to figure out the principle themselves might read it.

And they would start having all sorts of bright ideas for inventing new Potions.

And then they would be turned into catgirls.

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TABOO TRADEOFFS PRELUDE: CHEATING

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It had been made very clear to Harry that he wasn't going to be sharing this particular discovery with Neville, or Hermione either after the next armies' battle. Harry had tried to say something about Hermione seeming really off lately and this being just the sort of thing that might cheer her up. Professor McGonagall had said flatly that he wasn't even to think it, and Professor Flitwick had raised his little hands and made a gesture as of snapping a wand in half.

Although the two Professors had been kind enough to suggest that if Mr. Potter thought he knew what the potion's ingredients should be, he might be able to find an already-existing recipe that did the same thing; and Professor Flitwick had mentioned several volumes in the Hogwarts library that might be useful...

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The vast parchment-like screen now showed only an aerial view of the forest, from which you could barely make out the camouflaged forms of three armies, split up into two groups each, converging to fight their three-way battle.

The benches of the Quidditch stadium were now rapidly filling up with the more easily bored sort of spectator who only wanted to be there for the final battle and skip out on all the boring points along the way. (If there was anything wrong with Professor Quirrell's battles, it was widely agreed, it was that his spectacles didn't last nearly as long as Quidditch matches, once they actually started. To this Professor Quirrell had replied only, *Such is realism*, and that had been that.)

Within the huge window—it was all one window now, observing from a great height—the vague collections of tiny camouflaged forms grew closer.

Closer.

Almost touching—

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The vast white parchment window showed the first touch of battle between Sunshine and Chaos, a screaming mass of running children with

smiley-faces upon their breasts, charging forward with *Contego* shields held high and others shouting "*Somnium!*"—

Until one of their number shrieked "*Prismatis!*" in a terrified voice and the entire charge came to a sudden halt before the sparkling wall of force that had appeared in front of them.

Tracey Davis had walked out from behind the trees.

"That's right," said Tracey, her voice low and grim as she leveled her wand on the barrier. "You should fear me. For I am Tracey Davis, the Darke Lady! That's Darke Lady spelled D-A-R-K-E, with an E!"

(Amelia Bones, Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, was sending an inquiring look at Mr. and Mrs. Davis, both of whom looked like they would have dearly preferred to die on the spot.)

Behind the Prismatic Barrier, there was some kind of hushed argument taking place among the Sunshine Soldiers, one of whom in particular seemed to be getting scolded by several of the others.

Then, a moment later, *Tracey* flinched.

Susan Bones had come to the front of the Sunshine contingent.

("Goodness," said Augusta Longbottom. "What *do* you suppose your grand-niece has been learning at Hogwarts?")

("I don't know," Amelia Bones said calmly, "but I shall owl her a Chocolate Frog and instructions to learn more of it.")

The Prismatic Barrier vanished.

The Sunshine Soldiers resumed their charge forward.

Tracey yelled, her voice high with strain, "*Inflammaré!*" and the Sunshine charge came to another sudden halt as a line of fire blazed up between them in the half-dry grass, extending to follow the path of Tracey's wand as she pointed it; an instant later Susan Bones cried "*Finite Incantatem!*" and the flames dimmed, brightened, dimmed in the contest of their wills, other soldiers raising their wands to aim at Tracey; and *that* was when Neville Longbottom plunged shrieking out of the sky.

One of the Dragon Warriors, Raymond Arnold, made a hand-sign, pointing forward and oblique left; and there was a sudden hushed hiss of whispers among the Dragon Army contingent as they all quietly reoriented themselves in the direction of the enemy. The Sunnies knew they were there, of course both armies knew; but somehow, in this moment, they had all become instinctively quiet.

The Dragons crept forward further, and then further, the dull camouflaged forms of the Sunnies beginning to appear among the distant trees, and still nobody spoke, nobody bellowed the call to charge.

Draco was now at the forefront of his soldiers, Vincent behind him and Padma only a shade further back; if the three of them could take the shock of Sunshine's best, the rest of Dragon Army might stand a chance.

Then Draco saw one Sunnie staring at him from the distance, in the vanguard of her own army; staring at him with a look of fury—

Across the forest battleground, their eyes met.

Draco had only a fraction of a second to wonder, in the back of his mind, what Hermione Granger was so angry about, before the shout went up from both their armies; and they were all running forward to the charge.

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The other Chaotics had appeared now from among the trees, some had *dropped out* of trees, and the battle was in full force now, everyone firing in every direction at anything that looked like an enemy. Plus a number of Sunnies crying "*Luminos!*" at Neville Longbottom as the Chaos Hufflepuff twisted and rocketed up through the air on courses that could only be described as, indeed, "chaotic"—

And it happened, the way it happened only one time out of twenty in mock aerial combat, that Neville Longbottom's broomstick glowed bright red beneath his clenched hands.

It should've meant that Longbottom was out of the game.

Then, in the Hogwarts stands, among the watching crowds of students, a scream went up—

Combat realism. It was Professor Quirrell's one master rule. You could get away with anything if it was realistic, and in real life, a soldier didn't just vanish when their *broomstick* got hit by a curse.

Neville was falling toward the ground and screaming "*Chaotic landing!*" and the Chaotics were wrenching their attention away from fights to cast the Hover Charm (and run at the same time so they wouldn't be sitting ducks), almost everyone else stopping to gape—

And Neville Longbottom slammed into the leaf-laden forest ground, landing on one knee, one foot, and both hands, as though he were kneeling down to be knighted.

Everything stopped. Even Tracey and Susan paused in their duel.

In the stadium, all crowd noises vanished.

There was a universal silence composed of astonishment, concern, and sheer dumbstruck gaping awe, as everyone waited to see what would happen next.

And then Neville Longbottom slowly rose to his feet, and leveled his wand at the Sunshine Soldiers.

Though nobody on the battlefield heard it, a large segment of the stadium audience had begun chanting, in steadily rising notes each time the word was uttered, "DOOM DOOM DOOM DOOM DOOM", because you just couldn't see that and *not* think it required musical accompaniment.

"The crowd is cheering your grandson," said Amelia Bones. The old witch was favoring the screen with a measuring look.

"So they are," said Augusta Longbottom. "Some, if I hear correctly, are cheering, *Our blood for Neville! Our souls for Neville!*"

"Quite," said Amelia, taking a sip from a teacup which had not been there moments earlier. "It shows the lad has leadership potential."

"These cheers," continued Augusta, her voice taking on an even more stunned quality, "seem to be coming from the Hufflepuff benches."

"It is the House of the loyal, my dear," said Amelia.

"Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore! *What in Merlin's name has been happening in this school?*"

Lucius Malfoy was watching the screens with an ironic smile, his fingers tapping at his armrest in no discernible pattern. "I do not know what

is more frightening, the thought that he has some hidden plan behind all this, or the thought that he does not.”

“Look!” cried the Lord of Greengrass. The dapper young man had risen half out of his chair, pointing his finger at the screen. “There she goes!”

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“We’ll both take him at once,” Daphne whispered. She knew that a few fear-filled minutes of real combat experience, a handful of times each week, might not be enough to match Neville’s regular dueling practice with Harry and Cedric Diggory over the same period. “He’s too much for one of us, but both of us together—I’ll use my Charm, you just try to stun him—”

Hannah, beside her, nodded, and then they both screamed at the top of their lungs and charged forward, the Hover Charms of two supporting Sunshine Soldiers moving them faster and making them light on their feet, Daphne already crying “*Tonare!*” even as Hannah kept a huge *Contego* shield moving in front of them, and with a brief extra lift they leapt over the heads of the front screen of soldiers and landed in front of Neville with their hair billowing high around them—

(Photographs were strictly prohibited at all Hogwarts games, but somehow this moment *still* ended up on the front page of the next day’s *Quibbler*.)

—and in the same instant, because fighting older bullies had burned away the slightest traces of hesitation, Hannah fired her first Sleep Hex at Neville (she’d started the incantation while she was still in the air) even as Daphne, concentrating more on speed than on force, slashed down with her Ancient Blade at where she thought Neville’s thighs would be *after* he dodged—

But Neville leapt up, not sideways, leapt up higher than he should’ve been able to go, so that her glowing sword cut only the air beneath his feet. Somehow Daphne realized what it meant, that Neville still had other Chaotics Hovering him, in time for her to raise her Blade up over her head, but Neville *fell too fast* and when his Blade smashed into hers it was

like being hit by a Bludger. It knocked Daphne off her feet and sent her sprawling backward onto the grass, hitting the ground hard on her back. It might have been all over for her, then, if Neville hadn't landed too hard himself and gone to his knees with a pained gasp. And then before Neville could bring his glowing Blade down, Hannah shouted "*Somnium!*" and Neville lurched frantically backward—though of course no spell had actually come from Hannah's wand, the Hufflepuff girl couldn't really have fired again that fast—which gave Daphne a second to scramble to her feet and get both hands around her wand again—

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"Dear Merlin," said Lady Greengrass. Her voice seemed unsteady, the aristocratic poise well-punctured. "My daughter is fighting with the Charm of the Most Ancient Blade. In her first year. I never knew she possessed—such extraordinary talent—"

"Excellent blood," Charles Nott said approvingly, causing Augusta to snort.

"My good Lady," said Professor Quirrell, sounding grave. "Do not wrong your daughter so. That is not mere talent which you see." His voice grew a little dryer. "Rather, it is what happens when children put their competitive efforts into a game which involves actual spellcasting."

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"*Expelliarmus!*" shouted Draco, trying not to let his voice crack as he simultaneously dodged the blazing red stunbolt that Hermione Granger had fired at him, his muscles twisting with the need to dodge in the wrong direction—she'd pointed to his left, and then with a mysterious twitch fired right—

Hermione dodged the fast-moving dueling hex, and cried with hardly another moment's pause, "*Steleus!*", a wide-angle Hex that Draco couldn't

avoid, but he managed to point his wand at his own face and cry “*Quiescus!*” before the sudden urge to inhale could devolve into a sneezing fit that would’ve ended the battle.

Draco Malfoy was already half-exhausted from all the Locking Charms and Transfigurations earlier, but his confusion was beginning to give way to a sense of his own blood boiling, he didn’t know why Granger was attacking him so angrily all of a sudden, but *if she wanted a fight he’d give her one*—

(The Dragons and Sunnies weren’t stopping to watch the duel of their Generals, the Dragons were too disciplined to stop and watch and that meant the Sunnies had to go on fighting too; but the gaping audience in the Hogwarts Quidditch stands were being distracted even from Neville and Daphne’s spectacle, shifting their eyes to the duel of two Generals as Malfoy and Granger fired hex after hex and jinx after jinx at each other, casting more rapidly than any other student in their year could have managed, the Dragon General’s trained dueling dance matched by the Sunshine General’s frantic energy, the combat between them beginning to resemble an adult duel as the two most magically powerful first-years resorted to spells more exotic than the usual Sleep Hex.)

—although, Draco was beginning to realize, when he and Harry and Professor Quirrell had dismissed Miss Granger as having as much intent to kill as a bowl of wet grapes, they’d never seen her *angry*.

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Daphne lashed out with her Ancient Blade, again not trying to hit hard but just moving the Blade as fast as possible, at the same time Hannah cried “*Somnium!*” and Neville leapt back again, but it had been another bluff and Hannah was moving in to fire a real spell almost point-blank—

—and Neville Longbottom did exactly what—he would explain afterward—Cedric Diggory had trained him to do if he was fighting Bellatrix Black, which was to spin around and kick Hannah *really hard* in the pit of her stomach.

The Hufflepuff girl made a sad little sound, a gasping cry of pain, as she was knocked off her feet by the hard shoe sinking into her abdomen with the force of Neville's whole body behind it.

For an instant the battlefield stood still, everything halted except Hannah's falling form.

Then Neville's face turned to absolute dismay and he lowered his wand, the Chaotic Lieutenant starting instinctively toward his House-mate as he reached for her with his other hand—

Even as Hannah turned her fall into a roll and came out with her wand raised and shot him.

A fractional second later, Daphne, who hadn't hesitated either, sank her Most Ancient Blade squarely into Neville's back, causing the Chaotic Lieutenant's muscles to jerk convulsively with the stunning magic discharging into him even as Hannah's Sleep Hex took effect, and then the last scion of Longbottom was sprawled still on the ground with a look of total surprise frozen to his face.

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"Today Mr. Longbottom has learned a valuable lesson about his feelings of pity and remorse," said Professor Quirrell.

"And chivalry," said Amelia, sipping her tea again.

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"Are you all right?" whispered Daphne, as she stood protectively over where Hannah lay on the ground clutching her stomach. The girl didn't give anything back in reply except more retching sounds that sounded like Hannah was trying not to throw up while trying not to cry.

Somehow, even though it might not have been good tactics—it would've been better if Hannah had been hexed outright, than for other soldiers to be tied up protecting her—a number of Sunnies seemed to be standing in front of Hannah with their wands clutched tightly, staring

angrily at the Chaotics. Someone had thrown up a Prismatic barrier between the two groups, Daphne couldn't see who.

And for some reason the Chaotics didn't seem to be pressing the attack. Even Tracey had completely dropped the grim look on her face and was shifting her weight nervously from one foot to another, as though she was having trouble remembering which side she was on—

"*Hold!*" shouted a voice. "*Hold battle!*"

There wasn't much battle going on anyway, but it held.

General Potter, looking every inch the Boy-Who-Lived, strode out from the trees with something large and camouflage-cloth-covered held under one arm.

"Is Miss Abbott breathing all right?" General Potter yelled.

Daphne didn't look back. She didn't trust that this wasn't a trap—it was absolutely certain that if the Chaotics took the opportunity to attack, Professor Quirrell would not only rule it legal but also award them extra points afterward. But Daphne could hear the answer well enough with her ears, it wasn't like Hannah was trying to breathe *quietly*, and so she said, "Sort of."

"She should get out of here and to someone who can use healing Charms," Harry said. "Just in case that broke something."

From behind Daphne, a small gasping voice said, "I—can—still—fight—"

"Miss Abbott, don't—" Harry said, just as there was the sound from behind Daphne of someone collapsing back to the grass after trying and failing to get to her feet. Everyone winced, but Daphne didn't turn her back on Harry.

"Why haven't the teachers stopped the battle?" said Susan, her voice angry.

"I expect it's because Miss Abbott is in no danger of permanent damage and Professor Quirrell thinks we're learning valuable lessons," Harry said in a hard voice. "Look, Miss Abbott, if you go, Tracey will also retire from the battle. You already outnumber us, so that's a very good deal for your side. Please take it."

"Hannah, just go!" said Daphne. "I mean, just say you're out!"

When Daphne glanced back she saw that Hannah was shaking her head, still curled up in a ball on the grass.

"Oh, screw this," said Harry. "*Chaotics! The faster we stun them, the faster she's out of here! We're going to do this very quickly, even if we take casualties! End truce! TUNAFISH!*"

Daphne's political hindbrain had only an instant to admire how Harry's few words had just made the Chaotics the *good* guys, and then in almost perfect unison, the Chaotics were plunging their hands into the pockets of their uniforms and drawing out green sunglasses in an unfamiliar style. Not like anything you would wear to the beach, more like goggles for advanced Potions—

Then Daphne realized what was about to happen and snapped up her other hand to shield her eyes, just as Harry ripped the cloth off the cauldron.

The fluid that spilled forth as Harry Potter threw the cauldron's contents into the air was too bright to be seen, too brilliant to be imagined, incandescent like the Sun magnified a dozen times—

(which was exactly what it was)

(the sunlight which had been invested to create the acorns, the bright energy that had fueled a tree rising up from the bare dirt)

(blazing a searing purple, the color of the mixed blue and red wavelengths that chlorophyll absorbed)

(with almost none of the green wavelengths that chlorophyll reflected to create the green color of leaves)

(which was the color of the Chaos Legion's sunglasses, made to pass through green wavelengths, blocking red and blue, reducing even the most incandescent purple glare to something bearable)

—the violet light blazed on and on, Daphne tried dropping her arm from her eyes but found that she couldn't look directly at anything, even the secondhand purple glare was so bright she had to squint; and she had only time to cry one *Finite Incantatem*, which didn't work, before a Sleep Hex took her.

What was left of the battle didn't take very long after that.

“NOW!” bellowed Blaise Zabini, formerly of Sunshine, now commanding a detachment of Chaos Legionnaires. “I mean, TUNAFISH!” The Slytherin boy’s hand grasped the cloth shielding the cauldron from the triggering touch of daylight, already beginning to move it aside.

“NOW!” bellowed Dean Thomas, formerly of Chaos, commanding a consignment of Dragon Warriors. “DO WHATEVER THEY DO!”

The Chaotics of Zabini’s detachment plunged their hands into their uniform pockets, and came forth bearing green sunglasses—

—an action almost perfectly mirrored by Dean and the Dragon Warriors, who drew forth green-colored Potions goggles, and quickly drew the straps over their own heads, even as the Chaotics put on their sunglasses and the violet incandescence blasted forth.

(As General Malfoy had explained, if Mr. Goyle reported that the Chaos Legion was wearing green-colored Potions goggles, you didn’t have to know *why* to Transfigure some copies.)

“THAT’S CHEATING!” shrieked Blaise Zabini.

“THAT’S TECHNIQUE!” Dean yelled back. “DRAGONS, CHARGE!”

(“Pardon me,” the Lady Greengrass said. “Could you stop laughing like that, Mr. Quirrell? It’s unnerving.”)

“FINITE THEIR GOGGLES!” shouted Blaise Zabini, as the two armies ran headlong toward each other through omnipresent eye-searing purple glare. “WE CAN STILL WIN!”

“YOU HEARD HIM!” bellowed Dean. “GET THEIR GLASSES!”

Blaise Zabini’s reply to this wasn’t anything articulate.

That battle went on a lot longer.

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“*Stupefy!*” shrieked the Sunshine General.

Draco didn’t dodge, he didn’t counter, he didn’t have enough energy left for either, all he could do was whip his left hand into position and hope—

The red stunbolt dissipated again on Draco's *Colloportused* glove, which he'd Transfigured and spell-locked to his hand the same as the rest of Dragon Army. It was all that was saving him now, that shield.

It should have been a time to counterattack, but Draco could only catch his breath, as the two of them danced backward and forward beneath the trees in the never-ending movements of their duel. Across from him, General Granger was panting hard, the young girl's face glistening with sweat like dew, her chestnut hair wetted into brown plaits. Her camouflage uniform was stained with damp spots, her shoulders visibly trembling with exhaustion, but her wand was still steel-steady where it stayed level on Draco through all their motion. Her eyes glaring, her cheeks flushed with rage.

So, little girl, why're you pretending to fight like a grownup today?

The taunt came to mind, but he didn't really think he needed Granger any angrier; so instead Draco just said—though he could hear his own voice cracking—"Any reason you're feeling mad at me, Granger?"

The girl was gasping for breath herself, her own voice wobbling as she spoke. "I know what you're up to," said Hermione Granger, her voice rising. "I know what you and Snape are up to, Malfoy, and I know who's behind it!"

"Huh?" Draco said without even thinking about it.

That only seemed to increase Granger's fury, and her fingers whitened on the wand she held leveled on him.

And then Draco got it, and it boiled his own blood in his veins. Even *she* thought he was secretly plotting against her—

"You too?" Draco yelled. "*I helped you, you bucktoothed bint! You, you, you,*"—stuttering past all the Dark curses that came to mind until he found something he could actually cast at her—"DENS AUGEO!"

But Granger flashed and whirled around the Tooth-Lengthening Hex, and then her own wand came around and leveled at almost point-blank range, even as Draco brought up his left hand like a shield, placing the magic-locked glove between himself and whatever she was about to fire, and the Sunshine General's own voice rose to a shriek audible across the whole battleground—

"ALOHOMORA!"

Time should have paused.

But it didn't.

Instead the padlock clicked and fell off the glove.

Just like that.

Just like that.

The screens showed it all very clearly, to the entire watching Hogwarts stadium.

And the bone-dead-silent hush that fell over every bench in every bleacher said that everyone understood quite clearly what it meant, that the scion of House Malfoy had just had his magic overcome by a Muggleborn.

Hermione Granger didn't pause in her fight, gave no sign that she even knew what she'd done; instead her foot snapped out in a Muggle-style kick that knocked Draco's wand cleanly out of his hand, his shocked mind and body moving just a little too slowly. Draco dove after his wand, scrabbling frantically on the ground, but from behind him a girl's crackling voice said "*Somnium!*" and Draco Malfoy fell and didn't rise again.

There was another moment of frozen silence. The Sunshine General was wobbling on her feet, looking like she might faint.

Then the Dragon Warriors screamed at the top of their lungs and charged forward to avenge their fallen commander.

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Mr. and Mrs. Davis were shaking as they stood up from the comfortable chairs of the faculty Quidditch box; they couldn't quite clutch each other while walking, but they held hands tightly, pretending hard to be invisible. If they'd been children young enough for accidental magic they probably would've spontaneously Disillusioned themselves.

The elderly Charles Nott said nothing as he stood from his chair. The scarred Lord Jugson said nothing, as he stood from his own chair.

Lucius Malfoy said nothing as he stood.

All three of them turned without pause and strode toward the stairwell of the elevated bleachers, moving in eerie unison like an Auror trio—

"Lord Malfoy," the Defense Professor said in mild tones. That man was still seated in his own chair, looking upon his parchment-like screens, arms limp at his side, as though for some reason he didn't feel like moving.

The white-haired man halted just before reaching the exit archway, and the elderly man and the scarred man halted as well, flanking him. Lord Malfoy's head turned, too slightly to be any form of acknowledgement, but in the Defense Professor's direction.

"Your son performed exceptionally well today," said Professor Quirrell. "I must confess that I underestimated him. And he has earned his army's loyalty, as you have witnessed." Still very mild, the Defense Professor's voice. "Speaking as your son's teacher, it is my opinion that he will not benefit if you interfere in his—"

Lord Malfoy and his compatriots vanished down the stairs.

"A fine try, Quirinus," Dumbledore said quietly. The old wizard's face showed small lines of worry; he hadn't risen from his own seat either, staring at the parchment screens as though they were still active. "Do you think he will listen?"

The Defense Professor's shoulders twitched in a slight shrug, the only movement they'd shown since the battle ended.

"Well," said the Lady Greengrass, as she rose up and cracked her knuckles, stretching, her husband silent beside her. "I must say, that was quite... interesting..."

Amelia Bones had risen from her own cushioned seat without any fuss. "Interesting indeed," said Director Bones. "I do confess, I find myself disturbed by the skill with which those children were fighting one another."

"The skill?" Lord Greengrass said. "Their spells didn't seem all that impressive to me. Except for Daphne's, of course."

The old witch did not move her eyes from where she was gazing at the Defense Professor's balding head. "The Stunning Hex is not a first-year spell, Lord Greengrass, but that is not the skill I had in mind. They supported each other with those simple spells, they reacted at speed to surprises..." The Director of the DMLE paused, as though searching for words that a mere civilian could understand. "In the midst of battle," she

said finally, "with spells flying in every direction... those children seemed quite at home."

"Indeed, Director Bones," said the Defense Professor. "Some arts are best begun in youth."

The old witch's eyes narrowed. "You are readying them to become a military force, Professor. To what end?"

"Now hold on!" interjected Lord Greengrass. "There's plenty of schools where they teach dueling in first year!"

"Dueling?" said the Defense Professor. From behind it wasn't visible if the pale face was smiling. "That is nothing, Lord Greengrass, to what my students have learned. They have learned not to hesitate in the face of ambushes and greater foes. They have learned to adapt when combat conditions change and change again. They have learned to protect their allies, to protect more those who are more valuable, to abandon pieces which cannot be rescued. They have learned that to survive they must follow orders. Some have even learned a little creativity. Oh, no, Lord Greengrass, *these* wizards will not hide in their manors and wait to be protected, when the next threat comes. They will know that they know how to fight."

Augusta Longbottom loudly clapped her hands together three times.

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We won.

It was the first thing Draco heard when he woke up on the battlefield, Padma telling him how his soldiers had rallied after he fell. How, thanks to the Dragon General's foresight, Mr. Thomas had led his detachment to victory over Chaos. How General Potter had defeated the portion of the Sunshine Regiment that clashed with him. How Mr. Thomas's Dragon Warriors had rejoined the main body of soldiers bearing both their own goggles and the sunglasses of the defeated Chaotics. How, only moments later, General Potter's remaining contingent had attacked both other armies with a potion that emitted searing purple light. But Dragon had held the numerical advantage over Sunshine and Chaos both, and

enough sunglasses for their warriors; and so Padma had managed to lead her inherited army to victory.

From the light in Padma's eyes and her arrogant smile that would have done proud to a Malfoy, she was expecting congratulations. Draco managed to grit out some form of praise from between his clenched teeth, and couldn't have said afterward what it was. The foreign-born witch, it appeared, hadn't any idea what'd happened, or what it meant.

I lost.

The Dragons trudged back to Hogwarts beneath gray skies, cold droplets landing heavy on Draco's skin, one by one. While he'd been stunned, it had begun, the long-promised rain finally beginning to fall. There was only one option left to Draco now. A forced move, as Mr. MacNair, who'd taught Draco chess, would have termed it. Harry Potter probably wouldn't like it, if he really was in love with Granger the way everyone said. But the forced move, as Mr. MacNair had defined it, was one you needed to make if you wanted the game to continue at all.

It kept on playing in Draco's mind, over and over again, even as he walked like an automaton through the massive portals of Hogwarts, sent away Vincent and Gregory with two sharp words, and became alone within his private bedroom, sitting on his bed, staring at the wall above his desk. Filling his mind like a Dementor had locked him into the memory.

The padlock on his glove clicking and falling away—

Draco knew, he *knew* what he'd done wrong. He'd been so tired after casting twenty-seven Locking Charms for all the other Dragon Warriors. Less than a minute wasn't enough time to recover after each spell. And so he'd *just* cast *Colloportus* on his own padlocked glove, *just* cast the spell, not put in all his strength to bind it stronger than Harry Potter or Hermione Granger could undo.

But nobody was going to believe that, even if it was true. Even in Slytherin, nobody would believe that. It sounded like an excuse, and an excuse was all that anyone would hear.

Granger whirled and spun and screamed 'ALOHOMORA!'—

Draco's mind kept playing it over and over as the resentment built. He'd helped Granger—cooperated with her on banning traitors—held

her hand as she'd dangled off the roof—stopped a riot from breaking out around her in the Great Hall—did she have any idea what he'd risked, what he'd probably already *lost*, what it meant for the heir of House Malfoy to do that for a *mudblood*—

And now there was only one move left, and the thing about a forced move was that you *had* to make it, even if it meant getting detention and losing House points. Professor Snape would know and understand, but there were limits (Father had warned him) to what the Potions Master would overlook.

Challenge Granger to a wizard's duel, in open defiance of Hogwarts regulations. Attack her outright, if she tried to refuse. Defeat her one-on-one, in public, not with clever dueling technique, but by *overpowering* her magic. Beat her solidly, completely, crush her as utterly as the Dark Lord himself had crushed his enemies. Make it absolutely clear to everyone, so that nobody could possibly doubt, that Draco had just been exhausted from casting the spell so many times. Prove that the Malfoy blood was stronger than any *mudblood's*—

Only it's not, Harry Potter's voice whispered inside Draco's mind. *It's easy to forget what's really true, Draco, once you start trying to win at politics. But in reality there's only one thing that makes you a wizard, remember?*

Draco knew, then, he knew the reason for the disquiet in the back of his mind, as he stared at the blank wall above his desk contemplating his forced move. It should've been simple—when you only had one move, the thing to do was make it—but—

Granger whirling, spinning, sweat-dampened hair flying around her, bolts flying from her wand as fast as his own, jinx and counter-jinx, glowing bats flying at his face, and through all of it the look of fury in Granger's eyes—

There'd been a part of him admiring that, before it had all gone wrong, admiring Granger's fury and power; a part of him that had exulted in the first real fight he'd ever been in, against...

...an equal opponent.

If he challenged Granger, and *lost*...

It ought not to be possible, Draco had gotten his wand two full years before anyone else in his Hogwarts class.

Only there was a reason why they usually didn't bother giving wands to nine-year-olds. Age counted too, it wasn't just how long you'd held a wand. Granger's birthday had been only a few days into the year, when Harry had bought her that pouch. That meant she was twelve now, that she'd been twelve almost since the start of Hogwarts. And the truth was, Draco hadn't been practicing much outside of class, probably not nearly as much as Hermione Granger of Ravenclaw. Draco hadn't thought he needed any more practice to stay ahead...

And Granger was exhausted too, whispered the Voice of Contrary Evidence inside him. Granger must have been exhausted from all those Stunning Hexes, and even in that state she'd been able to undo his Locking Charm.

And Draco *could not* afford to challenge Granger publicly, one-on-one with no excuses, and lose.

Draco knew what you were supposed to do in this sort of situation. You were supposed to cheat. But if anyone discovered Draco cheating, it would be disastrous, perfect blackmail material even if it never got out publicly, and any Slytherins watching would *know* that, they'd be *looking*...

And then, if you were watching, you would have seen Draco Malfoy get up from his bed, and go to his desk, and take out a sheet of the finest sheepskin parchment, and a pearl-carven inkwell, filled with greenish-silver ink that had been made with true silver and crushed emeralds. From the great trunk at his bed's foot, the Slytherin drew forth a book bound also in silver and emeralds, entitled *The Etiquette of the Houses of Britain*. And with a new, clean quill, Draco Malfoy began to write, frequently looking to the book where it lay open as a reference. There was a grim smile on the boy's face, making the young Malfoy look very much like his father, as he carefully drew each letter as though it were a separate artwork.

From Draco, son of Lucius son of Abraxis Lords of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy, son also of Narcissa daughter of Druella Lady of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, scion and heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy:

To Hermione, the first Granger:

(That form might have been meant to sound polite, long ago when it had been invented; nowadays, after centuries of being used to address mudbloods, it carried a lovely tinge of refined venom.)

I, Draco, of Most Ancient House, demand redress, for

Draco paused, carefully moving the quill aside so that it wouldn't drip. He needed a pretext for this, at least if he wanted to impose the duel's conditions. The challenged had the choice of terms *unless* they had insulted a Noble House. He needed to make it look like Granger had insulted him...

What was he thinking? Granger *had* insulted him.

Draco flipped the book to the page of standard formulae, and found one that seemed appropriate.

I, Draco, of Most Ancient House, demand redress, for that I have thrice over helped you and offered you only my goodwill, and in return you falsely accused me of plotting against you,

Draco had to stop and take a breath, forcing down the seething anger; he was starting to genuinely feel the insult now, and he'd just written out the last phrase and underlined it without thinking, like it was an ordinary letter. After a moment's reflection, he decided to let it stand; it might not be the exact formal phrasing but it had a raw, angry tone that seemed appropriate.

which insult you committed before the eyes of Britain.

Thus I, Draco, compel you, Hermione, by custom, by law, by

"The seventeenth ruling of the thirty-first Wizengamot," Draco said aloud without looking, a line delivered in many plays; he sat straighter as he said it, feeling every pulse of the noble blood in his veins.

Thus I, Draco, compel you, Hermione, by custom, by law, by the 17th ruling of the 31st Wizengamot, to meet me in wizard's duel with terms: That we each come alone and in silence, speaking to none before or after,

If the duel went poorly, Draco could just say nothing and leave it at that. And if he did defeat Granger, he would have learned experimentally that he could beat her *again* in a public challenge. It wasn't cheating, but it was Science, which was almost as good.

contesting by magic solely, without death or lasting injury,

...where? Draco had been told about a room in Hogwarts that was good for duels, where everything valuable was already protected by wards, and there were no portraits to tattle on you... which one had it been again...

in the trophy room of the Castle of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,

And their second and public duel had better be soon, like tomorrow, it would take very little time for his reputation in Slytherin to go irretrievably to sludge. He needed to fight Granger for the first time *tonight*.

upon midnight's stroke that shall end this very day.

Draco, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy.

Draco signed the formal parchment, and then drew forth his ordinary and lesser parchment, and his regular ink, for his post scriptum:

If you don't know how the rules work, Granger, here's how it is. You insulted a Most Ancient House, and I've got the lawful right to challenge. And if you affront the conditions of the duel, like by having Flitwick show up at the trophy room, or even just telling anyone else, my father will take you and your false honor straight to the Wizengamot.

Draco Malfo

On the last letter his quill pressed down on the parchment so viciously that the nib snapped off, creating a streak of ink and a small rip in the parchment, which Draco decided also looked appropriate.

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That night at dinnertime, Susan Bones came to Harry Potter and told him that she thought Draco Malfoy was going to carry out his plot against Hermione very soon. She was warning all the members of SPHEW, and she'd warned Professor Sprout, and she'd warned Professor Flitwick, and she was going to send a letter to her Aunt tonight, and now she was warning Harry Potter, too. Only they couldn't quite talk about it with Padma—Susan said, looking very serious—because Padma was feeling torn between her loyalty to Hermione and her loyalty to her General.

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, who was at this point feeling more frustrated with the entire situation than anything really *productive*, snapped at her that *yes*, he knew something had to be done.

After Susan Bones left, Harry looked over at the other end of the Ravenclaw table, where Hermione had sat down away from him or Padma or Anthony or any of her other friends.

But Hermione didn't look like she was in a mood where somebody going over and bothering her would be taken very well.

Later, looking backward, Harry would think of how, in his SF and fantasy novels, people always made their big, important choices for big, important reasons. Hari Seldon had created his Foundation to rebuild the ashes of the Galactic Empire, not because he would look more important if he could be in charge of his own research group. Raistlin Majere had severed ties with his brother because he wanted to become a god, not because he was incompetent at personal relationships and unwilling to ask for advice on how to do better. Frodo Baggins had taken the Ring because he was a hero who wanted to save Middle-Earth, not because it would've been too awkward not to. If anyone ever wrote a true history of the world—not that anyone ever could or would—probably 97% of all

the key moments of Fate would turn out to be constructed of lies and tissue paper and trivial little thoughts that somebody could've just as easily thought differently.

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres looked at Hermione Granger, where she'd sat down at the other end of the table, and felt a sense of reluctance to bother her when she looked like she was already in a bad mood.

So then Harry thought that it probably made more sense to talk to Draco Malfoy first, just so that he could absolutely positively definitely assure Hermione that Draco really wasn't plotting against her.

And later on after dinner, when Harry went down to the Slytherin basement and was told by Vincent that *the boss ain't to be disturbed...* then Harry thought that maybe he should see if Hermione would talk to him right away. That he should just get started on unraveling the whole mess before it raveled any further. Harry wondered if he might just be procrastinating, if his mind had just found a clever excuse to put off something unenjoyable-but-necessary.

He actually thought that.

And then Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres decided that he'd just talk to Draco Malfoy the next morning instead, after Sunday breakfast, and *then* talk to Hermione.

Human beings did that sort of thing all the time.

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It was Sunday morning, on the 5th of April, 1992, and the simulated sky above the Great Hall of Hogwarts showed great torrents of rain pouring down in such density that the lightning flashes were diminished and scattered into small pulses of white light that sometimes transformed the House tables, paling their faces and making all the students appear briefly to be ghosts.

Harry sat at the Ravenclaw table, wearily eating a waffle, waiting for Draco to make an appearance so that he could get started on sorting this whole thing out. There was a *Quibbler* being passed around which had

somehow ended up with Hannah and Daphne on the front page, but it hadn't gotten to his place yet.

A few minutes later Harry finished eating his waffle, and then looked around again to see if Draco had arrived yet for breakfast at the Slytherin table.

It was odd.

Draco Malfoy was almost never late.

Since Harry was looking in the direction of the Slytherin table, he didn't see Hermione Granger entering through the huge doors of the Great Hall. Thus he was rather startled when he turned back and discovered Hermione sitting down directly beside him at the Ravenclaw table, just as if she hadn't not-done that for more than a week.

"Hi, Harry," Hermione said, her voice sounding almost exactly normal. She started to put toast on her plate and a selection of healthy fruits and vegetables. "How are you?"

"Within one standard deviation of my own peculiar little average," Harry automatically replied. "How are you doing? Did you sleep okay?"

There were dark bags under Hermione Granger's eyes.

"Why, yes, I'm fine," said Hermione Granger.

"Um," Harry said. He took a slice of pie onto his plate (as his brain was occupied with other things, Harry's hand simply took the tastiest thing within range, without evaluating complex concepts like whether he was ready to eat dessert). "Um, Hermione, I'm going to need to talk to you later today, is that okay?"

"Sure," said Hermione. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"Because—" Harry said. "I mean—you and I haven't—for the last few days—"

Shut up, suggested an internal part of Harry that seemed to have been recently allocated for governing Hermione-related issues.

Hermione Granger didn't look like she was paying much attention to him in any case. She just stared down at her plate, and then, after about ten seconds of awkward silence, began to eat her tomato slices, one after another, without pause.

Harry looked away from her and began to eat a slice of pie which, he discovered, had somehow materialized on his plate.

"So!" Hermione Granger suddenly said after she'd polished off most of her plate in silence. "Anything happening today?"

"Um..." Harry said. He looked around frantically, as though to find something-happening that he could use as conversational fodder.

And so Harry was one of the first to see it, and wordlessly point, although the sudden swell of whispers that swept through the Great Hall showed that a number of other people had seen it too.

The distinctive crimson tinge of the robes would have been recognizable anywhere, but it still took Harry's brain a few moments to place the faces. An Asianish-looking man, solemn, and today looking rather grim. A man with a piercing gaze that swept over the room, his long black hair waving behind him in a ponytail. A man thin and pale and unshaven, with a face so blank that it was like stone. It took Harry a few moment to place the faces, and remember the names, from that long-ago day in January when the Dementor had come to Hogwarts: *Komodo*, *Butnaru*, *Goryanof*.

"An Auror trio?" Hermione said in a strange bright voice. "Why, I wonder what they'd be doing here."

Dumbledore was in their company as well, looking as worried as Harry had ever seen him; and after a moment's pause while the old wizard's eyes scanned the Great Hall and the students whispering over their breakfasts, he pointed—

—straight at Harry.

"Oh, now what," Harry said under his breath. His inward thoughts were a lot more panicked than that, as he wondered frantically if anyone had connected him to the Azkaban breakout somehow. He looked at the Head Table, trying to make the glance casual, and realized that Professor Quirrell was nowhere to be seen, this morning—

The Aurors swept toward him with swift strides, Auror Goryanof approaching from the other side of the Ravenclaw table as though to block any escape in that direction, Auror Komodo and Auror Butnaru approaching from Harry's side, the Headmaster following straight on Komodo's heels.

All conversation everywhere had ground to utter silence.

The Aurors reached Harry's place at the table, surrounding him from three angles.

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TABOO TRADEOFFS PRELUDE: CHEATING

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“Yes?” Harry said, as normally as he could. “What is it?”

“Hermione Granger,” Auror Komodo said in a toneless voice, “you are under arrest for the attempted murder of Draco Malfoy.”

CHAPTER SEVENTY-NINE

TABOO TRADEOFFS, PART I

The words dropped into Harry's consciousness and shattered his thoughts into a hundred shards of incredulity, the shock of adrenaline running into so much confusion that—

"She—" Harry said. "She—she wouldn't—WHAT?"

The Aurors weren't paying any attention to him. Komodo spoke again, still in that colorless voice. "Mr. Malfoy has regained consciousness in St. Mungo's and named you, Hermione Granger, as his assaulter. He has repeated these accusations under two drops of Veritaserum. The Blood-Cooling Charm you cast upon Mr. Malfoy would have killed him if he had not been found and treated, and it must be presumed known to you that this was a fatal curse. I therefore arrest you upon the serious charge of attempted murder and you will be taken into Ministry custody to be interrogated under three drops of Veritaserum—"

"*Are you mad?*" the words burst out of Harry's mouth, as he shoved himself up from the Ravenclaw table, an instant before Auror Butnaru's hand clamped down hard upon his shoulder. Harry ignored it. "That's *Hermione Granger* you're trying to arrest, the nicest girl in Ravenclaw, she helps Hufflepuffs with their homework, she'd *die* before she tried to kill *anyone*—"

Hermione Granger's face had crumpled. "I did it," she whispered in a tiny voice. "It was me."

Another huge rock fell on Harry's thoughts and crushed their fragile order, bursting fragments of comprehension into dust.

Dumbledore's face seemed to have aged decades over the course of seconds. "Why, Miss Granger?" Dumbledore said, his own voice barely above a whisper. "Why would you do such a thing?"

"I'm," Hermione said, "I'm, I'm—sorry—I don't know why I—" She seemed to collapse in on herself, her voice was formed of nothing but sobs, and the only words that could be made out were, "I thought—killed him—sorry—"

And Harry should have said something, should have done something, should have jumped up out of his seat and stunned all three Aurors and then gone on to some incredibly clever next move, but the twice-shattered fragments of his thought processes could yield no output. Butnaru's hand pushed Harry gently but firmly back into his seat and Harry found himself *stuck* there like he'd been glued, he tried to grab his wand for a *Finite* and it wouldn't come out of his pocket, the three Aurors and Dumbledore escorted Hermione out of the Great Hall amid a rising storm of outcries and the doors began to swing shut behind them—nothing made sense, it was surreal beyond all reckoning, like he'd been transported into an alternate universe, and then Harry's mind flashed back to another day of confusion and in a moment of desperate inspiration he finally realized what the Weasley twins had done to Rita Skeeter, and his voice rose in a scream, "*HERMIONE YOU DIDN'T DO IT YOU'VE BEEN FALSE-MEMORY-CHARMED!*"

But the doors had already shut.

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Minerva couldn't possibly have stood still, she paced back and forth through the Headmaster's office, the back of her mind half-expecting Severus or Harry to tell her to shut up and sit down, but neither the Potions Master or the Boy-Who-Lived seemed much concerned with her, both of their gazes focused on Albus Dumbledore where he had emerged from the Floo. There were sounds in the background that nobody heard. Severus seemed as passionless as ever, sitting in a small cushioned chair beside the Headmaster's desk. The old wizard stood terrible and upright by the still-burning fireplace, robed in black like a starless night, radiating power and dismay. All her own thoughts were of utter confusion and

horror. Harry Potter sat on a wooden stool with his fingers gripping the seat, and his eyes were fury and freezing ice.

At 6:33am, Quirinus Quirrell had Flooed St. Mungo's from his office for immediate pickup of Draco Malfoy. Professor Quirrell had found Mr. Malfoy in the trophy room of Hogwarts, on the verge of death from the continuing effects of the Blood-Cooling Charm slowly lowering his body temperature. Professor Quirrell had immediately dispelled the Charm, cast stabilizing spells on Mr. Malfoy, and levitated him to his office to Floo him to St. Mungo's for further treatment. After this, Professor Quirrell had informed the Headmaster, stating the facts briefly before vanishing through the Floo; the Aurors, notified by St. Mungo's, had demanded his presence for questioning.

The clear intent of the Blood-Cooling Charm had been to kill Draco Malfoy so slowly that the wards of Hogwarts, set to detect sudden injury, would not trigger. Under interrogation, Professor Quirrell had told the Aurors that he had cast several tracking Charms upon Mr. Malfoy's person in January, shortly after Mr. Malfoy's return to Hogwarts from Yuletide break. Professor Quirrell had cast tracking Charms because he had learned of a person with a motive to harm Mr. Malfoy. Professor Quirrell had refused to identify this person. The tracking Charms which Professor Quirrell had cast were triggered by Mr. Malfoy's health falling below an absolute level, rather than by sudden changes, and had therefore alerted Professor Quirrell before Mr. Malfoy had died.

Two drops of Veritaserum, sufficient to prevent Mr. Malfoy from withholding any meliorating or moderating information in his statements, had shown that Mr. Malfoy had—legally under the laws of Noble Houses, illegally under the regulations of Hogwarts—challenged Hermione Granger to a duel. Mr. Malfoy had won the duel but had then, as he left, been attacked from behind by Miss Granger with a Stunning Hex. After this Mr. Malfoy knew nothing.

Three drops of Veritaserum, requiring her to volunteer all relevant information, had caused Hermione Granger to confess that she had stunned Draco Malfoy from behind, and then, in a fit of anger, cast the Blood-Cooling Charm on him, with the deliberate intention of killing him slowly enough to evade identification from the Hogwarts wards,

whose workings she had read about in *Hogwarts: A History*. She had been horrified at herself upon awakening the next morning, but had not told anyone of what she'd done, believing Draco Malfoy to be already dead—as he certainly would have been after seven hours, had his body's own magic not been resisting the effects of the Blood-Cooling Charm.

"Her trial," said Albus Dumbledore, "is set for tomorrow at noon."

"*What?*" the word burst out of Harry Potter. The Boy-Who-Lived didn't rise from his chair, but Minerva saw his fingers whiten where they gripped the wooden seat beneath him. "That's insane! You can't do a police investigation in one day—"

The Potions Master raised his voice. "This is not *Muggle* Britain, Mr. Potter!" Severus's face was as expressionless as ever, but the bite in his voice was sharp. "The Aurors have an accusation under Veritaserum and a confession under Veritaserum. So far as they are concerned, the investigation is *done*."

"Not quite," said Dumbledore, just as Harry seemed ready to explode. "I have insisted to Amelia that this matter be given the utmost scrutiny. Unfortunately, as the ill-fated duel was at midnight—"

"*Supposed* duel," Harry said sharply.

"As the *supposed* duel was at midnight—yes, you're quite right, Harry—it is beyond the range of any Time-Turner—"

"Also *supposedly*," the Boy-Who-Lived said coldly. "And rather *suspiciously*, since the alleged murder suspect doesn't know about Time-Turners. I hope that an invisible Auror was immediately sent back in time as far as possible to observe—"

Dumbledore inclined his head. "I went *myself*, Harry, the moment I heard. But by the time I reached the trophy room, Mr. Malfoy was already unconscious and Miss Granger had gone—"

"No," said Harry Potter. "You reached the trophy room and saw Draco unconscious. That is all you observed, Headmaster. You did not *observe* Hermione there, or watch her leave. Let us distinguish observation from inference." The boy's head turned to look at her. "Imperius, Obliviation, False Memory Charm, Legilimency. Professor McGonagall, am I leaving out any mind-affecting spell that could have made Hermione do this or make her believe she'd done it?"

"The Confundus Charm," she said. And the Dark Arts had never been her study, but she knew—"And certain Dark rituals. But none of those could be performed in Hogwarts without alarm."

The boy nodded, his eyes still directly addressing her. "Which of those spells can be detected? Which would the Aurors try to detect?"

"The Confundus Charm would wear off in a few hours," she said, after a moment to gather her thoughts. "Miss Granger would remember the Imperius. Obliviation cannot be detected by any known means, but only a Professor could have cast that spell upon a student without alarm from the Hogwarts wards. Legilimency—can only be detected by another Legilimens, I think—"

"I requested that Miss Granger be examined by the court Legilimens," said Dumbledore. "The examination showed—"

"Do we trust him?" said Harry.

"Her," said Dumbledore. "Sophie McJorgenson, whom I remember as an honest student of Ravenclaw, and she is bound by the Unbreakable Vow to tell the truth of what she sees—"

"Could someone else be Polyjuiced as her?" Harry Potter interrupted again. "What did you *observe*, Headmaster?"

Albus said heavily, "A person who looked like Madam McJorgenson told us that a single Legilimens had lightly touched Miss Granger's mind some months ago. That is from January, Harry, when I communicated with Miss Granger about the matter of a certain Dementor. That was expected; but what I did not expect was the rest of what Sophie found." The old wizard turned to gaze into the Floo fire, letting the orange flames reflect on his face. "As you say, Harry, a False Memory Charm is one possibility; they are, when cast perfectly, indistinguishable from true memory—"

"That doesn't surprise me," Harry interrupted. "Studies show that human memories are more or less rewritten every time we remember them—"

"Harry," Minerva said softly, and the boy's mouth clamped shut.

The old wizard continued. "—but a False Memory Charm of such quality requires as much time to create as a true memory. Creating a detailed memory of ten minutes would be ten minutes' work. And according to

the court Legilimens,” Albus’s face now seemed more tired and lined than before, “Miss Granger has been obsessing over Mr. Malfoy since the day that Severus... yelled at her. She has been thinking of how Mr. Malfoy might be in league with Professor Snape, how he might be planning to harm her and harm Harry—imagining it for hours every day—it would be impossible to create false memories for so much time.”

“The appearance of insanity...” Severus murmured softly, as though he were speaking to himself. “*Could* it be natural? No, it is too disastrous to be pure accident; too convenient for *someone*, I have no doubt. A Muggle drug, perhaps? But that would not be enough—Miss Granger’s madness would have to be *guided*—”

“Ah!” Harry said suddenly. “I get it now. The *first* False Memory Charm was cast on Hermione after Professor Snape yelled at her, and showed, say, Draco and Professor Snape plotting to kill her. Then last night that False Memory was *removed* by Obliviation, leaving behind the memories of her obsessing about Draco for no apparent reason, at the same time she and Draco were given false memories of the duel.”

Minerva blinked in startlement. It would have been a thousand years before she thought of that possibility.

The Potions Master was frowning thoughtfully, eyes intent. “The *reaction* to a False Memory Charm is hard to predict in advance, Mr. Potter, without Legilimency. The subjects do not always act as expected, when they first remember the false memories. It would have been a risky ploy. But I suppose that is one way Professor Quirrell could have done it.”

“Professor Quirrell?” said Harry. “What motive does *he* have to—”

The Potions Master said dryly, “The Defense Professor is always a suspect, Mr. Potter. You will notice a trend, given time.”

Albus raised up a hand, a silencing gesture, and their heads all turned to look at him. “But in this case there is another suspect,” Albus said quietly. “Voldemort.”

That deadliest of unspeakable words seemed to echo around the room, canceling all the heat from the orange flames of the fireplace.

“I do not know,” the old wizard said slowly, “I know all too little, of the methods of Voldemort’s immortality. He searched out those books before I did, I think. All I could find were ancient tales, scattered across too many

volumes for him to remove. But to find truth among many stories is also a wizard's mastery, and this I have endeavored to do. There is a human sacrifice, a murder, of that I am certain; committed in coldest blood, the victim dying in horror. And old, old tales of wizards possessed, doing mad deeds, claiming the names of Dark Lords thought defeated; and there is usually a device, of that Dark Lord, which they wield..." Albus looked at Harry, the ancient eyes searching the younger. "I think, Harry—though you will call it only inference—that the act of murder splits the soul. That by ritual of blackest horror, the torn fragment of soul is chained to this world. To a material thing of this world. Which must be, or which then becomes, a device of power."

Horcrux. The terrible name echoed in Minerva's mind, though it seemed that—for what reason she did not know—Albus would not speak that word in front of Harry.

"And therefore," the old wizard finished quietly, "the remainder of the soul is bound to its chained part, lingering here when its body is destroyed. A sad and painful existence, I think it would be; less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost..." The old wizard's eyes were locked on Harry, who gazed back with his eyes narrowed. "It would take time for that mutilated soul to regain a mockery of life. That is why we have had our ten-year reprieve, I believe; why Voldemort did not return at once. But in time... that revenant would become capable of rising again." The old wizard spoke with grim precision. "It is clear, from the stories, that the Dark Lords who return by possessing another's form, wield lesser magics than they once knew. I do not think Voldemort would be satisfied with that. He would take some other avenue to life. But Voldemort was more Slytherin than Salazar, grasping at every opportunity. He would *use* his pitiful state, *use* his power of possession, if he had reason. If he could benefit by another's... inexplicable fury." Albus's voice had fallen to almost a whisper. "That is what I suspect happened to Miss Granger."

Minerva's throat was very dry. "He's *here*," she gasped. "*Here*, in *Hogwarts*—"

Then she stopped, because the *reason* Voldemort had come to Hogwarts—

The old wizard glanced at her only briefly, and said, still in that whis-

per, "I am sorry, Minerva, you were right."

Harry's voice was edged. "Right about what?"

"Voldemort's strongest avenue to life," Dumbledore said heavily. "The most desirable road for him, by which he would rise greater and more terrible than ever before. It is guarded here, within this castle—"

"Excuse me," Harry said politely. "Are you stupid?"

"Harry," she said, but there was no force in her voice.

"I mean, maybe you haven't noticed this, Headmaster Dumbledore, but this castle is full of *CHILDREN*—"

"*I had no choice!*" bellowed Dumbledore. The blue eyes were blazing now, beneath the half-moon spectacles. "I do not *own* it, that thing which Voldemort desires. It belongs to another, and is held here by *his* consent! I *asked* if it could be kept in the Department of Mysteries. But *he* would not permit that—he said it must be within the wards of Hogwarts, in the place of the Founders' protection—" Dumbledore passed his hand across his forehead. "No," the old wizard said in a quieter voice. "I cannot pass this blame to him. He is right. There is too much power in that thing, too much that men desire. I agreed that the trap should be laid behind the wards of Hogwarts, in the place of my own power." The old wizard bowed his head. "I knew Voldemort would worm his way here somehow, and planned to trap him. I did not think—I did not dream—that he would tarry in an enemy fortress one minute longer than he must."

"But," said Severus in some puzzlement, "what would the Dark Lord possibly gain by killing Lucius's only heir?"

"Point of order," Harry Potter said, a hard edge in his voice. "The motives of whoever's behind this are not the primary issue. Our top priority at this point is that an innocent Hogwarts student is in *trouble!*"

The green eyes locked with the blue, as Albus Dumbledore gazed back at the Boy-Who-Lived—

"Quite right, Mr. Potter," Minerva said, she hadn't even thought about it, the words just seemed to pop out of her lips. "Albus, who is watching over Miss Granger now?"

"Professor Flitwick has gone to her," the Headmaster said.

"She needs a *lawyer*," Harry said. "Anyone who just blurts out 'I did it' to the police—"

"Unfortunately," Minerva said, her tone taking on some of Professor McGonagall's sternness without thinking, "I doubt an attorney will be any use to Miss Granger at this point, Mr. Potter. She is to face the judgment of the Wizengamot, and they would be exceedingly unlikely to free her on a technicality."

Harry was looking at her with an utterly incredulous expression, as though suggesting that Hermione Granger didn't need an attorney was akin to suggesting that she be set on fire.

"She is correct, Mr. Potter," Severus said quietly. "Few court processes in this country involve solicitors."

Harry lifted his glasses and rubbed his eyes, briefly. "Fine. How do we get Hermione off the hook, exactly? I suppose it's too much to hope that with all the lawyers gone, the judges understand the concept of 'common sense' and 'prior probability' well enough to realize that twelve-year-old girls basically never commit cold-blooded murders?"

"It is the Wizengamot that she faces," said Severus. "The oldest Noble Houses, and certain other wizards of influence." Severus's face twisted in something approaching his customary sarcasm. "As for them showing common sense—you might as well expect them to make you a bacon sandwich, Potter."

Harry nodded, his mouth set. "Exactly what sort of penalty is Hermione facing? Snapped wand and expulsion—"

"No," Severus said. "Nothing that light. Are you willfully misunderstanding, Potter? She is facing the *Wizengamot*. There is no set penalty. There is only the vote."

Harry Potter murmured, "*The rule of law, in complex times, has proved itself deficient; we much prefer the rule of men, it's vastly more efficient...* There's no constraining legal rules at all, then?"

Light glinted off the old wizard's half-moon glasses; he spoke carefully, and not without anger. "Legally, Harry, we are dealing with a blood debt from Hermione Granger to the House of Malfoy. The Lord of Malfoy proposes a repayment of that debt, and then the Wizengamot votes on his proposal. That is all."

"But..." Harry said slowly. "Lucius was Sorted into Slytherin, he's *got* to realize that Hermione was just a pawn. Not the one he should actually

be angry at. Right?"

"No, Harry Potter," Albus Dumbledore said heavily. "That is how you *wish* Lucius Malfoy would think. Lucius Malfoy himself... will not share your desire that he think that way."

Harry gazed at the Headmaster, his eyes growing colder, at the same time that Minerva herself had to clamp down harder on her own emotions, stop her pacing and try to breathe. She'd been trying not to think about it, trying to turn her thoughts away from it, but she knew. She'd known since the instant she'd heard. She could see it in Albus's eyes—

"Is she facing capital punishment?" Harry said quietly, and chills went all the way down Minerva's spine at the undertones of that voice.

"No!" Albus said. "No, not the Kiss, not Azkaban, not for a first-year in Hogwarts. Our country is not so lost, not yet."

"But Lucius Malfoy," Severus said tonelessly, "certainly will not be satisfied with only snapping her wand."

"All right," Harry said commandingly. "As I see it, we've got two essential lines of attack. Line one, find the real culprit. Line two, other leverage over Lucius. Professor Quirrell saved Draco's life, does that create a blood debt from House Malfoy to him that he could redeem to cancel Hermione's?"

Minerva blinked in startlement again.

"No," Dumbledore said. The old wizard shook his head. "It was a clever thought—but no, Harry, I'm afraid not. There is an exception when the Wizengamot suspects that the circumstances of a life-debt may have been created deliberately. And the Defense Professor is hardly above suspicion. Thus Lucius would argue."

Harry nodded once, face set. "Headmaster, I know I said I wouldn't—but under the circumstances—that time Draco cast that torture hex on me, is that debt enough—"

"No," the old wizard said (even as she blurted "*What?*" and Severus lifted an eyebrow). "It would not have been enough, and now it is no debt at all. You are an Occlumens and cannot testify under Veritaserum. Draco Malfoy could be Obliviated of his own memory before he could testify—" Albus hesitated. "Harry... whatever you have done with Draco, you must assume that Lucius Malfoy will soon know of it."

Harry's head sank into his hands. "He'll give Draco Veritaserum."

"Yes," Albus said quietly.

The Boy-Who-Lived didn't say anything, as he sat with his head in his hands.

The Potions Master looked genuinely shocked. "Draco really *was* trying to help Miss Granger," Severus said. "You—Potter, you *actually*—"

"Turned him?" Harry said from between his hands. "I was about three-quarters done. Taught him the Patronus Charm and everything. I don't know what will happen now, though."

"Voldemort has struck a grave blow against us, this day," Albus said. The sound of old wizard's voice was like the look of the boy with his head in his hands. "He has taken two of our pieces, with one... No. I should have seen it earlier. He has taken two of *Harry's* pieces with one move. Voldemort has begun his game again, not against myself, but against *Harry*. Voldemort knows the prophecy, he knows who his last foe shall be. He is not waiting to face Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy at Harry's side when they are grown. He is striking at them *now*."

"Maybe it's You-Know-Who and maybe it isn't," Harry said, his voice sounding a little unsteady. "Let's not narrow down the hypothesis space prematurely." Harry took a breath and lowered his hands. "The other thing we can try is to nail the real culprit before the trial—or at least find solid evidence that *someone* else did it."

"Mr. Potter," said Minerva, "Professor Quirrell told the Aurors that he knew of someone with a motive to harm Mr. Malfoy. Do *you* know who he was talking about?"

"Yes," Harry said, after a hesitation. "But I think I shall conduct that part of my investigation with the Defense Professor—just as I would not have Professor Quirrell in the room while we were discussing how to investigate *him*."

"He suspects me?" Severus said, then gave a short laugh. "Why, of course he does."

"My own plan," said Harry, "is to go look at the trophy room where the supposed duel took place and see if I can discover anything anomalous. If you can tell the investigating Aurors to let me through—"

"What investigating Aurors?" Severus said tonelessly.

Harry Potter took a deep breath, slowly let it out, and then spoke again. "In mystery books it usually takes longer than one day to solve a crime, but twenty-four hours is—no, *thirty* hours is eighteen hundred minutes. And I can think of at least one other important place to look for clues—though it'll have to be someone who can get into the Ravenclaw girls' dorm. Back when Hermione was fighting bullies, she was finding notes under her pillow each morning, telling her where to go—"

"*Albus...*" ground out Minerva.

"I did not send them," said the old wizard. His white eyebrows had lifted in surprise. "I knew nothing of this. You think she was being played, Harry?"

"It's a possibility," Harry said. "More so, because there's a part of this puzzle that you don't know about yet." Harry's voice lowered, grew more intense. "Headmaster, you already know that I got my father's invisibility cloak from someone who left a note under my pillow, saying it was an early Christmas present. I think we have to assume that's the same person who left notes for Hermione—"

"Harry," the old wizard said, and hesitated momentarily. "Returning your father's cloak to you, does not seem to me like the act of a villain—"

"*Listen*," Harry Potter said urgently. "The part you *don't* know is that after Bellatrix Black escaped from Azkaban, I found another note under my pillow, signed 'Santa Claus', saying that they'd heard you were shutting me up inside Hogwarts, and that they were giving me an escape route to the Salem Witches' Institute in America. That note came with a deck of cards, in which the King of Hearts was supposedly a portkey—"

"*Mr. Potter!*" cried Professor McGonagall, she hadn't even thought before she spoke. "That could well be a *kidnapping attempt!* You should have told—"

"Yes, Professor, I did the sensible thing," the boy said levelly. "As *adapted to the circumstances*, I did the sensible thing. I told Professor Quirrell. And according to Professor Quirrell, that portkey goes to somewhere in London—it's definitely not strong enough to be an international portkey. Now it's *possible* that the person who sent the note is honest, and that the point in London is just a way station." The boy reached into his robes and took out a deck of cards, along with a folded paper note. "I will

trust you *not* to go in guns blazing—I mean wands blazing—just in case the sender is an ally of mine, if not yours. But if this is a trap, I say we spring it *now*. And whoever it is, take them *alive* so we can exhibit them before the Wizengamot, I cannot overemphasize that part.”

Severus rose from his chair, his eyes now intent, and moved toward Harry. “I’ll need a hair of yours for Polyjuice, Mr. Potter—”

“Let us not be hasty!” said Albus. “We have not yet examined the notes sent to Miss Granger; there may be no resemblance after all. Severus, would you enter her dorm room and see if you can find those?”

Harry Potter’s eyebrows had raised, even as he stood to offer the Potions Master better access to his mess of hair. “You think two *different* people are running around Hogwarts leaving notes beneath pillows?”

Severus gave a brief sardonic laugh, as his hand moved forward and plucked a hair, which soon was being carefully wrapped in silk. “Quite possibly. If I have learned anything in my tenure as Head of Slytherin, I have learned what ridiculous messes arise when there is more than one plotter and more than one plan. But Headmaster—I think Mr. Potter is correct that I should follow this portkey and see where it leads.”

Albus hesitated, and then nodded reluctantly. “I will speak to you before you go, then.”

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Even as Harry Potter left the room for his own investigations, Severus spun on his heel and strode swiftly toward the jar of Floo powder, his cloak rising behind him with his speed. “I’ll get some raw Polyjuice, add the hair, and go. Headmaster, will you stand by to—”

“Albus,” Minerva said, surprised at how steady her own voice was, “did you leave those notes under Mr. Potter’s pillow?”

Severus’s hand halted an instant before casting Floo powder into the fire.

Dumbledore nodded to her, though the accompanying smile seemed a bit hollow. “You know me far too well, my dear.”

"And I suppose the portkey goes to a friendly home where Mr. Potter would be kept safe and sound until you arrived to pick him up and return him to Hogwarts?" Her voice tight—it was sensible, she could not deny it was sensible, but somehow it seemed a little cruel.

"It would depend on the circumstances," the old wizard said quietly. "If Harry had gone so far—I might have let him make good his escape, for a time. Better to know where he was going, and ensure it was somewhere safe, with friends—"

"And to think," said Professor McGonagall, "that I had thought to reprimand Mr. Potter for not telling us about this important matter! Upbraid him for not having the sense to trust us!" Her voice had risen in volume. "I shall skip that lecture, I suppose!"

Severus was gazing at the Headmaster with narrowed eyes. "And the notes to Miss Granger—"

"The Defense Professor, very likely," the old wizard said. "Still—that is only a guess."

"I shall go look for them," Severus said. "And then, I suppose, start looking for You-Know-Who." A frown crossed the Potions Master's face. "A task at which I haven't the faintest idea of where to start. Do you know of any magics to find a soul, Headmaster?"

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The Divination classroom was lit by the dim red light of a hundred small fires where burned a hundred kinds of incense, so that if you were to ask in one word what the room looked like, the answer would be 'smoke'. (Assuming you bothered to look at anything, when your nose was threatening to overload and die.) If your gaze could pierce those dank mists, you would see a tiny, cluttered room in which forty stuffed armchairs, most of them unused, were crammed around a small open space in the center of the room, where a circular trapdoor waited on your escape.

"The grim!" Professor Trelawney said in a quavering voice, as she peered into George Weasley's teacup. "The grim! It is a sign of death!"

One whom you know, George—someone you know is to die! And soon—yes, it shall be quite soon, I think—unless of course it is later—”

It would have been a good deal scarier, thought Fred and George, if she hadn’t said the same thing to every single other student in their Divination class. They were hardly even thinking about it at this point; all their thoughts were on today’s disaster—

The trapdoor in the floor flew open with a bang that caused Professor Trelawney to shriek and spill George’s tea all over his robes, and then an instant later Dumbledore was whooshing up out of the floor with a bird of fire upon his shoulder.

“Fred!” the old wizard said commandingly. His robes were the black of a moonless night, his eyes hard like blue diamonds. “George! With me, now!”

There was an collective gasp and by the time Fred and George were climbing down the ladder after the Headmaster, the entire class was already speculating what role they’d played in the attempted murder of Draco Malfoy.

The trapdoor had hardly slammed shut above them before all nearby sounds muted and the old wizard spun on them and held out a hand and commanded, “Give me the map!”

“M-map?” said Fred or George in total shock. They’d never even suspected that Dumbledore suspected. “Why, w-we don’t know what you’re—”

“Hermione Granger is in trouble,” said the old wizard.

“The Map is in our dorm,” George or Fred said immediately. “Just give us a few minutes to get it and we’ll—”

The wizard’s arms swept them up as if they were hugging-pillows, there was a piercing cry and a flash of fire and then the three of them were in the third-year Gryffindor’s boys’ dorm.

A few moments later, Fred and George were handing over the Map to the Headmaster, wincing only slightly at the sacrilege of giving their precious piece of the Hogwarts security system to the person who actually owned it, and the old wizard was frowning at the apparent blankness.

“You’ve got to say,” they explained, “*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good—*”

"I decline to lie," said the old wizard. He held the Map high and bel-
lowed, "Hear me, Hogwarts! *Deligitor prodi!*" An instant later the Head-
master was wearing the Sorting Hat, which looked *scarily right* upon his
head, as though Dumbledore had always been waiting for a patchwork
pointed hat to complete his existence.

(Fred and George immediately memorized this phrase, just in case it
would work for somebody besides the Headmaster, and began trying to
think of pranks that would involve the Sorting Hat.)

The old wizard wasted not a moment before sweeping the Sorting
Hat off his head and turning it upside-down—it was hard to tell with the
Hat upside-down, but it looked a bit cross at the treatment—and then
plunged in his hand and drew out a crystal rod. With this instrument he
began tracing rune-like patterns on the Map, muttering strange incan-
tations that sounded not quite like Latin and echoed in their ears in an
unusually creepy fashion. In the midst of tracing one rune he looked up
at both of them, fixing them with a sharp glare. "I will return this to you
later, sons of Weasley. Go back to class."

"Yes, Headmaster," they said, and hesitated. "Ah—about Hermione
Granger, is she really going to be bound to serve Draco Malfoy forever as
his—"

"Go," said the old wizard.

They went.

When he was alone in the room, the old wizard looked down at the
map, which had now written upon itself a fine line drawing of the Gryffin-
dor dorms in which they stood, the small handwritten *Albus P.W.B. Dum-
bledore* the only name left therein.

The old wizard smoothed the map, bent over it, and whispered, "Find
Tom Riddle."

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The interrogation room at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement
was usually lit by a small orange light, so that the Auror interrogating you
would be leaning toward your uncomfortable metal chair with most of

their face in shadow, preventing you from reading their expression, even as they read yours.

As soon as Mr. Quirrell had entered the room, the small orange light had dimmed and begun flickering like a candle about to be blown out by the wind. The room was now lit by a sourceless ice-colored glow which illuminated all of Mr. Quirrell's pale skin like alabaster, except, somehow, his eyes, which stayed in darkness.

The Auror on duty outside had surreptitiously tried to dispel this effect four times without the slightest success, despite the fact that Mr. Quirrell had politely surrendered his wand upon being detained for interrogation, and had shown no sign of speaking any incantations nor exerting any other power.

"Quirinus... Quirrell," drawled the man now sitting across from where the Defense Professor had waited courteously. The interrogator had tawny hair that swept back like a lion's mane, with yellowish eyes set into the sternly lined face of a man late in his tenth decade. The man was, at this moment, leafing through a large folder of parchments that he had taken from a black and very solid-looking briefcase after he had limped into the room and sat down, seeming not to look at the face of the man he was interrogating. He had not introduced himself.

After some further leafing through parchments, carried out in silence, the Auror spoke again. "Born the 26th of September, 1955, to Quondia Quirrell, of an acknowledged tryst with Lirinus Lumblung..." intoned the Auror. "Sorted into Ravenclaw... O.W.L.S. quite good... N.E.W.T.S. in Charms, Transfiguration... an Outstanding in Muggle Studies, impressive... Ancient Runes, and ah yes, Defense. An Outstanding in that as well. Went on to become quite the tourist, visiting all sorts of places. Portkey visas for Transylvania, the Forbidden Empire, the City of Endless Night... my my, *Texas*." The man looked up from the portfolio, eyes narrowed. "What were you doing *there*, Mr. Quirrell?"

"Sightseeing, mostly in the Muggle areas," the Defense Professor said easily. "As you say, I am quite the tourist."

The man listened to this with a frown, then looked back down, then up again. "I also see that you visited Fuyuki City in 1983."

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CHAPTER 79

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The Defense Professor lifted an eyebrow in mild puzzlement. "What of it?"

"What did you do in Fuyuki City?" The question snapped out razor-sharp.

The Defense Professor frowned slightly. "Nothing of any account. I visited some better-known sights, some less-known sights, and aside from that, kept to myself."

"Really?" the Auror said softly. "I find that reply rather interesting."

"How so?" said the Defense Professor.

"Because there was no visa listed for Fuyuki City." The man slammed the folder shut. "You're not Quirinus Quirrell. Who the *hell* are you?"

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The Potions Master walked quietly into the Ravenclaw girls' dorm, the first-year dorm room, a festive place where bronze and blue competed to be the color of stuffed animals, scarves and dresses, small bits of inexpensive jewelry, and posters of famous people. Hermione Granger's bed was easy to identify; it was the one that had been attacked by a book monster.

Nobody else seemed to be around, at that time of day, and a number of spells verified this.

The Potions Master searched under Hermione Granger's pillow, and beneath her bed, and then began going through her trunk, sorting through mentionable and unmentionable items without change of expression, and finally succeeded in drawing forth a set of papers describing places and times where bullies would be found, all of the papers signed only with an elaborate 'S'.

A brief burst of fire later, the papers were gone, and the Potions Master left to report the failure of his mission.

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The Defense Professor was sitting calmly with his hands still folded in his lap. "If you consult Headmaster Dumbledore," said the Defense Professor, "you will find that he is well aware of this matter, and that I agreed to teach his Defense class on the explicit condition that no inquiry be made into my—"

In a lightning motion, the interrogator whipped out his wand and spat "*Polyfluis Reverso!*" at the same time that the Defense Professor sneezed, which somehow caused the mirror-silvered ray to disrupt in a shower of white sparks.

"Pardon me," the Defense Professor said politely.

The smile that the Auror gave had absolutely no mirth in it. "So where's the real Quirinus Quirrell, eh? Under an Imperius in the bottom of a trunk somewhere, while you take a hair now and then for your illegal Polyjuice?"

"You are making highly questionable assumptions," the Defense Professor said with an edged voice. "What makes you think I did not steal his body outright using incredibly Dark magic?"

This was followed by a certain pause.

"I suggest," the Auror said, "that you take this seriously, Mr. Whoever-You-Are."

"I'm sorry," said the Defense Professor, leaning back in his chair, "but I see little reason to humble myself on this particular occasion. What are you going to do, kill me?"

"I don't appreciate your humor," the Auror said softly.

"How unfortunate for you, Rufus Scrimgeour," said the Defense Professor. "You have my deepest sympathy." He tilted his head, seeming to study the interrogator; and even within the shadow of the ice-light, the eyes glinted.

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Padma stared down at her plate.

"Hermione wouldn't just *do* that!" yelled Mandy Brocklehurst, who was practically in tears, in fact she *was* in tears, her voice would have been loud enough to silence the Great Hall if it hadn't been for all the other

students also screaming at each other. "I—I bet Malfoy tried to—to *do* things to her—"

"Our General would *never* do that!" Kevin Entwhistle yelled even louder than Mandy.

"Of course he would!" shouted Anthony Goldstein. "Malfoy's the son of a *Death Eater*!"

Padma stared down at her plate.

Draco was the General of her army.

Hermione was the founder of SPHEW.

Draco had trusted her to be his second-in-command.

Hermione was her fellow Ravenclaw.

Both of them were her friends, maybe the two best friends she had.

Padma stared down at her plate. She was glad the Sorting Hat hadn't offered her Hufflepuff. If she'd been Sorted into Hufflepuff it would probably have been much more painful, trying to decide where her divided loyalties lay...

She blinked and realized that her vision had gotten blurry again, and raised a trembling hand to wipe once more at her eyes.

Morag MacDougal snorted so loudly it was audible even amid the pandemonium of lunch, and said in a loud voice, "I bet Granger *cheated* in her battle yesterday, I bet that's why Malfoy challenged her—"

"All of you *SHUT UP*!" roared Harry Potter, as he hit the table with his fists so hard that plates rattled all the way along it.

At any other time it would have gotten Professors reprimanding him, this time it just got a few nearby students to look.

"I'd wanted to eat lunch," Harry Potter said, "and then get back to investigating, so I wasn't going to talk. But you're all being *silly*, and when the truth comes out you're going to regret what you said about innocent people. Draco didn't do anything, Hermione didn't do anything, they were both False-Memory-Charmed!" Harry Potter's voice had been rising on the last words. "*How is that not BLOODY OBVIOUS?*"

"You think we'll believe *that*?" Kevin Entwhistle yelled right back at him. "That's what everyone says! 'I didn't do it, it was all just a False Memory Charm!' You think we're *stupid*?"

And Morag nodded right along with him, with a condescending look.

The look that came over Harry Potter's face then made Padma flinch.

"I see," Harry Potter said, it wasn't a shout so Padma had to strain to hear it. "Professor Quirrell isn't here to explain to me how stupid people are, but I bet this time I can get it on my own. People do something dumb and get caught and are given Veritaserum. Not romantic master criminals, because *they* wouldn't get caught, *they* would have learned Occlumency. Sad, pathetic, incompetent criminals get caught, and confess under Veritaserum, and they're desperate to stay out of Azkaban so they say they were False-Memory-Charmed. Right? So your brain, by sheer Pavlovian association, links the idea of False Memory Charms to pathetic criminals with unbelievable excuses. You don't have to consider the specific details, your brain just *pattern-matches* the hypothesis into a bucket of things you don't believe, and you're done. Just like my father thought that magical hypotheses could never be believed, because he'd heard so many stupid people talking about magic. Believing a hypothesis that involves False Memory Charms is *low-status*."

"What are you *blithering* about?" said Morag, looking down her nose at the Boy-Who-Lived.

"You think we'd believe anything *you* say?" yelled a slightly older-looking Ravenclaw witch who Padma didn't recognize. "When *you* turned Granger Dark?"

"And I'm not going to complain," Harry Potter said in an eerily calm voice, "about wizards not having any logic and believing the craziest things. Because I said that to Professor Quirrell once, and he just gave me this *look* and said that if I wasn't blinded by my upbringing I could think of a hundred more ridiculous things that lots of Muggles believe. What you're all doing is very human and very normal and doesn't make you *unusually* bad people, so I'm not going to complain." The Boy-Who-Lived rose up from his bench. "I'll see you all later."

And Harry Potter walked away from them, walked away from all of them.

"You're not thinking he's *right*, are you?" said Su Li from beside her, in a tone which made it clear what *she* thought.

"I—" said Padma. Her words seemed to be caught in her throat, her thoughts seemed to be caught in her head. "I—I mean—I—"

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If you think hard enough you can do the impossible.

(It had always been an article of faith with Harry. There'd been a time when he'd acknowledged the laws of physics as ultimate limitations, and now he suspected there were no true limits at all.)

If you think *fast* enough you can sometimes do the impossible *quickly*...
...sometimes.

Only sometimes.

Not always.

Not *reliably*.

The Boy-Who-Lived stared around the trophy room, surrounded by awards and cups and plates and shields and statues and medals kept behind thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of crystal glass displays. For as many centuries as Hogwarts had existed, this room had been accumulating details. A week, a month, maybe even a year, wouldn't have sufficed to take the 'examine' option on every item in the room. With Professor Flitwick gone, Harry had asked Professor Vector if there was any way to detect damage to the wards around the crystal cases, verify the residue that a real duel should have left behind. Harry had raced through the Hogwarts library looking for spells to tell the difference between old fingerprints and new fingerprints, or to detect lingering exhalations in a room. And all those attempts at playing detective had failed.

There were no clues, none that he was smart enough to find.

Professor Snape had said that the portkey led to an empty house in London, with no sign of anyone or anything else.

Professor Snape hadn't found any notes in Hermione's dorm.

Headmaster Dumbledore had said that Voldemort's spirit was probably hiding out in the Chamber of Secrets where the Hogwarts security system couldn't find him. Harry had snuck into the Slytherin dungeons under the Cloak of Invisibility and spent the rest of the afternoon looking through all the obvious places, but he hadn't found anything snaky that

answered back when spoken to. The entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, it seemed, hadn't been meant to be found in a day.

Harry had talked to all of Hermione's friends that would still talk to him, and none of them had remembered Hermione saying anything specific about why she'd believed that Draco was plotting against her.

Professor Quirrell hadn't come back from the Ministry as of dinner-time. The older students seemed to think that this year's Defense Professor would probably end up being blamed for the incident, and fired for teaching Hogwarts students to be too violent. They'd talked about the Defense Professor as though he were already gone.

Harry had used up all six hours from his Time-Turner, and there were still no clues, and he had to go to sleep now if he wanted to be functional at Hermione's trial the next day.

The Boy-Who-Destroyed-A-Dementor was standing in the middle of the Hogwarts trophy room, his wand dropped at his feet.

He was crying.

Sometimes you call your brain and it doesn't answer.

The trial of Hermione Granger started on schedule the next day.

CHAPTER EIGHTY

TABOO TRADEOFFS, PART II: THE HORNS EFFECT

The Most Ancient Hall of the Wizengamot is cool and dark, with concentric half-circles of stone rising up from the lowest center, and simple wooden benches set down upon those elevated half-circles. There is no source of light, but the chamber is well-lit, without any apparent cause or reason; it is simply a brute fact that the hall is well-lit. The walls like the floor are stone, dark stone, some elegant and mysterious conjugation of rock most fine to gaze upon, with a smooth texture that seems to flow and shift beneath its surface. This is the Most Ancient Hall, the oldest place of wizardry that has lasted into the modern day; every other place of power was destroyed in one war or another. This is the Hall of the Wizengamot, which is most ancient because the wars ended with the building of this place.

This is the Hall of the Wizengamot; there are older places, but they are hidden. Legend holds that the walls of dark stone were conjured, created, willed into existence by Merlin, when he gathered the most powerful wizards left in the world and awed them into accepting him as their chief. And when (the legend continues) the Seers continued to foretell that not enough had yet been done to prevent the end of the world and its magic, then (the story goes) Merlin sacrificed his life, and his wizardry, and his time, to lay in force the Interdict of Merlin. It was not an act without cost, for a place like this one could not be raised again by any power still

known to wizardkind. Nor yet destroyed, for those walls of dark stone would pass unharmed, and perhaps unwarmed, through the heart of a nuclear explosion. It is a pity that nobody knows how to make them any more.

In the highest of the rising half-circles of the Wizengamot, on the topmost level of dark stone, there is a podium. At that podium stands an old man, with care-lined face and a silver beard that stretches down below his waist; this is Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. His right hand bears a wand of power, upon his shoulder perches a bird of fire. His left hand holds a short rod, thin and featureless and forged of the same dark stone as the walls, and this is the Line of Merlin Unbroken, the device of the Chief Warlock. Karen Dutton bequeathed the Line to Albus Dumbledore on the last day of her life, scant hours after he returned half-dead from his defeat of Grindelwald with a phoenix flaming brightly at his side. She in turn received the Line from the perfectionist Nicodemus Capernaum, each wizard passing it to their chosen successor, back and back in unbroken chain to the day Merlin laid down his life. That (if you were wondering) is how the country of magical Britain managed to elect Cornelius Fudge for its Minister, and yet end up with Albus Dumbledore for its Chief Warlock. Not by law (for written law can be rewritten) but by most ancient tradition, the Wizengamot does not choose who shall preside over its follies. Since the day of Merlin's sacrifice, the most important duty of any Chief Warlock has been to exercise the highest caution in their choice of people who are both good and able to discern good successors. You would expect that chain of light to miss a step, sometime down through the centuries; that it would go astray at least once, and then never return. But it has not. The Line of Merlin continues, unbroken.

(Or so say those of Dumbledore's faction. Lord Malfoy would tell you otherwise. And in Asia they tell other tales entirely, which may not make Britain's version wrong.)

Upon the bottommost platform of the Ancient Hall there is a high-backed chair, legged and armed and without cushions, of dark metal rather than dark stone, which Merlin did not place there.

The Ministry building that grew up around this place is wood-paneled

and gold-washed, bright and fire-lit, filled with bustling foolishness. This place is different. It is the stone heart of magical Britain, and it is neither gold-washed nor wood-paneled, neither fire-lit nor bright.

Filing solemnly into this room are witches and wizards in plum-colored robes each embroidered with a silver W. They carry themselves with an air of seriousness showing that they are well aware that they are terribly, terribly important. They are meeting in the Most Ancient Hall, after all. They are the Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot, and they consider themselves the greatest folk of the world's greatest magical country. Lesser folk have fallen before them on bended knee in supplication; they are powerful, they are wealthy, they are noble; are they not great?

Albus Dumbledore knows everyone in this room by name. He has taught many of them, though too few have learned. Some are his allies, some his opponents, the rest he courts within the careful dance of their neutrality. All of them, to him, are people.

The current Defense Professor of Hogwarts, if you asked him for his opinion of the Lords and Ladies, would say that while many of them are ambitious, few have any ambition. He would observe that the Wizengamot is exactly where someone like that would end up—that it is exactly the sort of opportunity you would grasp, if you had nothing better to do. Such folk are rarely interesting, but they are often useful; pieces to be manipulated, points to be scored, by the true players of the game.

Not among the rising half-circles, but off to one side among a raised arc for the spectators, next to a witch in pointed hat whose face is lined with apprehension, there sits a boy dressed in the most formal black robes that he owns. His eyes are green ice and abstraction, and he hardly glances at the Lords and Ladies as they bustle in. To him they are just a collection of murmuring plum-colored robes to decorate the wooden benches, visual background for the scene of the Most Ancient Hall. If there is an enemy here, or something to be manipulated, it is merely “the Wizengamot”. The wealthy elites of magical Britain have collective force, but not individual agency; their goals are too alien and trivial for them to have personal roles in the tale. As of now, this present time, the boy neither likes nor dislikes the plum-colored robes, because his brain does not assign them enough agenthood to be the subjects of moral judgment.

He is a PC, and they are wallpaper.
This view is about to change.

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Harry gazed unseeing around the hall of the Wizengamot; it looked quite old and historic and there was no doubt that Hermione could have lectured him about the place for hours on end. The plum-colored robes had stopped arriving, and Harry's pocketwatch, advancing at the rate of three minutes every half-hour, said that the trial was almost due to start.

Professor McGonagall was sitting beside him, and her eyes never left him for more than twenty consecutive seconds.

Harry had read the *Daily Prophet* that morning. The headline had been "MAD MUGGLEBORN TRIES TO END ANCIENT LINE" and the rest of the paper had been the same. When Harry was nine years old the IRA had blown up a British barracks, and he'd watched on TV as all the politicians contested to see who could be the most loudly outraged. And the thought had occurred to Harry—even then, before he'd known much about psychology—that it looked like *everyone* was competing to see who could be most angry, and *nobody* would've been allowed to suggest that anyone was being *too* angry, even if they'd just proposed the saturation nuclear bombing of Ireland. He'd been struck, even then, by an essential emptiness in the indignation of politicians—though he hadn't had the words to describe it, at that age—a sense that they were trying to score cheap points by hitting at the same safe target as everyone else.

Harry had always possessed that sense of hollowness about political indignation, but it was strange how very much more obvious it seemed, when you were reading a dozen articles in the *Daily Prophet* beating on Hermione Granger.

The leading article, written by some name that Harry didn't recognize, had called for the minimum age for Azkaban to be lowered, just so that the twisted mudblood who had defaced the honor of Scotland with her savage, unprovoked attack upon the last heir of a Most Ancient

House within the sacred refuge of Hogwarts could be sent to the Demen-tors that were the only punishment commensurate with the severity of her unspeakable crime. Only this would be enough to discourage any other foreign, subhuman brutes who similarly believed in their twisted insanity that they could evade the majesty of the Wizengamot's inevitable and merciless scourging of all that threatened the honorable nobility of etcetera etcetera etcetera.

The next article had said the same thing in less eloquent words.

Earlier, Albus Dumbledore had told him,

"I will not try to keep you from this trial." The old wizard's voice quiet and unyielding. "I can well foresee how that would go. But I would have you treat me with equal courtesy in return. The politics of the Wizengamot are delicate, and of them you know nothing. Dare any folly and it shall be to Hermione Granger's cost; and you will remember that folly for the rest of your days, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres."

"I understand," Harry said. "I know. Just—if you're planning to pull a rabbit out of your hat and save the day at the last minute when everything seems lost, please tell me now instead of letting me sit and worry—"

"I would not do that to you," the old wizard said, a terrible weariness seeming to suffuse him as he turned to go. "Still less to Hermione. But I have no rabbits in my hat, Harry. We can only see what Lucius Malfoy wants."

There was a small sharp rap, a single brief sound that somehow silenced the entire room and caused Harry's head to jerk around and upward. High above, Dumbledore had just tapped his podium with the dark rod he held in his left hand.

"The ninetieth session of the two-hundred-and-eighth Wizengamot is convened at the request of Lord Lucius Malfoy," the old wizard said tonelessly.

At once, far to the side of the podium but also in the highest circle, rose a tall man with a mane of long white spilling down from his head over the shoulders of his plum-colored robes. "I present a witness for questioning under Veritaserum," Lucius Malfoy said, his cool tone clear throughout the room, smoothly controlled with only a slight undertone of righteous fury. "Let Hermione, the first Granger, be brought forth."

"I ask you all to remember that she is a first-year of Hogwarts," Dumbledore said. "I will brook no abuse of this witness—"

Someone in the benches quite audibly said "Pfah!" and there was a spread of disgusted snorts, even one or two jeers.

Harry stared at the plum-colored robes, his eyes narrowing.

And with the growing anger came something else, a rising sense of disquiet, of something horribly skewed, like reality itself was being disrupted. Harry knew that, somehow, but he couldn't figure out what was awry, or why his mind thought it was getting worse...

"Order!" Dumbledore bellowed. He rapped the stone rod twice against the podium, producing two more small clicks that overrode all noise. "I will have order here!"

The door through which the witness was brought forth was set directly beneath Harry's own seat, so it wasn't until the entire group had emerged fully into the stone hall that Harry saw—

—an Auror trio—

—Hermione's back was to Harry as she was brought out, he couldn't see her face—

—followed by a shining silver sparrow and a running moonlit squirrel—

—and the source of the horrible wrongness, half-hidden beneath a tattered cloak.

Harry shot to his feet before he could even think, it was only Professor McGonagall's sudden frantic grab on his wrist that stopped his hand going for his wand; and the Transfiguration Professor whispered desperately, "*Harry it's all right there's a Patronus—*"

It took a few seconds for Harry to remember himself. For the part of himself that understood that Hermione hadn't been directly exposed to a Dementor, to argue his other parts into something like sanity—

But animal Patronuses aren't perfect, said another voice inside his mind. Or Dumbledore wouldn't see the form of a naked man painful to look upon. You felt it approaching, animal Patronus or no...

Slowly, Harry Potter sat back down again as Professor McGonagall pulled down with her grip on his wrist.

But by then he'd already declared war on the country of magical Britain, and the idea of other people calling him a Dark Lord no longer seemed important one way or another.

Hermione's face became visible to him, as she sat down in the chair. She wasn't upright and defiant like she'd been in front of Snape, she wasn't crying like she'd been when the Aurors arrested her. She just sat there with a look of vacant horror as dark metal chains snaked out from the chair and bound her arms and legs.

Harry couldn't take it. Without even thinking he was trying to flee inside himself, flee into his dark side, pull the cold rage over himself like a shield. It took too long, he hadn't tried to go fully into his dark side since Azkaban. And then when his blood was something like cold, he looked up again, and saw Hermione in the chair again, and discovered that his dark side knew nothing about how to deal with this type of pain, it pierced through the coldness like a knife and didn't hurt less in the slightest.

"Why, if it isn't Harry Potter!" came a high, light female voice, sickly sweet and indulgent.

Slowly, Harry turned his head away from the chair and saw a smiling woman wearing so much makeup that her skin looked almost pink, sitting next to a man that Harry recognized from photographs as Minister Cornelius Fudge.

"Did you have something to say, Mr. Potter?" inquired the woman, as cheerfully as if this wasn't a trial.

Other people were also looking at him now.

Harry couldn't speak, all the words in his mind would have been stupid to speak aloud. He couldn't find anything to say that Neville could also have said. Dumbledore had warned Harry that if anyone *else* wanted the Boy-Who-Lived to speak, he must *pretend to be his age*—

"The Headmaster said I shouldn't ought to talk," the boy said, not quite able to keep the edge out of his voice.

"Oh, but you have *our* permission to talk!" the woman said brightly. "I'm sure the Wizengamot is always happy to hear from the Boy-Who-Lived!" Beside her, Minister Cornelius Fudge was nodding.

The woman's face was puffy and overweight, visibly pale beneath the makeup. Almost inevitably, a certain word came to mind, and that word

was *toad*. Which, said Harry's logical part, shouldn't correlate to morality in any way. Only in Disney movies were ugly people more likely to be evil and vice versa; and those movies were probably scripted by writers who'd never been ugly. He'd give her a chance, everyone in this room deserved one chance...

"Because I got rid of the Dark Lord?" the boy said, and pointed at the Dementor where it was hovering behind Hermione's chair. "There's something in this room that's Darker."

The woman's face narrowed, growing a little stern. "I realize a young boy like yourself may be scared by them, Mr. Potter, but the Dementors are quite obedient to the Ministry of Magic. And they would, of course, be necessary to guard—"

"A twelve-year-old girl?" the boy yelled. "Those are the Darkest creatures in the whole world, I could feel it coming here even through the Patronus—the *wrongness* coming nearer—it's horribly evil and it—it'd eat everyone in this room, if it could! It shouldn't be let near any child, ever! Not me, not her, not anyone! You ought to vote to send it away!"

"We'll *certainly* have no such vote—" the toad-woman snapped.

"That's enough, Madam Umbridge, Mr. Potter," came Dumbledore's stern voice from high above. And then after a short pause, the old wizard went on, "Although, of course, the boy is correct on every count."

Some of the members of the Wizengamot were looking abashed at the Boy-Who-Lived's admonition, and a few others were nodding violently to the old wizard's words. But they were too few. Harry could see it. They were too few.

The Veritaserum was brought in then, and Hermione looked for a brief moment like she *was* about to sob, she was looking at Harry—no, at Professor McGonagall—and Professor McGonagall was mouthing words that Harry couldn't make out from his angle. Then Hermione swallowed three drops of Veritaserum and her face grew slack.

"Gawain Robards," said the smooth voice of Lucius Malfoy. "Your pro-bity is known to all of us. If you would do the honors?"

One of the three Aurors stepped forward.

After the first few questions Harry looked away and stared off to one side with his fingers in his ears, as Hermione's brain played back the con-

tents of the False Memory Charm. He couldn't handle the drug-dulled anguish in Hermione's voice as she recounted the false memories, and his dark side couldn't handle it either, and he'd already heard the contents summarized.

Harry's mind flashed back to another day of horror, and even though Harry had been on the verge of writing off Lord Voldemort's continued existence as the senility of an old wizard, it suddenly seemed horribly and uniquely plausible that the entity who'd Memory-Charmed Hermione was the very same mind that had—*made use of*—Bellatrix Black. The two events had a certain signature in common. To choose that this should happen, *plan* for this to happen—it would take more than evil, it would take *emptiness*.

Harry looked up for a moment, then, and saw that the plum-colored robes were watching, just watching.

Some time later, after all the stars in the night sky had gone cold and dark and the last light in the Universe had sputtered down to embers and gone black, the questioning of Hermione ended.

"If it pleases my Lords," said the voice of Lord Malfoy, "I should like to have the testimony of my son Draco, witnessed under two drops of Veritaserum, read aloud at this time."

Until she went after me in that battle, I wasn't plotting anything against Granger. But after that day I really was feeling insulted, I'd helped her all those times—

The sound that came from Hermione's throat was like she'd just been crushed under a falling stone, so huge that she couldn't cry or breathe, just a small sad gasp.

"Pardon me," said one witch from what seemed to be the Malfoy-aligned side of the room. "But Lord Malfoy, why would your son *help* this mudblood girl?"

"My son," Lucius Malfoy said in a heavy voice, "seems to have been listening to certain misguided ideas. He is young—and he has learned, now, we have all seen as a country, what such folly brings in repayment."

A few steps down along the visitor's benches, a man wearing a newsman's cap and a badge identifying him as belonging to the *Daily Prophet* was avidly scribbling with a long quill.

The few people who'd nodded along to Dumbledore earlier had rather sick looks on their faces. One witch in plum-colored robes quite deliberately stood up from what had seemed like Dumbledore's side of the room, and made her way over toward the Malfoy side.

The Auror went on reading, his voice monotone.

"I'd been so tired from casting all those locking wards, I was weak when I cast the last one. I thought I was stronger than Granger but I wasn't certain, so I tested it empirically by challenging her to a duel, that's why I d-d-did it and also because if I'd won I was planning to beat her again the next day where everyone could see. Stupid Veritaserum. But she didn't know about that when she tried to kill me! And I really was insulted by what she'd done, I really had helped her before and I hadn't been planning anything against her then, only she went after me in front of everyone!"

When all the witness testimony was done, the deliberations of the Wizengamot began.

If you could call them that.

It seemed that many members of the Wizengamot were of the strong opinion that murder was bad.

The plum-colored robes on Dumbledore's side of the room were silent, the supposed forces of good saving their political capital for more winnable battles. And Harry could hear, as though Professor Quirrell were standing next to him, a dry voice in his mind; explaining to him that it would hardly have been to the politicians' own advantage to speak, just then.

But there was one wizard in the room whose status was high enough that he had, it seemed, transcended his caution against losing face; one wizard alone whose status was high enough that he could speak a word of sanity and escape unscathed. He alone spoke to defend Hermione, the man with a phoenix flaming bright upon his shoulder.

Only Albus Dumbledore spoke.

The Chief Warlock didn't raise the possibility that Hermione Granger was entirely innocent. That, the Headmaster had explained to Harry, would not be believed, would only make it worse.

But Albus Dumbledore said, in one gentle reminder after another, that the perpetrator was a first-year girl in Hogwarts; that many had done

foolish things during their youth; that a first-year in Hogwarts was simply too young to comprehend the consequences of her acts. He himself (the Chief Warlock said quietly) had attempted certain foolish things during his childhood, when he was well older than she.

Albus Dumbledore said that Hermione Granger had been beloved of all the Hogwarts faculty, and helped four Hufflepuff girls with their Charms homework, and had scored one hundred and three points for Ravenclaw over the course of the school year.

Albus Dumbledore said that nobody who knew Hermione Granger would be anything but shocked by these events. That they had, all of them, heard the horror in her voice as she recounted her testimony. And if some unusual madness had temporarily possessed her, then—his voice rising in stern command—she deserved nothing from them except sympathy and a healer’s attentions.

And at the last, Albus Dumbledore reminded the Wizengamot, over cries of protest, that the charge was *attempted* murder and not murder. Albus Dumbledore said, over a rising storm of objections, that no lasting harm had come to anyone. And Albus Dumbledore begged them not to do worse themselves than anything that had yet been done—

“*Enough!*” bellowed Lucius Malfoy, and a show of hands ended the deliberations. The white-maned man stood tall and terrible, his silver cane held high in one hand like a gavel about to fall. “For what this mad woman has tried to do to my son—for the blood debt that she owes for trying to end the line of a Noble and Most Ancient House—I say that she will—”

“Azkaban!” roared a man with a scarred face, seated at Lord Malfoy’s right hand. “Send the mad mudblood to Azkaban!”

“Azkaban!” cried another plum-colored robe, and then another, and another—

A click from the rod in Dumbledore’s hand silenced the room. “You are out of order,” the old wizard said sternly. “And your proposal is barbaric, beneath the dignity of this assembly. There are things we do not do. Lord Malfoy?”

Lucius Malfoy had listened to this with an impassive face. “Well,” Lord Malfoy said after a few moments. A cold gleam lit his eyes. “I had

not planned to ask it. But if that is the will of the Wizengamot—then let her pay as any in her place would pay. Let it be Azkaban.”

A great cheer of rage went up—

“Are you all *lost*?” cried Albus Dumbledore. “She is too young! Her mind would not withstand it! Not in three centuries has such a thing been done in Britain!”

“What will the other countries think of us?” said the sharp voice of a woman that Harry recognized as Neville’s grandmother.

“Will *you* guard Azkaban after she goes there, Lord Malfoy?” said a stern old witch that Harry didn’t know. “For my Aurors may decline to guard it, I fear, if small children are kept within.”

“The deliberations are ended,” Lucius Malfoy said coldly. “But if you are incapable of finding Aurors who can obey the vote of the Wizengamot, Madam Bones, you may relinquish the position; we can easily find another to serve in your place. The will of this Hall is clear. For the monstrosity of her crimes, the girl is to be tried as an adult and punished accordingly; ten years in Azkaban, the justice for attempted murder.”

When the old wizard spoke again, his voice was lower. “Is there no alternative to this, Lucius? We may retire to my chambers to discuss it, if need be.”

The tall man of the long white hair turned, then, to regard where the old wizard stood at the podium; and the two stared at each other for a long moment.

When Lucius Malfoy spoke again his voice seemed to tremble ever so slightly, as though the stern control on it was failing. “Blood calls for repayment, the blood of my family. Not for any price will I sell the blood debt owed my son. You would not understand that, who never had love or child of your own. Still, there is more than one debt owed to House Malfoy, and I think that my son, if he stood among us, would rather be repaid for his mother’s blood than for his own. Confess your own crime to the Wizengamot, as you confessed it to me, and I shall—”

“Don’t even think about it, Albus,” said the stern old witch who had spoken before.

The old wizard stood at the podium.

The old wizard stood at the podium, his face twisting, untwisting—

"Stop it," said the old witch. "You know the answer you must give, Albus. It will not change for agonizing over it."

The old wizard spoke.

"No," said Albus Dumbledore.

"And you, Malfoy," continued the stern old witch, "I suppose all you really wanted this whole time was to ruin—"

"Hardly," said Lucius Malfoy, his lips now twisting into a bitter smile. "No, I have no purpose here but my son's vengeance. I only wished to show the Wizengamot the truth behind this old man's pretended heroism and his praise of that girl—that he would hardly think of sacrificing himself to save her."

"Cruelty worthy of a Death Eater indeed," said Augusta Longbottom. "Not that I'm implying anything, of course."

"Cruelty?" said Lucius Malfoy, the bitter smile still on his face. "I think not. I knew what his answer would be. I have ever warned you that he only plays his pretended part. If you believe in his hesitation, the more fool you. Remember that his answer was the same." The man raised his voice. "Let us vote, my friends. I think a show of hands will suffice for it. I do not imagine there will be many who choose to align themselves with murderers." The voice went cold, on the last note, the promise in it very clear.

"Look at the girl," said Albus Dumbledore. "See her, see the horror you are committing! She is—" The old wizard's voice broke. "She is afraid—"

The Veritaserum must have been wearing off, because Hermione Granger's face was twisting beneath the slackness, her limbs trembling visibly beneath the chains, as though she were trying to run, run from that chair, but was pressed down by weights larger than the enchanted metal links that bound her. Then there was a convulsive effort and Hermione's neck moved, her head twisted, enough to bring her eyes into line—

She looked at Harry Potter and though she didn't speak, it was absolutely clear what she was saying.

*Harry
help me
please—*

And in the Most Ancient Hall of the Wizengamot an icy voice rang out, speech the color of liquid nitrogen, pitched too high for that it came from too young a throat, and that voice said, "*Lucius Malfoy*."

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In the ancient and hallowed halls of the Wizengamot, people looked around and it took their eyes too long to find what they sought. It might have been high in pitch, it might have been under-loud for the words being spoken; and yet even so, you wouldn't have expected to hear that voice from a child.

It wasn't until Lord Malfoy spoke in return that people even realized where they should be looking.

"Harry Potter," said Lucius Malfoy. He did not incline his head.

Heads spun, eyes moved, and people focused on the messy-haired young boy standing near the weeping older witch. The boy stood merely chest-high with his shoes on, dressed in short robes of formal black. Though unless your eyes were keen indeed, you couldn't have seen, from all the way across the Hall, that famous and deadly scar beneath his messy hair.

"This folly does not become you, Lucius," said the boy. "Twelve-year-old girls do not go around committing murders. You are a Slytherin and an intelligent one. You know this is a plot. Hermione Granger was placed on this gameboard by force, by whatever hand lies behind that plot. *You* were surely intended to act just as you are acting now—except that Draco Malfoy was meant to be dead, and you were meant to be beyond all reason. But he is alive and you are sane. Why are you cooperating with your intended role, in a plot meant to take the life of your son?"

A storm seemed to be raging inside Lucius, the face beneath the flowing white hair threatening to crack open and spill something unguessable. The Lord of Malfoy seemed to almost speak once and then twice again, swallowing three unheard sentences before his lips parted for true. "A plot, you say?" Lord Malfoy said at last. His face was twitching, hardly controlled. "And whose plot would that be, then?"

"If I knew," said the boy, "I would have said so a good deal earlier. But anyone who had ever been Hermione Granger's classmate could tell you that she is a most unlikely murderess. She does, in fact, help Hufflepuffs with their homework. This was not a natural event, Lord Malfoy."

"Plot—or no plot—" Lucius's voice was trembling. "This mudblood filth has touched my son and for that I will end her. You should know that full well, *Harry Potter*."

"It is questionable," the boy said, "to put it mildly, whether Hermione Granger actually cast that Blood-Cooling Charm. I do not know the exact circumstances or what spells were involved, but simple trickery would not have sufficed to make her do it. She did not act of her own will, and perhaps did not act at all. Your vengeance is being misdirected, Lord Malfoy, and deliberately so. It is not a twelve-year-old girl who deserves your ire."

"And what do *you* care for her fate?" Lucius Malfoy's voice was rising. "What is *your* stake in this?"

"She is my friend," the boy said, "as Draco is my friend. It is possible that this blow was aimed at me, and not at House Malfoy at all."

Again the muscles jumped in Lucius's face. "And now you are lying to me—as you lied to my son!"

"Believe it or not," the boy said quietly, "I never willed anything but that Draco should know the truth—"

"*Enough!*" cried the Lord Malfoy. "Enough of your lies! Enough of your *games!* You do not understand—you would never understand—what it means that he is my son! I will not be denied this vengeance! No more! Never again! For the blood this girl owes House Malfoy, she shall go to Azkaban. And if I ever find another hand at work—even if it is your own—that hand shall be cut off as well!" Lucius Malfoy raised his deadly silver cane as though in command, his teeth clenched and his lips drawn back in a snarl, like a wolf facing a dragon. "And if you have nothing better to say than that—be silent, *Harry Potter!*"

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Harry's blood was hammering even beneath the ice of his dark side, the fear for Hermione, the part of him that wanted to lash out at Lucius and destroy him where he stood for his insolence and his *stupidity*—but Harry didn't have the *power*, he didn't even have a single vote in the Wizengamot—

Draco had said that Lucius was scared of him, for some unknown reason. And Harry could see it in the rictus that Lord Malfoy's face had become, drawn and tight, that it was taking all his courage for him to tell Harry to shut up.

So Harry said, his voice cool and deadly, hoping to hell that it meant something, "You will earn my enmity if you do this thing, Lucius..."

Someone in the lower rows of what was evidently the blood-purist side of the Wizengamot, who was looking down at the young boy rather than up at Lord Malfoy, laughed in outright incredulity. Other plum-colored robes began to laugh as well.

Lord Malfoy gazed at him with hard dignity, as that laughter spread. "If you want the enmity of the House of Malfoy, you shall have it, *child*."

"Now really," said the woman in too much pink makeup, "I think this has gone on quite long enough, wouldn't you say, Lord Malfoy? The boy will miss his classes."

"Indeed he will," said Lucius Malfoy, and then raised his voice again. "I call the vote! By show of hands, let the Wizengamot acknowledge the blood debt owed to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy, for the attempted murder of its last scion and ending of its line, by Hermione, the first Granger!"

Hands shot up one after another, and the secretary who sat in the bottom circle began to make marks on parchment to tally them, but it was obvious which way the majority had gone.

And Harry screamed inside his mind, a frantic call for help to any part of himself that would offer a way out, a strategy, an idea. But there was nothing, there was nothing, he'd played his last cards and lost. And then with a last convulsive desperation Harry plunged himself into his dark side, pushed himself into his dark side, seizing at its deadly clarity, offering his dark side anything if it would only solve this problem for him; and at last the lethal calm came over him, the true ice finally answering

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TABOO TRADEOFFS II: THE HORNS EFFECT

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his call. Beyond all panic and despair his mind began to search through every fact in its possession, recall everything it knew about Lucius Malfoy, about the Wizengamot, about the laws of magical Britain; his eyes looked at the rows of chairs, at every person and every thing within range of his vision, searching for any opportunity it could grasp—

CHAPTER EIGHTY-ONE

TABOO TRADEOFFS, PART III

In rising half-circles of dark stone, a great sea of upraised hands. The Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot, in plum-colored robes marked with a silver ‘W’, stared down in stern rebuke at a young girl trembling in chains. If they had, in any particular ethical system, damned themselves, they clearly thought quite highly of themselves for having done so.

Harry’s breath was trembling in his chest. His dark side had come up with a plan—and then rotated itself back out again because speaking too icily would not be to Hermione’s advantage; a fact which the only-half-cold Harry had somehow not realized...

“The vote carries, in favor,” intoned the secretary, when all the tallying was done, and the upraised hands fell back down. “The Wizengamot recognizes the blood debt owed by Hermione Granger to House Malfoy for the attempted murder of its scion and ending of its line.”

Lucius Malfoy was smiling in grim satisfaction. “And now,” said the white-maned wizard, “I say that her debt shall be paid—”

Harry clenched his fists beneath the bench and shouted, “By the debt owed from House Malfoy to House Potter!”

“Silence!” snapped the woman in too much pink makeup sitting next to Minister Fudge. “You’ve disrupted these proceedings quite enough already! Aurors, escort him out!”

“Wait,” said Augusta Longbottom from the top tier of seats. “What debt is this?”

Lucius's hands whitened on his cane. "House Malfoy owes no debt to you!"

It wasn't the world's most solid hope, it was based on one newspaper article from a woman who'd been False-Memory-Charmed, but Rita Skeeter had seemed to find it plausible, that Mr. Weasley had allegedly owed James Potter a debt because...

"I'm surprised you've forgotten," Harry said evenly. "Surely it was a cruel and painful period of your life, laboring under the Imperius curse of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, until you were freed of it by the efforts of House Potter. By my mother, Lily Potter, who died for it, and by my father, James Potter, who died for it, and by me, of course."

There was a brief silence within the Most Ancient Hall.

"Why, what an excellent point, Mr. Potter," said the old witch who'd been identified as Madam Bones. "I, too, am quite surprised that Lord Malfoy would forget such a significant event. It must have been such a happy day for him."

"Yes," said Augusta Longbottom. "He must have been so grateful."

Madam Bones nodded. "House Malfoy could not possibly deny that debt—unless, perhaps, Lord Malfoy is to tell us that he has misremembered something? I should take quite a professional interest in that. We are always trying to improve our picture of those dark days."

Lucius Malfoy's hands gripped the silver snake-handle of his cane like he was about to strike with it, unleash whatever power it kept—

Then the Lord Malfoy seemed to relax, and a chill smile came over his face. "Of course," he said easily. "I do confess I had not understood, but the child is quite correct. But I do not quite think the two debts cancel—House Potter was only trying to save itself, after all—"

"Not so," Dumbledore said from above.

"—and therefore," intoned Lucius Malfoy, "I demand monetary compensation as well, for the redemption of the blood debt owed my son. That, too, is the law."

Harry felt a strange inward flinch. That had also been in the newspaper article, Mr. Weasley had demanded an additional ten thousand Galleons—

"How much?" said the Boy-Who-Lived.

Lucius was still wearing the cold smile. "One hundred thousand Galleons. If you have not that much in your vault, I suppose I must accept a promissory note for the remainder."

A roar of protest went up from Dumbledore's side of the room, even some of the plum-colored robes in the middle looked shocked.

"Shall we put it to vote of the Wizengamot?" said Lucius Malfoy. "I think few of us would like to see the little murderess go free. By a show of hands, that additional compensation of one hundred thousand Galleons would be required to cancel the debt!"

The clerk began tallying, but that vote was also clear.

Harry stood there, breathing deeply.

You'd better not even have to think about this, Harry's inner Gryffindor said threateningly.

It's a major purchase, observed Ravenclaw. *We ought to spend a lot of time thinking about it.*

It shouldn't have been hard. It *shouldn't* have. Two million pounds was only money, and money was only worth what it could buy...

It was strange how much psychological attachment you could have to 'only money', or how painful it could be to imagine losing a bank vault full of gold that you hadn't even imagined existed just one year earlier.

Kimball Kinnison wouldn't hesitate, said Gryffindor. *Seriously. Like, snap decision. What sort of hero are you? I already hate you just for having to think about it for longer than 50 milliseconds.*

This is real life, said Ravenclaw. *Losing all your money is a lot more painful for real people in real life than in heroic books.*

What? demanded Gryffindor. *Whose side are you on?*

I wasn't advocating for a particular answer, said Ravenclaw, *I was just saying it because it was true.*

Could a hundred thousand Galleons be used to save more than one life if spent some other way? said Slytherin. *We have research to do, battles to fight, the difference between being 40,000 Galleons rich and being 60,000 Galleons in debt is not trivial—*

So we'll just use one of our ways to make money fast and earn it all back, said Hufflepuff.

It's not certain those will work, said Slytherin, and a lot of them require starting cash—

Personally, said Gryffindor, I vote that we save Hermione and then gang up and kill our inner Slytherin.

The clerk's voice said that the tally had been recorded and the vote had passed...

Harry's lips opened.

"I accept your offer," said Harry's lips, without any hesitation, without any decision having been made; just as if the internal debate had been pretense and illusion, the true controller of the voice having been no part of it.

Lucius Malfoy's mask of calm shattered, his eyes widened, he stared at Harry in sheer blank astonishment. His mouth had opened slightly, though he wasn't speaking, and if he was making any peculiar noises it couldn't be heard over the roar of simultaneous gasps from the Wizengamot—

A tap of stone silenced the crowd.

"No," said the voice of Dumbledore.

Harry's head jerked around to stare at the ancient wizard.

Dumbledore's lined face was pale, the silver beard was visibly trembling, he looked like he was in the final throes of a terminal illness. "I'm—sorry, Harry—but this choice is not yours—for I am still the guardian of your vault."

"What?" said Harry, too shocked to compose his reply.

"I cannot let you go into debt to Lucius Malfoy, Harry! I cannot! You do not know—you do not realize—"

DIE.

Harry didn't even know which part of himself had spoken, it might have been a unanimous vote, the pure rage and fury pouring through him. For an instant he thought that the sheer force of the anger might take magical wing and fly out to strike the Headmaster, send him tumbling back dead from the podium—

But when that mental voice had spoken, the old wizard was still standing there, gazing at Harry, long dark wand in his right hand, short black rod in his left.

And Harry's eyes also went to the red-golden bird with its claws resting on the shoulder of Dumbledore's black robes, silent when no phoenix should have been silent. "Fawkes," Harry said, his voice sounding strange in his own ears, "can you scream at him for me?"

The fiery bird on the old wizard's shoulder didn't scream. Maybe the Wizengamot had demanded that a spell of silence be put on the creature, otherwise it probably would have been screaming the whole time. But Fawkes hit his master, one golden wing buffeting the old wizard's head.

"I cannot, Harry!" the old wizard said, the agony clear in his voice. "I am doing as I must do!"

And Harry knew, then, as he looked at the red-golden bird, what he had to do as well. It should have been obvious from the beginning, that solution.

"Then I too will do what I must," Harry said up to Dumbledore, as though the two of them stood alone in the room. "You do realize that, don't you?"

The old wizard shook his trembling head. "You will change your mind when you are older—"

"I'm not talking about that," Harry said, his voice still strange in his own ears. "I mean that I will not allow Hermione Granger to be eaten by Dementors under any circumstances. Period. Regardless of what any law says, and no matter what I have to do to stop it. Do I still need to spell it out?"

A strange male voice spoke from somewhere far away, "Be sure that the girl is taken directly to Azkaban, and put under extra guard."

Harry waited, staring at the old wizard, and then spoke again. "I will go to Azkaban," Harry said to the old wizard, as though they stood alone in the world, "before Hermione can be taken there, and start snapping my fingers. It may cost me my life, but by the time she gets there, there won't be an Azkaban anymore."

Some members of the Wizengamot gasped in surprise.

Then a greater number started laughing.

"How would you even get there, little boy?" someone said, from among those who were laughing.

"I have my ways of going places," said the boy's distant voice. Harry kept his eyes on Dumbledore, on the old wizard staring at him in shock. Harry didn't look directly at Fawkes, didn't give his plan away; but in his mind he prepared to summon the phoenix to transport him, prepared to fill his mind with light and fury, to call for the fire-bird with all his might, he might have to do it upon the instant if Dumbledore pointed his wand—

"Would you truly?" the old wizard said to Harry, also as if the two of them stood alone in the room.

The room went silent again as everyone stared in shock at the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, who seemed to be taking the mad threat completely seriously.

The old wizard's eyes were locked only on Harry. "Would you risk everything—everything—only for her?"

"Yes," Harry said back in reply.

That's the wrong answer, you know, said Slytherin. *Seriously.*

But it's the true answer.

"You will not see reason?" said the old wizard.

"Apparently not," Harry said back.

The gazes stayed locked.

"This is terrible folly," said the old wizard.

"I am aware of this," answered the hero. "Now get out of my way."

Strange light glinted in the ancient blue eyes. "As you will, Harry Potter, but know that this is not over."

The rest of the world faded back into existence.

"I withdraw my objection," said the old wizard, "Harry Potter may do as he wishes," and the Wizengamot exploded in a roar of shock, only to be silenced by a final tap of the stone rod.

Harry turned his head back to look at Lord Malfoy, who looked like he'd seen a cat turn into a person and start eating other cats. To call the look confused did not begin to describe it.

"You would truly..." Lucius Malfoy said slowly. "You would truly pay a hundred thousand Galleons, to save one mudblood girl."

"I think there's about forty thousand in my Gringotts vault," Harry said. It was strange how that was *still* causing more internal pain than the

thought of taking an over-fifty-percent risk to his life to destroy Azkaban. "As for the other sixty thousand—what are the rules, exactly?"

"It comes due when you graduate Hogwarts," the old wizard said from high above. "But Lord Malfoy has certain rights over you before then, I fear."

Lucius Malfoy stood motionless, frowning down at Harry. "Who is she to you, then? *What* is she to you, that you would pay so much to keep her from harm?"

"My friend," the boy said quietly.

Lucius Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "By the report I received, you cannot cast the Patronus Charm, and Dumbledore knows this. The power of a single Dementor nearly killed you. You would not dare venture near Azkaban in your own person—"

"That was in January," said Harry. "This is April."

Lucius Malfoy's eyes remained cool and calculating. "You pretend you can destroy Azkaban, and Dumbledore pretends to believe it."

Harry did not reply.

The white-haired man turned slightly, toward the center of the half-circle, as though to address the greater Wizengamot. "I withdraw my offer!" shouted the Lord of Malfoy. "I will not accept the debt to House Potter in payment, not even for a hundred thousand Galleons! The girl's blood debt to House Malfoy stands!"

Again the roar of many voices. "Dishonorable!" someone cried. "You acknowledge the debt to House Potter, and yet you would—" and then that voice cut off.

"I acknowledge the debt, but the law does not strictly oblige me to accept it in cancellation," said Lord Malfoy with a grim smile. "The girl is no part of House Potter; the debt I owe House Potter is no debt to her. As for the *dishonor*—" Lucius Malfoy paused. "As for the grave shame I feel at my ingratitude toward the Potters, who have done so much for me—" Lucius Malfoy bowed his head. "May my ancestors forgive me."

"Well, boy?" called the scarred man sitting at Lord Malfoy's right hand. "Go and destroy Azkaban, then!"

"I'd like to see that," said another voice. "Will you be selling tickets?"

It went without saying that Harry didn't pick this particular moment to give up.

The girl is no part of House Potter—

He had, in fact, seen the obvious way out of the dilemma almost instantly.

It might have taken him longer if he hadn't recently overheard a number of conversations between older Ravenclaw girls, and read a certain number of Quibbler stories.

He was, nonetheless, having trouble accepting it.

This is ridiculous, said a part of Harry which had just dubbed itself the Internal Consistency Checker. *Our actions here are completely incoherent. First you feel less emotional reluctance to risk your bloody LIFE and probably DIE for Hermione, than to part with a stupid heap of gold. And now you're balking just at getting married?*

SYSTEM ERROR.

You know what? said Internal Consistency Checker. *You're stupid.*

I didn't say no, thought Harry. *I was just saying SYSTEM ERROR.*

I vote for destroying Azkaban, said Gryffindor. *It needs to be done anyway.*

Really, really stupid, said Internal Consistency Checker. *Oh, screw this, I'm assuming control of our body.*

The boy took a deep breath, and opened his mouth—

By this point Harry Potter had entirely forgotten the existence of Professor McGonagall, who had been sitting there this whole time undergoing a number of interesting changes of facial expression which Harry had not been looking at because he was distracted. It would have been overly harsh to say that Harry had forgotten her because he did not consider her a PC. It could be more kindly said that Professor McGonagall was not visibly a solution to any of his current problems, and therefore she was not part of the universe.

So Harry, who at this point had a fair amount of adrenaline in his bloodstream, startled and jumped quite visibly when Professor McGonagall, her eyes now blazing with impossible hope and the tears on her cheek half-dried, leapt to her feet and cried, "*With me, Mr. Potter!*" and, without waiting for a reply, tore down the stairs that led to the bottom platform where waited a chair of dark metal.

It took a moment, but Harry ran after; though it took him longer to reach the bottom, after Professor McGonagall vaulted half the stairs with a strange catlike motion and landed with the astonished-looking Auror trio already pointing their wands at her.

"Miss Granger!" cried Professor McGonagall. "Can you speak yet?"

Much as with Professor McGonagall, there was a certain sense in which it could be said that Harry had forgotten about the existence of Hermione Granger, because Harry had been tilting his neck back to look upward rather than downward, and because he hadn't considered her a solution to any of his current problems. Though it was hardly certain, in fact it wasn't at all probable, that Harry remembering to look at Hermione or think about what she must be feeling, would have helped anything in the slightest.

Harry reached the bottom of the stairs and saw Hermione Granger full on—

Without thinking, without being able to help himself, Harry shut his eyes, but he'd seen.

Her school robes around her neck, soaked all the way through with tears.

The way she'd been looking away from *him*.

And the eye of memory and sympathy, which could not be shut, which could not look away, knew that Hermione had recounted the worst shame of her life in front of the nobility of magical Britain and Professor McGonagall and Dumbledore and Harry; and then been sentenced to Azkaban where she would be exposed to darkness and cold and all her worst memories until she went mad and died; and then she'd heard that Harry was going to give away all his money and go into debt to save her, and maybe even sacrifice his life

and with the Dementor standing only a few paces behind her she hadn't said anything...

"Y-yes," whispered the voice of Hermione Granger. "I c-can talk."

Harry opened his eyes again and saw her face, now looking at him. It didn't say anything like what he thought Hermione was feeling, faces couldn't say anything that complicated, all facial muscles could do was contort themselves into knots.

"H-H-Harry, I-I'm so, I'm so—"

"Shut up," Harry suggested.

"s-s-sorry—"

"If you'd never met me on the train you wouldn't be in any trouble right now. So shut up," said Harry Potter.

"Both of you stop being silly," Professor McGonagall said in her firm Scottish accent (it was strange how much that helped). "Mr. Potter, hold out your wand so that Miss Granger's fingers can touch it. Miss Granger, repeat after me. Upon my life and magic—"

Harry did as he was bid, thrusting his wand forward to touch Hermione's fingers; and then Hermione's faltering voice said, "Upon my life and magic—"

"I swear service to the House of Potter—" said Professor McGonagall.

And Hermione, without waiting for any further instructions, said, the words spilling out of her in a rush, "I swear service to the House of Potter, to obey its Master or Mistress, and stand at their right hand, and fight at their command, and follow where they go, until the day I die."

All those words had been blurted out in a desperate gasp before Harry could have thought or said anything, if he'd been mad enough to interrupt.

"Mr. Potter, repeat these words," said Professor McGonagall. "I, Harry, heir and last scion of the Potters, accept your service, until the end of the world and its magic."

Harry took a breath and said, "I, Harry, heir and last scion of the Potters, accept your service, until the end of the world and its magic."

"That's it," said Professor McGonagall. "Well done."

Harry looked up, and saw that the entire Wizengamot, whose existence he'd forgotten, was staring at them.

And then Minerva McGonagall, who *was* Head of House Gryffindor even if she didn't always act like it, looked up high above at where Lucius Malfoy stood; and she said to him before the entire Wizengamot, "I regret every point I ever gave you in Transfiguration, you vile little worm."

Whatever Lucius was about to say in reply was silenced by a tap of the short rod in Dumbledore's hand. "Ahem!" said the old wizard from his podium of dark stone. "This session has carried on quite considerably,

and if it is not dismissed soon, some of us may miss their entire luncheon. The law of this matter is clear. You have already voted on the terms of the bargain, and Lord Malfoy cannot legally decline it. As we have far exceeded our allotted time, I now, in accordance with the last decision of the survivors of the eighty-eighth Wizengamot, adjourn this session.”

The old wizard tapped the rod of dark stone three times.

“You fools!” shouted Lucius Malfoy. The white hair was shaking as though in a wind, the face beneath was pale with fury. “Do you think you’ll get away with what you’ve done today? Do you think that girl can try to murder my son and escape unscathed?”

The toad-like pink-makeup woman, whose name Harry could no longer remember, was standing up from her seat. “Why, of course not,” she said with a sickening smile. “After all, the girl is still a murderess, and I think the Ministry shall be watching her affairs quite closely—it hardly seems wise that she should be allowed to wander the streets, after all—”

Harry was fed up at this point.

Without waiting to listen, Harry turned on his heel and strode forward in long steps toward—

The horror only he could truly see, the absence of color and space, the wound in the world, above which floated a tattered cloak; most imperfectly guarded by a running moonlit squirrel and fluttering silver sparrow.

His dark side had also noticed, when it was looking through the entire room for anything that could possibly be used as a weapon, that the enemy had been foolish enough to bring a Dementor into Harry’s presence. That was a powerful weapon indeed, and one that Harry might wield better than its supposed masters. There had been a time in Azkaban when Harry had told twelve Dementors to turn and go, and they had gone.

The Dementors are Death, and the Patronus Charm works by thinking about happy thoughts instead of Death.

If Harry’s theory was correct, that one sentence would be all it took to pop the Aurors’ Patronus Charms like a soap bubble, and ensure that nobody within reach of his voice could cast another one.

I am going to cancel the Patronus Charms and prevent any more Patronuses from being cast. And then my Dementor, flying faster than any broomstick, is

going to Kiss everyone here who voted to send a twelve-year-old girl to Azkaban.

Say that, to set up the if-then expectation, and wait for people to understand and laugh. Then speak the fatal truth; and when the Aurors' Patronuses winked out to prove the point, either people's *anticipations* of the mindless void, or Harry's threat of its destruction, would make the Dementor obey. Those who had sought to compromise with the darkness would be consumed by it.

It was the other solution his dark side had devised.

Ignoring the gasps rising from behind him, Harry crossed the radius of the Patronuses, strode to a single pace from Death. Its unhindered fear burst around him like a whirlpool, like stepping next to the sucking drain of some huge bathtub emptying out its water; but with the false Patronuses no longer obscuring the level on which they interacted, Harry could reach the Dementor even as it could reach him. Harry looked straight into the pulling vacuum and—

the Earth among the stars

all his triumph at saving Hermione

someday the reality of which you are a shadow will cease to exist

Harry took all the silver emotion that fueled his Patronus Charm and *shoved* it at the Dementor; and expected Death's shadow to flee from him—

—and as Harry did that, he flung his hands up and shouted “BOO!”

The void retreated sharply away from Harry until it came up against the dark stone behind.

In the hall there was a deathly silence.

Harry turned his back on the empty void, and looked up at where the toad-woman stood. She was pale beneath the pink makeup, her mouth opening and closing like a fish.

“I make you this one offer,” said the Boy-Who-Lived. “I never learn that you’ve been interfering with me or any of mine. And you never find out why the unkillable soul-eating monster is scared of me. Now sit down and shut up.”

The toad-woman fell back down to her bench without a word.

Harry looked further up.

"A riddle, Lord Malfoy!" the Boy-Who-Lived shouted across the Most Ancient Hall. "I know you weren't in Ravenclaw, but try to answer this one anyway! What destroys Dark Lords, frightens Dementors, and owes you sixty thousand Galleons?"

For an instant Lord Malfoy stood there with eyes slightly widened; then his face fell back into calm scorn, and his voice spoke coolly in reply. "Are you openly threatening me, Mr. Potter?"

"I'm not threatening you," said the Boy-Who-Lived. "I'm *scaring* you. There's a difference."

"Enough, Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall. "We shall be late for afternoon Transfiguration as it is. And do come back here, you're still terrifying that poor Dementor." She turned to the Aurors. "Mr. Kleiner, if you would!"

Harry strode back to them, as the Auror addressed moved forward and pressed a short rod of dark metal to the dark metal chair, muttering an inaudible word of dismissal.

The chains slithered back as smoothly as they had come forth; and Hermione pushed herself out of the chair as fast as she could, and half-ran and half-staggered forward a few steps.

Harry held out his arms—

—and Hermione half-jumped half-fell into Professor McGonagall's arms, beginning to sob hysterically.

Hmpfh, said a voice inside Harry. *I kind of thought we'd earned that one ourselves.*

Oh, shut up.

Professor McGonagall was holding Hermione so firmly that you might have thought it was a mother holding her daughter, or maybe granddaughter. After a few moments Hermione's sobs slowed, and then stopped. Professor McGonagall suddenly shifted her stance and grabbed onto her more tightly; the girl's hands were dangling limply, now, and her eyes were closed—

"She'll be fine, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said softly in Harry's direction, without looking at him. "She just needs a few hours in one of Madam Pomfrey's beds."

"All right, then," Harry said. "Let's get her to Madam Pomfrey's."

“Yes,” said Dumbledore, as he descended to the bottom of the dark stone stairs. “Let us all go home, indeed.” His blue eyes were locked on Harry, as hard as sapphires.

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The Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot are departing their wooden benches, leaving as they came, looking rather nervous.

The vast majority are thinking “The Dementor was frightened of the Boy-Who-Lived!”

Some of the shrewder ones are already wondering how this will affect the delicate power balance of the Wizengamot—if a new piece has appeared upon the gameboard.

Almost none are thinking anything along the lines of ‘I wonder how he did that.’

This is the truth of the Wizengamot: Many are nobles, many are wealthy magnates of business, a few came by their status in other ways. Some of them are stupid. Most are shrewd in the realms of business and politics, but their shrewdness is circumscribed. Almost none have walked the path of a powerful wizard. They have not read through ancient books, scrutinized old scrolls, searching for truths too powerful to walk openly and disguised in conundrums, hunting for true magic among a hundred fantastic fairy tales. When they are not looking at a contract of debt, they abandon what shrewdness they possess and relax with some comfortable nonsense. They believe in the Deathly Hallows, but they also believe that Merlin fought the dread Totoro and imprisoned the Ree. They know (because that too is part of the standard legend) that a powerful wizard must learn to distinguish the truth among a hundred plausible lies. But it has not occurred to them that they might do the same.

(Why not? Why, indeed, would wizards with enough status and wealth to turn their hands to almost any endeavor, choose to spend their lives fighting over lucrative monopolies on ink importation? The Headmaster of Hogwarts would hardly see the question; of course most people should not be powerful wizards, just as most people should not

be heroes. The Defense Professor could explain at great and cynical length why their ambitions are so trivial; to him, too, there is no puzzle. Only Harry Potter, for all the books he has read, is unable to understand; to the Boy-Who-Lived the life choices of the Lords and Ladies seem incomprehensible—not what a good person would do, nor yet an evil person either. Now which of the three is most wise?)

For whatever reason, then, most of the Wizengamot has never walked the path that leads to powerful wizardry; they do not seek out what is hidden. For them, there is no *why*. There is no explanation. There is no causality. The Boy-Who-Lived, who was already halfway into the magisterium of legend, has now been promoted all the way there; and it is a brute fact, simple and unexplained, that the Boy-Who-Lived frightens Dementors. Ten years earlier they were told that a one-year-old boy defeated the most terrible Dark Lord of their generation, perhaps the most evil Dark Lord ever to live; and they just accepted that too.

You are not meant to question that sort of thing (they know in some unspoken way). If the most terrible Dark Lord in history, confronts an innocent baby—why, how could he *not* be vanquished? The rhythm of the play demands it. You are supposed to applaud, not stand up from your seat in the audience and say ‘Why?’ It is just the story’s conceit, that in the end the Dark Lord is brought down by a little child; and if you are going to question that, you might as well not attend the play in the first place.

It does not occur to them to second-guess the application of such reasoning to the events they have seen with their own eyes in the Most Ancient Hall. Indeed, they are not consciously aware that they are using story-reasoning on real life. As for scrutinizing the Boy-Who-Lived with the same careful logic they would use on a political alliance or a business arrangement—what brain would associate to *that*, when a part of the legendary magisterium is at hand?

But there are a very few, seated on those wooden benches, who do *not* think like this.

There are a certain few of the Wizengamot who have read through half-disintegrated scrolls and listened to tales of things that happened to someone’s brother’s cousin, not for entertainment, but as part of a quest

for power and truth. They have already marked the Night of Godric's Hollow, as reported by Albus Dumbledore, as an anomalous and potentially important event. They have wondered why it happened, if it did happen; or if not, why Dumbledore is lying.

And when an eleven-year-old boy rises up and says "Lucius Malfoy" in that cold adult voice, and goes on to speak words one simply would not expect to hear from a first-year in Hogwarts, they do not allow the fact to slip into the lawless blurs of legends and the premises of plays.

They mark it as a clue.

They add it to the list.

This list is beginning to look somewhat alarming.

It doesn't particularly help when the boy yells "BOO!" at a Dementor and the decaying corpse presses itself flat against the opposite wall and its horrible ear-hurting voice rasps, "*Make him go away.*"

CHAPTER EIGHTY-TWO

TABOO TRADEOFFS, PART FINAL

Phoenix travel was a sensation entirely unlike Apparition or portkeys. You caught on fire—you definitely felt yourself catching on fire, even though there was no pain—and instead of burning to ashes, the fire burned all the way through you and you *became* fire, and then you went out in one place and blazed up in another. It didn't sicken the stomach like portkeys or Apparition, but it was a rather unnerving experience nonetheless. If the underlying truth of phoenix travel really was becoming a specific instantiation of a more general Fire, then that seemed to hint you could potentially burn *anywhere*—even in the distant past, or in another universe, or in two places at once. You might go out in one place and blaze up in a hundred others, and the you who arrived at Hogwarts would never know the difference. Though Harry had read what he could about phoenixes, trying to figure out how to get one of his own, and there'd been no hint of anything remotely like *that* capability.

Harry caught fire and went out and blazed up somewhere else; and just like that he, and the Headmaster, and the unconscious form of Hermione Granger held in the Headmaster's arms, were occupying another place; with Fawkes above them all. A calm, warm room of bright stone columns, skylit on all four sides, populated by white beds in long rows, four of which had silencing veils drawn around them, and the rest empty.

In one corner of Harry's vision, a surprised-looking Madam Pomfrey was turning toward them. Dumbledore seemed to pay the senior healer no heed, as he carefully laid down Hermione on an unoccupied white bed.

From a distant corner there was a flash of green, and from out of a fireplace strode Professor McGonagall, brushing herself off slightly from the Floo ashes.

The old wizard turned from the bed and reached one of his arms around Harry again; and then the Boy-Who-Lived and his wizard vanished in another burst of fire.

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When Harry had fully lit up again he was standing in the Headmaster's office, amid the noises of a dozen dozen inexplicable gidgets.

The young boy took a step away from the old wizard and then turned on him, emerald and sapphire eyes meeting.

The two of them did not speak for a time, looking at each other; as though all they had to speak could be said only by stares, and not said in any other way.

In time the boy enunciated words slowly and precisely.

"I cannot believe that a phoenix is still upon your shoulder."

"The phoenix chooses but once," said the old wizard. "They might perhaps leave a master who chooses evil over good; they will not leave a master forced to choose between one good and another. Phoenixes are not arrogant. They know the limits of their own wisdom." Stern indeed, that ancient gaze. "Unlike you, Harry."

"Choose between one good and another," Harry echoed flatly. "Like Hermione Granger's life, versus a hundred thousand Galleons." The rage and indignation Harry wanted to put into his voice wasn't quite there, for some reason, maybe because—

"You are hardly in a position to speak to me of that, Harry Potter." The Headmaster's voice was deceptively soft. "Or what was that look of reluctance that I saw upon your face, there in the Most Ancient Hall?"

The sense of inward hollowness grew worse. "I was looking for other alternatives," Harry bit out. "Some way to save her that *didn't* lose the money."

Wow, said Ravenclaw. *You just told an outright lie. Not only that, I think you actually believed it for the seconds it took to say it. That's kinda scary.*

"Is that what you were thinking, Harry?" The blue eyes were keen, and there was a terrifying moment when Harry wondered if the world's most powerful wizard could see right past his Occlumency barriers.

"Yes," Harry said, "I flinched away from the pain of losing all the money in my vault. But I *did* it! *That's* what counts! And *you*—" The indignation that had faltered out of Harry's voice returned. "You *actually* put a price on Hermione Granger's life, and you put it below a hundred thousand Galleons!"

"Oh?" the old wizard said softly. "And what price do you put on her life, then? A million Galleons?"

"Are you familiar with the economic concept of 'replacement value'?" The words were spilling from Harry's lips almost faster than he could consider them. "Hermione's replacement value is *infinite*! There's nowhere I can go to buy another one!"

Now you're just talking mathematical nonsense, said Slytherin. *Ravenclaw, back me up here?*

"Is Minerva's life also of infinite worth?" the old wizard said harshly. "Would you sacrifice Minerva to save Hermione?"

"Yes and yes," Harry snapped. "That's part of Professor McGonagall's job and she knows it."

"Then Minerva's value is not infinite," said the old wizard, "for all that she is loved. There can only be one king upon a chessboard, Harry Potter, only one piece that you will sacrifice any other piece to save. And Hermione Granger is not that piece. Make no mistake, Harry Potter, this day you may well have lost your war."

And if the old wizard's words hadn't hit quite so hard, and quite so close to home, Harry might not have said what he said then.

"Lucius was right," Harry ground out. "You never had a wife, you never had a daughter, you've never had anything but war—"

The old wizard's left hand closed hard upon Harry's wrist, bony fingers digging into the still-developing muscle of Harry's arm, and for a moment Harry was paralyzed with the shock of it, he had forgotten what it meant that adults were stronger.

Albus Dumbledore did not seem to notice. He only turned, dragging Harry with him, and moved forward in hard steps toward the wall of the room.

"Phoenix's price."

Harry was pulled up along the black stairs.

"Phoenix's fate."

The room of black pedestals, silver light falling on shattered wands.

"You think," yelled Harry, after his lips unlocked, "that you can win any argument, just by standing here?"

The old wizard ignored him, dragging Harry across the room. His right hand, no longer holding his wand, grabbed up a vial of silver fluid—

Harry blinked in shock; the vial of silver fluid had been standing next to a picture of *Dumbledore*, or so it had appeared to Harry in the brief moment before he was dragged past.

Past the end of all the pedestals, at the farthest part of the room, rose a great stone basin with runes carved into it that Harry didn't recognize. The center was a shallow depression filled with transparent liquid, and into this the old wizard dumped the canister of silver fluid, which at once began to spread out, to swirl, to set the entire basin glowing eerie white.

The old wizard's hand let go of Harry's arm and gestured to the glowing basin, commanding harshly, "Look!"

As requested, Harry stared at the glowing water.

"Put your head into the Pensieve, Harry Potter." The old wizard's voice was stern.

Harry had heard that word before, but he couldn't remember where. "What—does this do—"

"Memories," the old wizard said. "You will see my memory. My oath that it is safe. Now look into the Pensieve, Ravenclaw, if you still care anything at all for your precious truth!"

That was a request that Harry could not deny, and he stepped forward and thrust his head into the glowing water.

Harry was sitting behind the desk in the Headmaster's office of Hogwarts, and his wrinkled hands that clutched at his head were spotted with age and white hairs.

"He is all that I have!" wept a voice, very strange was Dumbledore's voice as Dumbledore himself remembered it, from the inside it seemed far less stern and wise. "The last of my family! All that I have left!"

No emotion had been allowed to pass through the Pensieve, only the physical sensation of seeming to speak the words. Harry heard the utter desolation in Dumbledore's words, the sounds that seemed to come from Harry's own throat, but Harry did not feel it beyond the hearing.

"You've got no choice," said a harsh voice.

The eyes moved, the field of vision jumped to a man that Harry didn't recognize, in clothing tinged with Auror crimson but made of solid leather with many pockets.

His right eye was overlarge, with an electric-blue pupil that constantly darted and moved.

"You cannot ask this of me, Alastor!" Dumbledore's voice was wild. "Not this! Anything but this!"

"I'm not asking," growled the man. "Voldie's the one who's asking, and you're going to tell him no."

"For money, Alastor?" Dumbledore's voice was begging. "Only for money?"

"You ransom Aberforth, you lose the war," the man said sharply. "That simple. One hundred thousand Galleons is nearly all we've got in the war-chest, and if you use it like this, it won't be refilled. What'll you do, try to convince the Potters to empty their vault like the Longbottoms already did? Voldie's just going to kidnap someone else and make another demand. Alice, Minerva, anyone you care about, they'll all be targets if you pay off the Death Eaters. That's not the lesson you should be trying to teach them."

"If I do this I will have no one. No one." Dumbledore's voice broke, the world tilted as the outlooking head fell down into the ancient hands, and awful sounds came from not-Harry's throat as he began to sob like a child.

"Shall I tell Voldie's messenger no?" said Alastor's voice, now strangely gentle. "You don't have to do it yourself, old friend."

"No—I will say it myself—I must—"

The memory ended with a shock and Harry ripped his head out of the glowing water, gasping as though he'd been deprived of air.

The transition between scenes, between decade-old reality and present moment, was another jolt to Harry's mind; in some fashion his immersion in the past had unanchored him. The broken old man sobbing in his office had been another person in another era, Harry had understood that much; someone softer—

Before it had all vanished like dissipating smoke, returning the *now*, the present day.

Terrible and stern stood the ancient wizard, like he was carved from stone; beard woven of thread like iron, half-moon glasses like mirrors, and the pupils behind as sharp and unyielding as black diamond.

"Do you also wish to see my brother as he died under the Cruciatus?" said Albus Dumbledore. "Voldemort sent me that memory as well!"

"And that—" Harry was having trouble producing a voice, for the growing sickness in his chest. "*That* was when—" The words seemed to burn in his throat, as the awful knowledge dawned on him, the horrible understanding. "That was when you burned Narcissa Malfoy alive in her own bedroom."

Albus Dumbledore's gaze was cold as he answered. "To that question only a fool would say *yea* or *no*. What matters is that the Death Eaters believe I killed her, and that belief kept safe the families of all who served the Order of the Phoenix—until this day. Now do you understand what you have done? What you have done to your *friends*, Harry Potter, and to any that stand with you?" The old wizard seemed to grow still taller and more terrible, as his voice rose louder. "You have made them all targets, and targets they will remain! Until you prove, the only way it can be proven, that you are no longer willing to pay such prices!"

"And is it true?" Harry said. There was a buzzing sensation filling him, his body growing more distant. "What Draco said, that Narcissa Malfoy never got her hands dirty, that she was only Lucius's wife? She was an enabler, I get that, but I can't back that deserving being *burned alive*."

"Nothing less would have convinced them that I was done with hesita-

tion.” The old wizard’s voice brooked no question and no refusal. “Always I was too reluctant to do as I must, always it was others who paid the cost of my mercy. So Alastor told me from the beginning, but I did not listen to him. You, I expect, shall prove better at such decisions than I.”

“I’m surprised,” Harry said, amazed that his voice was almost steady. “I would have expected the Death Eaters to go after another Light family and start a cycle of escalating retaliation, if you didn’t get them all with your first strike.”

“If my opponent had been Lucius, perhaps.” Dumbledore’s eyes were like stones. “I am told that Voldemort laughed at the news, and proclaimed to his Death Eaters that I had finally grown, and was at last a worthy opponent. Perhaps he was right. After the day I condemned my brother to his death, I began to weigh those who followed me, balancing them one against another, asking who I would risk, and who I would sacrifice, to what end. It was strange how many fewer pieces I lost, once I knew what they were worth.”

Harry’s jaw seemed locked, like it took a massive effort to make his lips move. “But then it’s not like Lucius was deliberately taking Hermione for ransom,” Harry’s voice said thinly. “From Lucius’s perspective, someone else broke the truce first. So with that in mind, how many Galleons *was* Hermione worth, exactly? Leaving aside the Danegeld thing, if it was just some ordinary threat to her life, how much should I have paid to save her? Ten thousand Galleons? Five thousand?”

The old wizard did not answer.

“It’s a funny thing,” Harry said, his voice wavering like something seen through water. “Do you know, the day I went in front of the Dementor, what my worst memory was? It was my parents dying. I heard their voices and everything.”

The old wizard’s eyes widened behind the half-moon glasses.

“And here’s the thing,” Harry said, “here’s the thing I’ve been thinking about over and over. The Dark Lord gave Lily Potter the chance to walk away. He said that she could flee. He *told* her that dying in front of the crib wouldn’t save her baby. ‘Step aside, foolish woman, if you have any sense in you at all—’” An awful chill came over Harry as he spoke those words from his own lips, but he shook it off and continued. “And afterward I

kept thinking, I couldn't seem to stop myself from thinking, wasn't the Dark Lord *right*? If only Mother had stepped away. She tried to curse the Dark Lord but it was suicide, she had to have *known* that it was suicide. Her choice wasn't between her life and mine, her choice was for herself to live or for both of us to die! If she'd only done the logical thing and walked away, I mean, I love Mum too, but Lily Potter would be alive right now and she would be my mother!" Tears were blurring Harry's eyes. "Only now I understand, I know what Mother must have felt. She *couldn't* step aside from the crib. She couldn't! Love doesn't walk away!"

It was like the old wizard had been struck, struck by a chisel that shattered him straight down the middle.

"What have I said?" the old wizard whispered. "What have I said to you?"

"I don't know!" shouted Harry. "I wasn't listening either!"

"I—I'm sorry, Harry—I—" The old wizard pressed his hands to his face, and Harry saw that Albus Dumbledore was weeping. "I should not have said, such things to you—I should not, have resented, your innocence—"

Harry stared at the wizard for another second, and then Harry turned and marched out of the black room, down the stairs, through the office—

"I really don't know why you're still on his shoulder," Harry said to Fawkes.

—out the oaken door and into the endlessly turning spiral.

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Harry had arrived in the Transfiguration classroom before anyone else, before even Professor McGonagall. There was Charms class earlier, for his year, but that he hadn't even bothered trying to attend. Whether Professor McGonagall would make today's class he didn't know. There was something ominous about all the empty desks beside him, the absence at the board. As if he stood alone in Hogwarts, with all his friends departed.

According to the class schedule, today's lesson was on sustained Transfigurations, all the rules of which Harry had learned by heart back

when he was Transfiguring a huge rock into the small diamond that shone on his pinky finger. It would be a theoretical subject, rather than practical, for the rest of the class; which was a pity, because he could have used a dose of Transfiguration's trance.

Harry noted distantly that his hand was trembling, to the point where he had trouble undoing the pouch's drawstring as he drew forth the Transfiguration textbook.

You were monstrously unfair to Dumbledore, said the voice Harry had been calling Slytherin, only now it also seemed to be the Voice of Economic Sensibility and maybe also Conscience.

Harry's eyes dropped down to his textbook, but the section was so familiar it might as well have been a blank parchment.

Dumbledore fought a war against a Dark Lord who deliberately set out to break him in the cruelest possible way. He had to choose between losing his war and his brother. Albus Dumbledore knows, he learned in the worst possible way, that there are limits to the value of one life; and it almost broke his sanity to admit it. But you, Harry Potter— you already knew better.

"Shut up," the boy whispered to the empty Transfiguration classroom, though there was nobody there to hear it.

You'd already read about Philip Tetlock's experiments on people asked to trade off a sacred value against a secular one, like a hospital administrator who has to choose between spending a million dollars on a liver to save a five-year-old, and spending the million dollars to buy other hospital equipment or pay physician salaries. And the subjects in the experiment became indignant and wanted to punish the hospital administrator for even thinking about the choice. Do you remember reading about that, Harry Potter? Do you remember thinking how very stupid that was, since if hospital equipment and doctor salaries didn't also save lives, there would be no point in having hospitals or doctors? Should the hospital administrator have paid a billion pounds for that liver, even if it meant the hospital going bankrupt the next day?

"Shut up!" the boy whispered.

Every time you spend money in order to save a life with some probability, you establish a lower bound on the monetary value of a life. Every time you refuse to spend money to save a life with some probability, you establish an upper bound on the monetary value of life. If your upper bounds and lower bounds are incon-

sistent, it means you could move money from one place to another, and save more lives at the same cost. So if you want to use a bounded amount of money to save as many lives as possible, your choices must be consistent with some monetary value assigned to a human life; if not then you could reshuffle the same money and do better. How very sad, how very hollow the indignation, of those who refuse to say that money and life can ever be compared, when all they're doing is forbidding the strategy that saves the most people, for the sake of pretentious moral grandstanding...

You knew that, and you still said what you did to Dumbledore.

You deliberately tried to hurt Dumbledore's feelings.

He's never tried to hurt you, Harry Potter, not once.

Harry's head dropped into his hands.

Why had Harry said what he'd said, to a sad old ancient wizard who'd fought hard and endured more than anyone should ever have to endure? Even if the old wizard was wrong, did he deserve to be hurt for it, after all that had happened to him? Why was there a part of him that seemed to get angry at the old wizard beyond reason, lashing out at him harder than Harry had ever hit anyone, without thought of moderation once the rage had been raised, only to quiet as soon as Harry left his presence?

Is it because you know Dumbledore won't fight back? That no matter what you say to him, however unfair, he'll never use his own power against you, he'll never treat you the way you treat him? Is this the way you treat people when you know they won't hit back? James Potter's bullying genes, manifesting at last?

Harry closed his eyes.

Like the Sorting Hat speaking inside his head—

What is the real reason for your anger?

What do you fear?

A whirlwind of images seemed to flash through Harry's mind, then, the past Dumbledore weeping into his hands; the present form of the old wizard, standing tall and terrible; a vision of Hermione screaming in her chains, in the metal chair, as Harry abandoned her to the Dementors; and an imagination of a woman with long white hair (had she looked like her husband?) falling amid the flames of her bedroom, as a wand was held upon her and orange light reflected from half-moon glasses.

Albus Dumbledore had seemed to think that Harry would be better at that sort of thing than him.

And Harry knew that he probably would be. He knew the math, after all.

But it was understood, somehow it was understood, that utilitarian ethicists didn't *actually* rob banks so they could give the money to the poor. The end result of throwing away all ethical constraint wouldn't *actually* be sunshine and roses and happiness for all. The prescription of consequentialism was to take the action that led to the best net consequences, not actions that had one positive consequence and wrecked everything else along the way. Expected utility maximizers were allowed to take common sense into account, when they were calculating their expectations.

Somehow Harry had understood that, even before anyone else had warned him he'd understood. Before he'd read about Vladimir Lenin or the history of the French Revolution, he'd known. It might have been his earliest science fiction books warning him about people with good intentions, or maybe Harry had just seen the logic for himself. Somehow he'd known from the very beginning, that if he stepped outside his ethics *when-ever there was a reason*, the end result wouldn't be good.

A final image came to him, then: Lily Potter standing in front of her baby's crib and measuring the intervals between outcomes: the final outcome if she stayed and tried to curse her enemy (dead Lily, dead Harry), the final outcome if she walked away (live Lily, dead Harry), weighing the expected utilities, and making the only sensible choice.

She would've been Harry's mother if she had.

"But human beings can't live like that," the boy's lips whispered to the empty classroom. "Human beings can't live like that."

CHAPTER EIGHTY-THREE

TABOO TRADEOFFS, AFTERMATH, PART I

When Padma entered the Transfiguration classroom, she saw that half the class had beaten her there, a strange, deathly silence pervading the room. Harry Potter sat alone in one corner, staring off into some unknown distance, his eyes half-lidded, nearly closed.

Rumor said that the Aurors had discovered that the Defense Professor had Polyjuiced as Granger to fool Malfoy.

Rumor said that Hermione had been bound by the Unbreakable Vow to be Draco Malfoy's slave.

Rumor said that Hermione had gotten the Dementor's Kiss.

But if *that* were true, Harry Potter wouldn't be sitting there, he would be—

Padma didn't know what General Potter would do. Her mind went blank, trying to think about it.

Even when Professor McGonagall got there, the silence hadn't broken. The Transfiguration Professor walked up to the board without a pause, erased it with a sweep of her hand, and then began to write.

"Today, children," began the calm professional voice of the Transfiguration Professor, just as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened that week, "we shall learn how much effort it takes to sustain a Transfiguration, and why, at your age, you should not even try. The original Form is not gone, only suppressed; and to maintain that suppression—"

"Excuse me," said Padma Patil. She knew her voice was shaking, she knew that she was trembling visibly, but she had to ask. "Excuse me, Professor, what happened with Miss Granger?"

The Transfiguration Professor paused at the board, and turned to look at Padma. The Professor should have looked stern, having been interrupted without a hand being raised, but instead her face was kindly. "You don't already know, Miss Patil? I expected that rumor would have spread."

"There's too many rumors," said Padma. "I don't know what's true."

Morag MacDougal raised her hand, then said without waiting to be called, "I told you, Padma, what's *true* is that the Wizengamot found Granger guilty and ordered her to get the Dementor's Kiss and they brought in the Dementor and Harry Potter glued it to the ceiling and wouldn't let it down until—"

"Oh, dear Merlin," said Professor McGonagall, her expression growing sharp, but then she visibly calmed herself. "The affair was utterly ridiculous and I shan't go into detail. Let it stand that Miss Granger is resting with Madam Pomfrey for now, and coming back to classes tomorrow. And if I catch anyone bothering her, I shall turn them into glass vases and drop them."

The entire class gasped at this; it wasn't so much that the threat was fatal, as that it broke the safety rules for Transfiguration.

Professor McGonagall turned back to her board—

From a corner of the classroom, another voice rose up. "What about Professor Quirrell?" said Terry Boot. "Has he been arrested?"

"The Aurors are only detaining him," said the Transfiguration Professor without turning around. "If they have not given back our Defense Professor by tomorrow, I shall ask the Headmaster to go fetch him. Though I may as well tell you now that the Board of Governors has scheduled a vote on whether Professor Quirrell's battles shall be allowed to continue."

Kevin Entwhistle spoke. "And General Malfoy? When's he getting back from St. Mungo's?"

The Transfiguration Professor paused in her drawing. She turned around again, more slowly, this time.

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TABOO TRADEOFFS, AFTERMATH I

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"I *am* sorry, Mr. Entwistle," said Professor McGonagall. Her face looked a little more lined than when she had entered the room. "Mr. Malfoy's health is in no danger, I am given to understand. Unfortunately, I have received an owl from Mr. Malfoy's father withdrawing him from Hogwarts. I am afraid he is not coming back."

CHAPTER EIGHTY-FOUR

TABOO TRADEOFFS, AFTERMATH, PART II

When Hermione Granger woke, she found herself lying in a soft, comfortable bed of the Hogwarts infirmary, with a square of setting sunlight falling on her midriff, warm through the thin blanket. Memory said that there would be a screen-sheet above her, either drawn around her bed or open, and that the rest of Madam Pomfrey's domain would lie beyond: the other beds, occupied or unoccupied, and bright windows set in the curvily-carven stone of Hogwarts.

When Hermione opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was the face of Professor McGonagall, sitting on the left side of her bed. Professor Flitwick wasn't there, but that was understandable, he'd stayed by her side all morning in the detention cell, his silver raven standing extra guard against the Dementor and his stern little face always turned outward toward the Aurors. The Head of Ravenclaw had surely spent way too much time on her, and probably had to get back to teaching his classes, instead of keeping watch on a convicted attempted-murderess.

She felt horribly, horribly sick and she didn't think it was because of any potions. Hermione would've started crying again, only her throat hurt, her eyes still burned, and her mind just felt tired. She couldn't have borne to weep again, couldn't find the strength for tears.

"Where are my parents?" Hermione whispered to the Head of House Gryffindor. Somehow it seemed like the worst thing in the world to face them, even worse than everything else; and yet she still wanted to see them.

The gentle look on Professor McGonagall's face Transfigured into something sadder. "I'm sorry, Miss Granger. Though it was not always so, we have found in recent years that it is wiser not to tell the parents of Muggleborns about any danger their child has faced. I should advise you also to remain silent, if you wish to stay at Hogwarts without trouble from them."

"I'm not being expelled?" the girl whispered. "For what I did?"

"No," said Professor McGonagall. "Miss Granger... surely you heard... I hope you heard Mr. Potter, when he said that you were innocent?"

"He was just saying that," she said dully. "To get me free, I mean."

The older witch shook her head firmly. "No, Miss Granger. Mr. Potter believes you were Memory-Charmed, that the whole duel never happened. The Headmaster suspects even Darker magics may have been involved—that your own hand might have cast the spell, but not your own will. Even Professor Snape finds the affair completely unbelievable, though he may not be able to say so publicly. He was wondering if Muggle drugs might have been used on you."

Hermione's eyes went on staring distantly at the Transfiguration Professor; she knew that she'd just been told something significant, but she couldn't find the energy to propagate any changes through her mind.

"Surely *you* don't believe it?" said Professor McGonagall. "Miss Granger, you cannot believe of yourself that you would turn to murder!"

"But I—" Her excellent memory helpfully replayed it for the thousandth time, Draco Malfoy telling her with a sneer that she'd never beat him when he wasn't tired, and then proceeding to prove just that, dancing like a duelist between the warded trophies while she frantically scrambled, and dealing the ending blow with a hex that sent her crashing against the wall and drew blood from her cheek—and then—then she'd—

"But you remember doing it," said the older witch, who was watching over her with kindly understanding. "Miss Granger, there is no need for a twelve-year-old girl to bear such dreadful memories. Say the word and I shall be happy to lock them away for you."

It was like a glass of warm water thrown into her face. "What?"

Professor McGonagall took out her wand, a gesture so practiced and quick that it seemed like pointing a finger. "I can't offer to rid you of the memories entirely, Miss Granger," the Transfiguration Professor said with her customary precision. "There may be important facts buried there. But there is a form of the Memory Charm which is reversible, and I shall be happy to cast that on you."

Hermione stared at the wand, feeling the stirrings of hope for the first time in almost two days.

Make it didn't happen... she'd wished that over and over again, for the hands of time to turn back and erase the horrible choice that could never, ever be undone. And if erasing the memory wasn't that, it was still a kind of release...

She looked back at Professor McGonagall's kindly face.

"You *really* don't think I did it?" Hermione said, her voice trembling.

"I am *quite* certain you would never do such a thing of your own will."

Beneath her blankets, Hermione's hands clutched at the sheets. "Harry doesn't think I did it?"

"Mr. Potter is of the opinion that your memories are entire fabrications. I can rather see his point."

Then Hermione's clutching fingers let go of the sheet, and she slumped back into the bed, from which she'd partially risen.

No.

She hadn't said anything.

She'd woken up and remembered what had happened last night, and it had been like—like—she couldn't find words even in her own thoughts for what it had been like. But she'd known that Draco Malfoy was already dead, and she hadn't said anything, hadn't gone to Professor Flitwick and confessed. She'd just dressed herself and gone down to breakfast and *tried to act normal* so that nobody would ever know, and she'd known it was wrong and Wrong and horribly horribly WRONG but she'd been so, so scared—

Even if Harry Potter was right, even if the duel with Draco Malfoy was a lie, she'd made *that* choice all by herself. She didn't deserve to forget that, or be forgiven for it.

And if she *had* done the right thing, gone straight to Professor Flitwick, maybe that would've—helped, somehow, maybe everyone would've seen then that she regretted it, and Harry wouldn't have had to give away all his money to save her—

Hermione shut her eyes, squeezed them shut really tight, she couldn't bear to start crying again. "I'm a horrible person," she said in a wavering voice. "I'm awful, I'm not heroic at all—"

Professor McGonagall's voice was very sharp, like Hermione had just made some dreadful mistake on her Transfiguration homework. "Stop being foolish, Miss Granger! *Horrible* is whoever did this to you. And as for being heroic—well, Miss Granger, you have already heard my opinion about young girls trying to involve themselves in such things before they are even fourteen, so I shall not lecture you on it again. I shall say only that you have just had an absolutely dreadful experience, which you survived as well as any witch in your year possibly could. Today you are allowed to cry as much as you like. Tomorrow you are going back to class."

That was when Hermione knew that Professor McGonagall couldn't help her. She needed someone to scold her, she couldn't be absolved if she couldn't be blamed, and Professor McGonagall would never do that for her, would never ask so much of a little Ravenclaw girl.

It was something Harry Potter wouldn't help her with either.

Hermione turned over in the infirmary bed, huddling into herself, away from Professor McGonagall. "Please," she whispered. "I want to talk—to the Headmaster—"

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"Hermione."

When Hermione Granger opened her eyes a second time, she saw the care-lined face of Albus Dumbledore leaning over her bedside, looking almost as though *he'd* been crying, though that was impossible; and Hermione felt another stabbing pang of guilt for having bothered him so.

"Minerva said you wished to speak with me," the old wizard said.

"I—" Suddenly Hermione didn't know at all what to say. Her throat locked up, and all she could do was stammer, "I—I'm—"

Somehow her tone must have communicated the other word, the one she couldn't even say anymore.

"Sorry?" said Dumbledore. "Why, for what should you be sorry?"

She had to force the words out of her throat. "You were telling Harry—that he shouldn't pay—so *I* shouldn't—have done what Professor McGonagall said, I shouldn't have touched his wand—"

"My dear," said Dumbledore, "had you not pledged yourself to the House of Potter, Harry would have attacked Azkaban singlehandedly, and quite possibly won. That boy may choose his words carefully, but I have never yet known him to lie; and in the Boy-Who-Lived there is power that the Dark Lord never knew. He would indeed have tried to break Azkaban, even at cost of his life." The old wizard's voice grew gentler, and kinder. "No, Hermione, you have nothing at all for which to blame yourself."

"I could have *made* him not do it."

In Dumbledore's eyes a small twinkle appeared before it was lost to weariness. "Really, Miss Granger? Perhaps you should be Headmistress in my place, for I myself have no such power over stubborn children."

"Harry promised—" Her voice stopped. The awful truth was very hard to speak. "Harry Potter promised me—that he would never help me—if I told him not to."

There was a pause. The distant noises of the infirmary that had accompanied Professor McGonagall had ceased, Hermione realized, when Dumbledore had awoken her. From where she lay in bed she could see only the ceiling, and the top of one wall's windows, but nothing in her range of vision moved, and if there were sounds, she could not hear them.

"Ah," said Dumbledore. The old wizard sighed heavily. "I suppose it is possible that the boy would have kept his promise."

"I should—I should've—"

"Gone to Azkaban of your own will?" Dumbledore said. "Miss Granger, that is more than I would ever ask anyone to take upon themselves."

"But—" Hermione swallowed. She couldn't help but notice the loophole, anyone who wanted to get through the portrait-door to the Ravenclaw dorm quickly learned to pay attention to exact wordings. "But it's not more than you'd take on *yourself*."

"Hermione—" the old wizard began.

"Why?" said Hermione's voice, it seemed to be running on without her mind, now. "Why couldn't I be braver? I was going to run in front of the Dementor—for Harry—before, I mean, in January—so why—why—why couldn't I—" Why had the thought of being sent to Azkaban just completely *unglued* her, why had she forgotten everything about being Good—

"My dear girl," Dumbledore said. The blue eyes behind the half-moon glasses showed a complete understanding of her guilt. "I would have done no better myself, in my first year in Hogwarts. As you would be kind to others, be kinder to yourself as well."

"So I *did* do the wrong thing." Somehow she needed to say that, to be told that, even though she already knew.

There was a pause.

"Listen, young Ravenclaw," the old wizard said, "hear me well, for I shall speak to you a truth. Most ill-doers do not think of themselves as evil; indeed, most conceive themselves the heroes of the stories they tell. I once thought that the greatest evil in this world was done in the name of the greater good. I was wrong. Terribly wrong. There is evil in this world which knows itself for evil, and hates the good with all its strength. All fair things does it desire to destroy."

Hermione shivered in her bed, somehow it seemed very real, when Dumbledore said it.

The old wizard continued speaking. "You are one of the fair things of this world, Hermione Granger, and so that evil hates you as well. If you had stayed firm through even this trial, it would have struck you harder and yet harder, until you shattered. Do not think that heroes cannot be broken! We are only more difficult to break, Hermione." The old wizard's eyes had grown sterner than she had ever seen. "When you have been exhausted for many hours, when pain and death is not a passing fear but a certainty, then it is harder to be a hero. If I must speak the truth—then today, yes, I would not waver in the face of Azkaban. But when I was a first-year in Hogwarts—I would have fled from the Dementor that you confronted, for my father had died in Azkaban, and I feared them. Know this! The evil that struck at you could have broken anyone, even myself.

Only Harry Potter has it within him to face that horror, when he has come fully into his power."

Hermione's neck couldn't stare at the old wizard any longer; she let her head fall back, back to the pillow, where she stared up at the ceiling, absorbing what she could.

"Why?" Her voice trembled again. "Why would anyone be that evil? I don't understand."

"I, too, have wondered," said Dumbledore's voice, a deep sadness in it. "For thrice ten years I wondered, and I still do not understand. You and I will never understand, Hermione Granger. But at least I know now what true evil would say for itself, if we could speak to it and ask why it was evil. It would say, *Why not?*"

A brief flare of indignation inside her. "There's got to be a *million* reasons why not!"

"Indeed," said Dumbledore's voice. "A million reasons and more. We will always know those reasons, you and I. If you insist on putting it that way—then yes, Hermione, this day's trial broke you. But what happens *after* you break—that, too, is part of being a hero. Which you are, Hermione Granger, and will always be."

She raised her head again, staring at him.

The old wizard got up from beside her bed. His silver beard dipped down, as Dumbledore bowed to her gravely, and left.

She went on looking at where the old wizard had gone.

It should have meant something to her, should have touched her. Should have made her felt better inside, that Dumbledore, who had seemed so reluctant before, had now acknowledged her as a hero.

She felt nothing.

Hermione let her head fall back to the bed, as Madam Pomfrey came and made her drink something that seared her lips like the afterburn of spicy food, and smelled even hotter, and didn't taste like anything at all. It meant nothing to her. She went on staring up at the distant stone tiles of the ceiling.

Minerva was waiting, doing her best not to hover, beside the double doors to the Hogwarts infirmary, she'd always thought of those doors as "the ominous gates" as a child in Hogwarts, and couldn't help but remember that now. Too much bad news had been spoken here—

Albus stepped out. The old wizard did not pause on the way out of the infirmary, only kept walking toward Professor Flitwick's office; and Minerva followed him.

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat. "Is it done, Albus?"

The old wizard nodded in affirmation. "If any hostile magic is cast on her, or any spirit touches her, I shall know, and come."

"I spoke to Mr. Potter after Transfiguration class," said Professor McGonagall. "He was of the opinion that Miss Granger should go to Beauxbatons, rather than Hogwarts, from now on."

The old wizard shook his head. "No. If Voldemort truly desires to strike at Miss Granger—he is tenacious beyond measure. His servants are returning to him, he could not have retrieved Bellatrix alone. Azkaban itself is not safe from his malice, and as for Beauxbatons—no, Minerva. I do not think Voldemort can essay such possessions often, or against stronger targets, or this year would have gone quite differently. And Harry Potter is here, whom Voldemort must fear whether he admits it or no. Now that I have warded her, Miss Granger will be safer within Hogwarts than without."

"Mr. Potter seemed to doubt that," Minerva said. She couldn't quite keep the edge from her voice; there was a part of her that agreed rather strongly. "He seemed to feel that common sense said Miss Granger should continue her education anywhere but Hogwarts."

The old wizard sighed. "I fear the boy has spent too much time among the Muggles. Always they reach for safety; always they imagine that safety can be reached. If Miss Granger is not safe within the center of our fortress, she shall be no safer for leaving it."

"Not everyone seems to think so," said Professor McGonagall. It had been almost the first letter she'd seen when she'd taken a quick look at her desk; an envelope of the finest sheepskin, sealed in greenish-silver wax, pressed into the image of a snake that rose and hissed at her. "I have received Lord Malfoy's owl withdrawing his son from Hogwarts."

The old wizard nodded, but did not break stride. "Does Harry know?"

"Yes." Her voice faltered, for a moment, remembering Harry's expression. "After class, Mr. Potter complimented Lord Malfoy's excellent good sense, and said that he would be writing Madam Longbottom advising her to do the same with her grandson, in case he was the next target. In the event that Mr. Longbottom's guardian was so negligent as to keep him in Hogwarts, Mr. Potter wanted him to have a Time-Turner, an invisibility cloak, a broomstick, and a pouch in which to carry them; also a toe-ring with an emergency portkey to a safe location, in case someone kidnaps Mr. Longbottom and takes him outside Hogwarts's wards. I told Mr. Potter that I did not think the Ministry would consent to such use of our Time-Turners, and he said that we should not ask. I expect he will want Miss Granger to receive the same, if she stays. And for himself Mr. Potter wants a three-person broomstick to carry in his pouch." She wasn't awed by the list of precautions. Impressed with the cleverness, but not awed; she was a Transfiguration Mistress, after all. But it still sent shivers of disquiet through her, that Harry Potter now thought Hogwarts as dangerous as spell research.

"The Department of Mysteries is not lightly defied," said Albus. "But for the rest—" The old wizard seemed to slump in on himself slightly. "We may as well give the boy what he wishes. And I will ward Neville also, and write Augusta to say that he should stay here over holiday."

"And finally," she said, "Mr. Potter says—this is a direct quote, Albus—whatever kind of Dark Wizard attractant the Headmaster is keeping here, he needs to get it out of this school, *now*." She couldn't stop the edge in her own voice, that time.

"I asked as much of Flamel," Albus said, the pain clear in his voice. "But Master Flamel has said—that even *he* can no longer keep safe the Stone—that he believes Voldemort has means of finding it wherever it is hidden—and that he does not consent for it to be guarded anywhere but Hogwarts. Minerva, I am sorry, but it must be done—*must!*"

"Very well," said Professor McGonagall. "But for myself, I think that Mr. Potter is right on every single count."

The old wizard glanced at her, and his voice caught as he said, "Minerva, you have known me long, and as well as any soul still living—tell me,

have I lost myself to darkness already?"

"What?" said Professor McGonagall in genuine surprise. Then, "Oh, Albus, no!"

The old wizard's lips pressed together tightly before he spoke. "For the greater good. I have sacrificed so many, for the greater good. Today I almost condemned Hermione Granger to Azkaban for the greater good. And I find myself—today, I found myself—beginning to resent the innocence that is no longer mine—" The old wizard's voice halted. "Evil done in the name of good. Evil done in the name of evil. Which is worse?"

"You are being silly, Albus."

The old wizard glanced at her again, before turning his eyes back to their way. "Tell me, Minerva—did you pause to weigh the consequences, before you told Miss Granger how to bind herself to the Potter family?"

She took an involuntary breath as she understood what she had done—

"So you did not." Albus's eyes were saddened. "No, Minerva, you must not apologize. It is well. For what you have seen of me this day—if your first loyalty is now to Harry Potter, and not to me, then that is right and proper." She opened her lips to protest, but Albus went on before she could say a word. "Indeed—indeed—that will be necessary and more than necessary, if the Dark Lord that Harry must defeat to come into his power is not Voldemort after all—"

"Not *this* again!" Minerva said. "Albus, it was You-Know-Who, not you, who marked Harry as his equal. There is no *possible* way that the prophecy could be talking about you!"

The old wizard nodded, but his eyes still seemed distant, fixed only on the road ahead.

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The holding cell, well to the center of Magical Law Enforcement, was luxuriously appointed; more a remark on what adult wizards took for granted, than any special feeling toward prisoners. There was a self-reclining, self-rocking chair with plush, richly textured, self-warming cushions. There was a bookcase containing random books rescued from a bargain bin,

and a full shelf of ancient magazines, including one from 1883. As for toiletries, well, it wasn't exactly luxurious, but there was a spell on the room which put all that business on hold; you weren't to go anywhere that the watching Auror couldn't see you. But aside from that, it was quite a pleasant little cell. The Defense Professor of Hogwarts was being detained, not arrested, not even intimidated. There was no evidence to indict him... except that a terrible and unusual crime had been committed at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and going by previous occasions the odds were five to one that the current Defense Professor was tangled up in it *somehow*. To this must be added the fact that nobody in the D.M.L.E. even knew who the Defense Professor *was*, and that the man had literally *sneezed* at all attempts to uncover his true identity. Why, no, they *hadn't* released 'Quirinus Quirrell' back to Hogwarts just yet.

Let us repeat this for emphasis:

The Defense Professor.

Was being detained.

In a cell.

The Defense Professor was staring at the watching Auror and humming.

The Defense Professor has not spoken a single word since he arrived in this particular cell. He has *only* been humming.

The humming started as a simple children's lullaby, the one that in Muggle Britain begins, *Lullaby, and goodnight...*

This tune was hummed, without variation, over and over, for seven minutes, to establish the underlying pattern.

Then began the elaborations upon the theme. Phrases hummed too slow, with long pauses in between, so that the listener's mind helplessly waits and waits for the next note, the next phrase. And then, when that next phrase comes, it is so out of key, so unbelievably awfully out of key, not just out of key for the previous phrases but sung at a pitch which does not correspond to *any* key, that you would have to believe this person had spent hours deliberately practicing their humming just to acquire such perfect anti-pitch.

It bears the same semblance to music as the awful dead voice of a Dementor bears to human speech.

And this horrible, horrible humming is *impossible* to ignore. It is similar to a known lullaby, but it departs from that pattern unpredictably. It sets up expectations and then violates them, never in any constant pattern that would permit the humming to fade into the background. The listener's brain cannot prevent itself from expecting the anti-musical phrases to complete, nor prevent itself from noticing the surprises.

The only possible explanation for how this mode of humming came to exist is that it was deliberately designed by some unspeakably cruel genius who woke up one day, feeling bored with ordinary torture, who decided to handicap himself and find out whether he could break someone's sanity *just by humming at them*.

The Auror has been listening to this unimaginably dreadful humming for four hours, while being stared at by a huge, cold, lethal presence that feels equally horrible whether he looks at it directly or lets it hover at the corner of his vision—

The humming stopped.

There was a long wait. Time enough for false hope to rise, and be squashed down by the memory of previous disappointments. And then, as the interval lengthened, and lengthened, that hope rose again unstopably—

The humming began once more.

The Auror cracked.

From his belt, the Auror took a mirror, tapped it once, and then said, "This is Junior Auror Arjun Altunay, I'm calling in code RJ-L20 on cell three."

"Code RJ-L20?" the mirror said in surprised tones. There was a sound of pages being flipped, then, "You want to be relieved because a prisoner is attempting psychological warfare and succeeding?"

(Amelia Bones really is quite intelligent.)

"What'd the prisoner say to you?" said the mirror.

(This question is *not* part of procedure RJ-L20, but unfortunately Amelia Bones has failed to include an explicit instruction that the commanding officer should not ask.)

"He's—" said the Auror, and glanced back at the cell. The Defense Professor was now leaning in back in his chair, looking quite relaxed. "He

was *staring* at me! And *humming*!”

There was a pause.

The mirror spoke again. “And you’re calling in an RJ-L20 over that? You’re sure you’re not just trying to get out of watching him?”

(Amelia Bones is surrounded by idiots.)

“You don’t understand!” yelled Auror Altunay. “It’s really awful humming!”

The mirror transmitted a sound of muffled laughter in the background, sounding like it was coming from more than one person. Then speech again. “Mr. Altunay, if you don’t want to be busted to Junior Auror Second Class, I suggest you buckle down and get back to work—”

“Strike that,” a crisp voice said, sounding slightly remote due to its distance from the mirror.

(Which is why Amelia Bones often sits in on a coordination center of the D.M.L.E. while doing her Ministry-required paperwork.)

“Auror Altunay,” said the crisp voice, seeming to approach closer to the mirror, “you will be relieved shortly. Auror Ben Gutierrez, the procedure for RJ-L20 does *not* say that you ask why. It says that you relieve the Auror who calls it in. *If I find that Aurors seem to be abusing it, I will modify the procedure to prevent its abuse—*” The mirror cut off abruptly.

The Auror turned back to look triumphantly at where the current Defense Professor of Hogwarts was leaning back in his cushioned chair.

That man then spoke the first words that had left his lips since he entered the cell.

“Goodbye, Mr. Altunay,” said the Defense Professor.

A few minutes later, the door to the detention cell opened, and in walked a grey-haired woman, dressed in the crimson-tinged robes of an Auror without any sign of rank or other ornamentation, carrying a black leather folder under her left arm. “You’re relieved,” the old woman said abruptly.

There was a brief delay while Auror Altunay tried to explain what had been happening. This was cut short by a nod and a stark, simple finger pointing out the door.

“Good evening, Madam Director,” said the Defense Professor.

Amelia Bones did not acknowledge this statement, but sat down abruptly in the vacated chair. The old witch opened the black folder and her gaze moved down to the parchments therein. "Possible hints to the identity of the current Hogwarts Defense Professor, as compiled by Auror Robards." The title parchment was turned, flipped aside. "The Defense Professor said that he was Sorted into Slytherin. Claimed that his family was killed by Voldemort. Said he had studied at a martial arts center in Muggle Asia which was destroyed by Voldemort. A request filed with the Department of International Magical Cooperation identifies this incident as the Oni Affair of 1969." Another parchment was flipped aside. "It also seems this Defense Professor gave a most stirring speech to his students, just before last Yule, castigating the previous generation for their disunity against the Death Eaters." The old witch looked up from the leather folder. "Madam Longbottom was rather taken with it, and insisted that I read the entire thing. The argument struck me as familiar, though I could not place it at the time. But then, of course, I had thought you dead."

The chief law enforcement officer of Magical Britain was now gazing sharply at the current Defense Professor of Hogwarts, across the pane of spell-reinforced glass separating them. The man in the cell returned the gaze equably, without apparent alarm.

"I shall not name any names," said the old witch. "But I shall tell a story, and see if it sounds familiar." Amelia Bones looked back down, turning to the next parchment. "Born 1927, entered Hogwarts in 1938, sorted into Slytherin, graduated 1945. Went on a graduation tour abroad and disappeared while visiting Albania. Presumed dead until 1970, when he returned to magical Britain just as suddenly, without any explanation for the missing twenty-five years. He remained estranged from his family and friends, living in isolation. In 1971, while visiting Diagon Alley, he fended off an attempt by Bellatrix Black to kidnap the daughter of the Minister of Magic, and used the Killing Curse to slay two of the three Death Eaters accompanying her. Beyond this all Britain knows the story; need I continue it?" The old witch looked up from her folder again. "Very well. There was a trial in the Wizengamot, during which this young man was exonerated for his use of the Killing Curse, not least due to the ef-

forts of his grandmother, the Lady of his House. He was reconciled with his family, and they held a House gathering to welcome his return. The guest of honor arrived at that gathering to find his entire family slain by Death Eaters, even to the house elves; and that he himself, of cadet line, was now the last remaining scion of a Most Ancient House."

The Defense Professor had not reacted at all to any of this, except that his eyes had half-closed, as though in weariness.

"The young man took up his family's seat in the Wizengamot, becoming among the most steadfast voices against You-Know-Who. Several times he led forces against the Death Eaters, fighting with skillful tactics and extraordinary power. People began to speak of him as the next Dumbledore, it was thought that he might become Minister of Magic after the Dark Lord fell. On the third of July, 1973, he failed to appear at a key Wizengamot vote, and was never heard from again. We assumed You-Know-Who had killed him. It was a grave blow to all of us, and matters went much the worse from that day on." The old witch's gaze was questioning. "I mourned you myself. What happened?"

The Defense Professor's shoulders moved lightly, a small shrug. "You make many assumptions," the Defense Professor said softly. "For myself, I would believe that man died years ago. But if that man is nonetheless alive—then it is clear he does not wish the fact announced, and has reasons enough for silence. That man was once of some help to you, it seems." The Defense Professor's lips curved in a cynical smile. "But I am no longer surprised when gratitude is fleeting. Is there yet more that you would demand from him?"

The old witch leaned back in her Auror's monitoring-chair, looking rather startled, maybe even hurt. "No—" she said after a moment. Her fingers tapped the leather folder; *nervously*, you might have thought, if you had believed that Amelia Bones could ever be nervous. "But your House—there are not many Ancient Houses remaining—"

"It shall matter little to this country whether eight Ancient Houses remain, or seven."

The old witch sighed. "What does Dumbledore think of this?"

The man in the detention cell shook his head. "He does not know who I am, and promised not to inquire."

The old witch's eyebrows rose. "How did he identify you to the Hogwarts wards, then?"

A slight smile. "The Headmaster drew a circle, and told Hogwarts that he who stood within was the Defense Professor. Speaking of which—" The tone went lower, flatter. "I am missing my classes, Director Bones."

"You seem to—*rest*, sometimes, in a peculiar manner. This has also been reported. And you seem to be *resting* more and more frequently, as time goes on." The old witch's fingers tapped the leather folder again. "I cannot recall reading of such a symptom, but when one hears of such a thing, one imagines... Dark Wizards fought, and terrible curses received..."

The Defense Professor remained expressionless.

"Do you require a healer's help?" said Amelia Bones. Her own mask had slipped, clearly showing the pain in her eyes. "Is there anything at all that can be done for you?"

"I agreed to teach Defense at Hogwarts," the man in the cell said flatly. "Draw your own conclusions, Madam. And I am missing my classes, of which there are not many left. I would return to Hogwarts, now."

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When Hermione woke the third time (though it felt like she'd only closed her eyes for a moment) the Sun was even lower in the sky, almost fully set. She felt a little more alive and, strangely, even more exhausted. This time it was Professor Flitwick who was standing next to her bed and shaking her shoulder, a tray of steaming food floating next to him. For some reason she'd thought Harry Potter ought to be leaning over her bedside, but he wasn't there. Had she dreamed that? She couldn't remember dreaming.

It developed (according to Professor Flitwick) that Hermione had missed dinner in the Great Hall, and was being woken to eat. And then she could go back to the Ravenclaw dorm, and her own bed, to sleep the rest of the night.

She ate in silence. There was a part of her that wanted to ask Professor Flitwick whether *he* thought she'd been Memory-Charmed or she'd tried to kill Draco Malfoy of her own will—

—*like she remembered doing*—

—but most of her was afraid to find out. *Afraid to find out* was a warning sign, according to Harry Potter and his books; but her mind felt tired, *bruised*, and she couldn't muster the strength to override it.

When she and Professor Flitwick left the infirmary they found Harry Potter sitting cross-legged outside the door, quietly reading a psychology textbook.

"I'll take her from here," said the Boy-Who-Lived. "Professor McGonagall said it would be all right."

Professor Flitwick seemed to accept this, and departed after a stern look at both of them. She couldn't imagine what the stern look was supposed to say, unless it was *don't try to kill any more students*.

The footsteps of Professor Flitwick faded, and the two of them stood alone outside the doors of the infirmary.

She looked at the green eyes of the Boy-Who-Lived, the mess of hair that didn't quite obscure the scar on his forehead; she looked upon the face of the boy who'd given all his money to save her without a second thought. There were feelings inside her—guilt, shame, embarrassment, other things as well—but no words. There was nothing she knew how to say.

"So," Harry said abruptly, "I did a quick skim through my psychology books to see what they said about post-traumatic stress disorder. The old books said you should talk about the experience immediately afterward with a counselor. The newer research says that when they actually ran experiments, it turned out that talking about it immediately afterward made it worse. Apparently what you really ought to do is run with your mind's natural impulse to repress the memories and just not think about it for a while."

It was so *normal* for the way she and Harry usually talked that she felt a sudden burning in her throat.

We don't have to talk about it. That was what Harry had just said, more or less. It felt like cheating, maybe even like a lie. Nothing *was* normal.

Everything wrong was still horribly wrong, everything left unsaid still needed to be said...

"Okay," said Hermione, because there wasn't anything else to say, anything else at all.

"I'm sorry I wasn't waiting when you woke up," Harry said, as they started to walk. "Madam Pomfrey wouldn't let me in, so I just stayed out here." He gave a small, sad-looking shrug. "I suppose I should be out there trying to run damage control on public relations, but... honestly I've never been good at that, I just end up speaking sharply at people."

"How bad is it?" She thought her voice should have come out in a whisper, a croak, but it didn't.

"Well—" Harry said with obvious hesitation. "The thing you've got to understand, Hermione, is that you had a lot of defenders at breakfast-time today, but everyone on your side was... *making stuff up*. Draco tried to kill you first, things like that. It was Granger versus Malfoy, that's how people saw it, like a seesaw where pushing his side down meant pushing your side up. I told them you were probably *both* innocent, that you'd both been Memory-Charmed. They didn't listen, both sides treated me like a traitor trying to play the middle. And then people heard that Draco had testified under Veritaserum that he'd been trying to help you before the battle—stop making that expression, Hermione, you didn't actually do anything to him. Anyway, all people understood was that the pro-Malfoy faction had been right and the pro-Granger faction had been wrong." Harry gave a small sigh. "I *told* them that when the truth came out later they'd be embarrassed..."

"How bad is it?" she said again. This time her voice did come out weaker.

"Remember Asch's conformity experiment?" Harry said, turning his head to give her a serious look.

Her mind was *slow to remember* for a few seconds, which frightened her, but then the reference came back. In 1951, Solomon Asch had taken some experimental subjects, and each one had been put among a row of other people who looked like them, seeming like other experimental subjects, but actually confederates of the experimenter. They'd shown a reference line on a screen, labeled X, next to three other lines, labeled A, B,

and C. The experimenter had asked which line X was the same length as. The correct answer had obviously been C. The other ‘subjects’, the confederates, had one after another said that X was the same length as B. The real subject had been put second-to-last in the order, so as not to arouse suspicion by being last. The test had been to see whether the real subject would ‘conform’ to the standard wrong answer of B, or voice the obviously correct answer of C.

75% of the subjects had ‘conformed’ at least once. A third of the subjects had conformed more than half the time. Some had reported afterward actually believing that X was the same length as B. And that had been in a case where the subjects hadn’t known any of the confederates. If you put people around others who belonged to the same group as them, like someone in a wheelchair next to other people in a wheelchair, the conformity effect got even stronger...

Hermione had a sickening feeling where this was going. “I remember,” she whispered.

“I gave the Chaos Legion anti-conformity training, you know. I had each Legionnaire stand in the middle and say ‘Twice two is four!’ or ‘Grass is green!’ while everyone else in the Chaos Legion called them idiots or sneered at them—Allen Flint did really good sneers—or even just gave them blank looks and then walked away. The thing you’ve got to remember is, *only* the Chaos Legion has ever practiced anything like that. Nobody else in Hogwarts even knows what conformity is.”

“Harry!” Her voice was wobbling. “How bad is it?”

Harry gave another sad-looking shrug. “Everyone in the second year and above, since they don’t know you. Everyone in Dragon Army. All of Slytherin, of course. And, well, most of the rest of magical Britain too, I think. Remember, Lucius Malfoy controls the *Daily Prophet*.”

“Everyone?” she whispered. Her limbs had started to feel cold, like she’d just gotten out of an unheated swimming pool.

“What people really believe doesn’t feel like a *belief*, it feels like the way the world *is*. You and I are standing in a private little bubble of the universe where Hermione Granger got Memory-Charmed. Everyone else is living in the world where Hermione Granger tried to murder Draco Malfoy. If Ernie Macmillian—”

Her breath caught in her throat. *Captain Macmillian—*

“—thinks he’s ethically prohibited from being your friend now, well, he’s trying to do the right thing as he understands it, in the world he thinks he lives in.” Harry’s eyes were very serious. “Hermione, you’ve told me a lot of times that I look down too much on other people. But if I expected too much of them—if I expected people to get things *right*—I really would hate them, then. Idealism aside, Hogwarts students don’t *actually* know enough cognitive science to take responsibility for how their own minds work. It’s not their fault they’re crazy.” Harry’s voice was strangely gentle, almost like an adult’s. “I know it’s going to be harder on you than it would be on me. But remember, eventually the real culprit gets nailed. The truth comes out, everyone who was confidently wrong gets embarrassed.”

“And if the real culprit doesn’t get caught?” she said in a trembling voice.

...or if it turns out to be me after all?

“Then you can leave Hogwarts and go to the Salem Witches’ Institute in America.”

“*Leave Hogwarts?*” She’d never even thought of that possibility except as an ultimate punishment.

“I... Hermione, I think you might want to do that anyway. Hogwarts isn’t a castle, it’s insanity with walls. You *have* got other options.”

“I’ll...” she stammered. “I’ll have... to think about it...”

Harry nodded. “At least nobody’s going to try hexing you, not after what the Headmaster said at dinner tonight. Oh, and Ron Weasley came up to me, looking very serious, and told me that if I saw you first, I should tell you that he’s sorry for having thought badly of you, and he’ll never speak ill of you again.”

“Ron believes I’m innocent?” said Hermione.

“Well... he doesn’t think you’re *innocent*, per se...”

The whole Ravenclaw dorm went silent as the two of them walked in.

Staring at them.

Staring at her.

(She'd had nightmares like this.)

And then, one by one, people looked away from her.

Penelope Clearwater, the 5th-year prefect in charge of first-years, looked away slowly and deliberately, turning her head to face in another direction.

Su Li and Lisa Turpin and Michael Corner, all sitting at a table together, all of whom she'd helped with their homework at one time or another, all looked away, their faces suddenly nervous, the moment she tried to catch their eyes.

A third-year witch named Latisha Randle, whom SPHEW had twice saved from Slytherin bullies, quickly bent back over her desk and started doing homework again.

Mandy Brocklehurst looked away from her.

If Hermione didn't burst into tears, then, it was only because she'd expected it, had played it out in her mind over and over again. At least people weren't screaming at her or shoving her or hexing her. They were just looking away—

Hermione walked very straight up to the staircaise that led toward the first-year girl's dorms. (She didn't see Padma Patil or Anthony Goldstein looking at her, those two lone heads turning to track her as she left.) From behind her, she heard Harry Potter saying in a very calm tone, "Now eventually the truth's going to come out, you all. So if you're all that confident she's guilty, can I ask you all to sign this paper right here, saying that if she later turns out to be innocent, she gets to say 'I told you so' and then hold it over you for the rest of your lives? Step on up, one and all, don't be cowards, if you really believe you shouldn't be afraid to bet—"

She was halfway up the stairs when she realized that there would be other girls inside her dorm room, too.

The stars hadn't quite come out yet, only one or two of the brightest ones visible through the reddish-purple haze of the horizon, though the sun had fully sunk.

Hermione's hands dug into the harsh stone of the parapet guarding the small balcony, where she'd ducked out of the stairwell after realizing that—

—she couldn't just go back to bed—

—the words echoed in her mind like 'You can't go home again' ought to sound.

She stared out at the empty grounds, the fading sunset, the sprouting grass so far below.

Tired, she was tired, she couldn't think now, she needed to sleep. Professor Flitwick had told her that she needed to sleep, and there'd been yet another potion with her dinner. Maybe that was how wizarding society treated horrible traumas to innocent young girls, just made them sleep a lot afterward.

She should go to her room and sleep, but she was afraid to go someplace where other people were. Afraid of how they might look at her, or look away.

Fragments of thought chased themselves around a mind too exhausted to finish or connect them, as the night fully set in.

Why—

Why did all this happen—

Everything was fine a week ago—

Why—

From behind her came the creaky sound of an opening door.

She turned her head and looked.

Professor Quirrell was leaning against the doorway she'd walked through, silhouetted like a cardboard cutout by the light of the Hogwarts torches lit behind him, in the open door. She couldn't see his expression, though the doorway behind him was bright; his eyes, his face, everything she could see from here lay within night's shadow.

The Defense Professor of Hogwarts, number one on the list of people who might've done this. She hadn't even realized she *had* a suspect list until that moment.

The man stood within that doorway, saying nothing; and she couldn't see his eyes. What was he even *doing* there in the first place—

"Are you here to kill me?" said Hermione Granger.

Professor Quirrell's head tilted at that.

Then the Defense Professor started toward her, the dark silhouette raising one hand slowly and deliberately, as though to push her off the Ravenclaw tower—

"*Stupefy!*"

The burst of adrenaline overrode everything, she drew her wand without thinking, her lips formed the word of their own accord, the stunbolt leapt out of her wand and—

—*slowed to a stop* in front of Professor Quirrell's raised hand, rippling in midair like it was still trying to fly and making a slight hissing sound.

The red glow illuminated Professor Quirrell's face for the first time, showing a strange fond smile.

"Better," said Professor Quirrell. "Miss Granger, you are still a student in my Defense class. As such, if you consider me a threat, I do not expect you to just look at me sadly and ask if I am there to kill you. Minus two Quirrell points."

She was entirely unable to form words.

The Defense Professor flicked his forefinger casually at the suspended stunbolt, sending the hex shooting back over her head, far into the night, so that they stood again in darkness. Then Professor Quirrell walked out of the doorway, which swung shut behind him; and a soft white light sprung up around the two of them, so that she could see his face once more, still with that strange fond smile.

"What are you—what are you *doing* here?"

A few more steps took Professor Quirrell to a higher part of the balcony's ramparts, where he put his elbows down on the stone, and leaned over heavily, looking up into the night.

"I came here straight upon being released by the Aurors, the moment I finished reporting to the Headmaster," said Professor Quirrell in a quiet voice, "because I am your teacher, and you are my student, and I am responsible for you."

Hermione understood, then; remembering what Professor Quirrell had said to Harry in the second Defense lesson of the year, about controlling his anger. She felt the flush of shame all the way down her chest. It took a moment after that for knowledge to override mortification, for her to force out the words—

“I—” said Hermione. “Harry thinks—that I *didn’t*—lose my temper, I mean—”

“So I heard,” said Professor Quirrell in rather dry tones. He shook his head, as though at the stars themselves. “The boy is fortunate that I have crossed the line from annoyance with his self-destructiveness, into sheer curiosity as to what he shall do next. But I agree with Mr. Potter’s assessment of the facts. This murder was well-planned to evade detection both by the wards of Hogwarts and the Headmaster’s timely eye. Naturally, in such a thoughtful murder, some innocent would be placed to take the blame.” A brief, wry smile crossed the Defense Professor’s lips, though he wasn’t looking at her. “As for the notion that you did it yourself—I consider myself a talented teacher, but even I could not teach such murderous intent to a student as obstinate and untalented as Hermione Granger.”

The part of her brain that said *What?* in indignation wasn’t anywhere near loud enough to reach her lips.

“No...” said Professor Quirrell. “That is not why I am here. You have made no effort to hide your dislike for me, Miss Granger. I thank you for that lack of pretense, for I much prefer true hate to false love. But you are still my student, and I have a word to say to you, if you will hear it.”

Hermione looked at him, still fighting down the aftereffects of the adrenaline from before. The Defense Professor seemed to be just staring up at the dark sky, in which the stars were becoming visible.

“I was going to be a hero, once,” said Professor Quirrell, still looking upward. “Can you believe that, Miss Granger?”

“No.”

“Thank you again, Miss Granger. It is true nonetheless. Long ago, long before your time or Harry Potter’s, there was a man who was hailed as a savior. The destined scion, such a one as anyone would recognize from tales, wielding justice and vengeance like twin wands against his

dreadful nemesis." Professor Quirrell gave a soft, bitter laugh, looking up at the night sky. "Do you know, Miss Granger, at that time I thought myself already cynical, and yet... well."

The silence stretched, in the cold and the night.

"In all honesty," said Professor Quirrell, looking up at the stars, "I still don't understand it. They should have known that their lives depended on that man's success. And yet it was as if they tried to do everything they could to make his life *unpleasant*. To throw every possible obstacle into his way. I was not naive, Miss Granger, I did not expect the power-holders to align themselves with me so quickly—not without something in it for themselves. But their power, too, was threatened; and so I was shocked how they seemed content to step back, and leave to that man all burdens of responsibility. They sneered at his performance, remarking among themselves how they would do better in his place, though they did not condescend to step forward." Professor Quirrell shook his head as though in bemusement. "And it was the strangest thing—the Dark Wizard, that man's dread nemesis—why, those who served *him* leapt eagerly to their tasks. The Dark Wizard grew crueler toward his followers, and they followed him all the more. Men fought for the chance to serve *him*, even as those whose lives depended on that other man made free to render his life difficult... I could not understand it, Miss Granger." Professor Quirrell's face was in shadow, as he looked upward. "Perhaps, by taking on himself the curse of action, that man removed it from all others? Was that why they felt free to hinder his battle against the Dark Wizard who would have enslaved them all? Believing men would act in their own interest was not cynicism, it turned out, but sheerest optimism; in reality men do not meet so high a standard. And so in time that one realized he might do better fighting the Dark Wizard alone, than with such followers at his back."

"So—" Hermione's voice sounded strange in the night. "You left your friends behind where they'd be safe, and tried to attack the Dark Wizard all by yourself?"

"Why, no," said Professor Quirrell. "I stopped trying to be a hero, and went off to do something else I found more pleasant."

"What?" said Hermione without thinking at all. "That's *horrible!*"

The Defense Professor turned his head down from the sky to regard her; and she saw, in the light of the doorway, that he was smiling—or at least half his face was smiling. “Are you going to tell me, Miss Granger, that I am an awful person? Well, perhaps I am. But then are people who never even try to be heroes still worse? If I had never done anything at all, like them, would you have thought better of me?”

Hermione opened her mouth and then found that, once again, she didn’t have anything to say. It wasn’t right to walk away from being a hero, you couldn’t just *do* that, but she didn’t *want* to say that everyone who wasn’t a hero was nothing, that was Quirrell-thinking...

The smile, or half-smile, had disappeared. “You were foolish,” the Defense Professor said quietly, “to expect any lasting gratitude from those you tried to protect, once you named yourself a heroine. Just as you expected that man to go on being a hero, and called him horrible for stopping, when a thousand others never lifted a finger. It was only *expected* that you should fight bullies. It was a tax you owed, and they accepted it like princes, with a sneer for the lateness of your payment. And you have already witnessed, I wager, that their fondness vanished like dust in the wind once it was no longer in their interest to associate with you...”

The Defense Professor slowly straightened off the balcony, standing almost straight, turning to regard her fully.

“But you don’t have to be a hero, Miss Granger,” said Professor Quirrell. “You can stop anytime you please.”

That idea...

...*had* occurred to her before, several times over the last two days.

People become who they are meant to be, by doing what is right, Headmaster Dumbledore had told her. The trouble was that there seemed to be two different right things to do. There was the part of her which said that *right* was to go on being a heroine, and stay at Hogwarts, she didn’t know what was going on but a heroine wouldn’t just run away.

And there was also the voice of common sense saying that young children shouldn’t ever stay around danger, that was what adults were for; the voice of every school poster that said not to take candy from strangers. That was also right.

Hermione Granger stood there on that balcony, looking at Professor Quirrell silhouetted by the emerging stars, and she didn't understand; she didn't understand how the Defense Professor could be gazing at her with his face showing concern; she didn't understand the notes of pain in the Defense Professor's voice that caught at her; she didn't understand *why* she was being told all this.

"You don't even like me, Professor," said Hermione.

A small smile flickered on Professor Quirrell's face. "I suppose I could go on about how I am angered that this affair has taken up my valuable time and disrupted my Defense classes. But mostly, Miss Granger, you are my student, and whatever other professions I may have once held, I think I have been a good teacher at Hogwarts, have I not?" Suddenly Professor Quirrell's eyes seemed very tired. "As your teacher, then, I am advising you that you have other career options. I should not like to see anyone else going down my path."

Hermione swallowed. It was a side of Professor Quirrell she'd never seen or imagined, and it was eating away at her preconceptions.

Professor Quirrell watched her for a moment, and then looked away from her again, back up at the stars. When he spoke this time his voice was quieter. "Someone here is targeting you, Miss Granger, and I cannot ward you as I warded Mr. Malfoy. The Headmaster has prevented it, for what he claims to be good reasons. It is easy to become fond of Hogwarts, I know, for I am fond of it as well. But in France they take a different view of the Ancient Houses than in Britain; and Beauxbatons would not mistreat you, I think. Whatever else you imagine of me, I swear that if you asked me to see you safely in Beauxbatons, I would do all in my power to convey you there."

"I can't just—" Hermione said.

"But you *can*, Miss Granger." Now the pale blue eyes watched her intently. "Whatever you wish to make of your life, you cannot attain it at Hogwarts, not anymore. This place is ruined for you now, even leaving aside all other threats. Simply ask Harry Potter to command you to go to Beauxbatons and live out your life in peace. If you stay here, he is your master in the eyes of Britain and its laws!"

She hadn't even been thinking about that, it paled so much in compar-

ison to being eaten by Dementors; it had been important to her before, but now it all seemed childish, unimportant, pointless, so why were her eyes burning?

“And if that fails to move you, Miss Granger, consider also that Mr. Potter has, just today at lunchtime, threatened Lucius Malfoy, Albus Dumbledore, and the entire Wizengamot because he cannot think sensibly when something threatens to take you from him. Are you not frightened of what he will do next?”

It made sense. Terrible sense. Dreadful awful sense.

It made *too much* sense—

She couldn't have described it in words, what triggered the realization, unless it was the sheer *pressure* that the Defense Professor was exerting on her.

That if the Defense Professor *was* behind this whole thing—then Professor Quirrell had done it all *just to get her out of the way of his plans for Harry*.

Without any conscious decision, she shifted her weight to the other foot, her body moving away from the Defense Professor—

“So you think I am the one responsible?” said Professor Quirrell. His voice sounded a little sad as he said it, and her own heart almost stopped from hearing it. “I suppose I cannot blame you. I am the Defense Professor of Hogwarts, after all. But Miss Granger, even *assuming* that I am your enemy, common sense should still tell you to get away from me *very quickly*. You cannot use the Killing Curse, so the correct tactic is to Apparate away. I do not mind being the villain of your imagination if it makes matters clearer. Leave Hogwarts, and leave me to those who can handle me. I will arrange for the transportation to be through some family of good repute, and Mr. Potter will know to blame me if you do not arrive safely.”

“I—” She was feeling cold, the night air chilling her skin, or maybe being chilled by it. “I've got to think about it—”

Professor Quirrell shook his head. “No, Miss Granger. Your departure will take time for me to arrange, and I have less time left than you may think. This decision may be painful for you, but it should not be am-

biguous; much weighs in the balance of these scales, but not evenly. I must know tonight whether you intend to go.”

And if not—

Was the Defense Professor warning her deliberately? That if she didn’t run, he would strike again?

Why would it matter so much, what did Professor Quirrell want to *do* with Harry?

Hermione Granger, I shall be less subtle than is usual for a mysterious old wizard, and tell you outright that you cannot imagine how badly things could go if the events surrounding Harry Potter turn to ill.

The most powerful wizard in the world had told her that, when he was talking about how important it was that she *not* stop being Harry’s friend.

Hermione swallowed, she swayed a little where she stood, on the stone balcony of a magical castle. Suddenly the whole deadly absurdity of the situation seemed to rise up and grab her by the throat, that twelve-year-old girls *shouldn’t* be in danger, *shouldn’t* be thinking about such things, that Mum would want her to RUN AWAY and her father would have a heart attack if he even knew she was being faced with the question.

And she knew, then, as Harry and Dumbledore had both tried to warn her, that everything she’d ever thought about being a heroine had been mistaken. That there wasn’t really any such thing as heroes, outside of stories. There was just horrible danger, and being arrested by Aurors and put in cells next to Dementors, pain and fear and—

“Miss Granger?” said the Defense Professor.

She said nothing. All the words were blocked in her throat.

“I need a decision, Miss Granger.”

She kept her jaw locked, didn’t let any words come out.

Finally the Defense Professor sighed. Slowly the white light failed, and slowly the door behind him swung open, so that he was once again a black silhouette against the opening. “Good night, Miss Granger,” he said, and turned his back to her, and walked away into Hogwarts.

It took a while for her breathing to slow down again. Whatever had happened here tonight, it didn’t feel anything like victory. She’d fought so hard just to stop herself from saying *Yes* in the face of the Defense Pro-

fessor's pressure, and now she didn't even know if she'd done the right thing.

When she walked back into the light herself (after exhaustion had overtaken everything and sleep was once more a possibility), she thought she heard it as she was within the doorway, from behind her and above her, a distant cawing cry.

But it wasn't meant for her, she knew, so she started climbing up the stairs toward her dorm room.

The other girls were probably asleep by now, and wouldn't look at her, or look away—

She felt the tears start, and this time she didn't stop them.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-FIVE

TABOO TRADEOFFS, AFTERMATH, PART III: DISTANCE

Slow and hard, the long stairway that led to the peak of Ravenclaw. From the inside, the stairway seemed like a straight upward slope, though from the outside you could see that it logically had to be a spiral. You could only get to the top of the Ravenclaw tower by making that long climb without shortcuts, stone step by stone step; passing beneath Harry's shoes, pushed down by his wearying legs.

Harry had seen Hermione safely off to bed.

He had lingered in the Ravenclaw common room long enough to collect a few signatures that might be useful to Hermione later. Not many students had signed; wizards hadn't been trained to think in the put-up-or-shut-up, stick-your-neck-out-and-make-a-prediction-or-stop-pretending-to-believe-in-your-theory rules of Muggle science. Most of them hadn't seen anything *incongruent* about being too nervous to sign an agreement saying that Hermione got to hold it over them for the rest of their lives if they were wrong, while acting outwardly confident that she was guilty. But just having demanded the signatures would make the point after the truth came out, if anyone ever again suspected Hermione of anything Dark. She wouldn't have to go through this *twice*, at least.

After that Harry had left the common room quickly, because all the kindly forgiving sentiments he'd reasoned out were getting harder and harder to remember. Sometimes Harry thought the deepest split in his

personality wasn't anything to do with his dark side; rather it was the divide between the altruistic and forgiving Abstract Reasoning Harry, versus the frustrated and angry Harry In The Moment.

The circular platform at the top of the Ravenclaw tower wasn't the tallest place in Hogwarts, but the Ravenclaw tower jutted out from the main body of the castle, so you couldn't see down into the top platform from the Astronomy tower. A quiet place to think, if you had an awful lot to think about. A place where few other students ever came—there were easier niches of privacy, if privacy was all you wanted.

The night-lit torches of Hogwarts were far below. The platform itself offered few obstructions; the stairs emerged from an uncovered gap in the floor, rather than an upright door. From this place, then, the stars were as visible as they ever were on Earth.

The boy lay down in the center of the platform, heedless of his robes that might be dirtied, dropping his head to rest upon the rock-tiled floor; so that, except for a few half-seen crenellations of stone at vision's edge, and a sliver of crescent moon, reality became starlight.

The pinpoints of light in dark velvet twinkled, wavering and returning, a different kind of beauty from their steady brilliance in the Silent Night.

Harry gazed out abstractly, his mind on other things.

This day your war against Voldemort has begun...

Dumbledore had said that, after the Incident with Rescuing Bellatrix from Azkaban. That had been a false alarm, but the phrase expressed the sentiment well.

Two nights ago his war had begun, and Harry didn't know with *who*.

Dumbledore thought it was Lord Voldemort, returned from the dead, making his first move against the boy who had defeated him last time.

Professor Quirrell had put detection wards on Draco, fearing that Hogwarts's mad Headmaster would try to frame Harry for the death of Lucius's son.

Or Professor Quirrell had set up the entire thing, and *that* was how he'd known where to find Draco. Severus Snape thought the Hogwarts Defense Professor was an obvious suspect, even *the* obvious suspect.

And Severus Snape himself might or might not be even remotely trustworthy.

Someone had declared war against Harry, their first strike had been meant to take out Draco and Hermione both, and it was only by the barest of margins that Harry had saved Hermione.

You couldn't call it victory. Draco had been removed from Hogwarts, and if that wasn't death, it wasn't clear how it could be undone, or what shape Draco might be in when he got back. The country of magical Britain now thought Hermione an attempted-murderer, which might or might not make her decide to do the sane thing and leave. Harry had sacrificed his entire fortune to undo his loss, and that card could only be played once.

Some unknown power had struck at him, and if that blow had been partially deflected, it had still hit *really hard*.

At least his dark side hadn't asked anything of him in exchange for saving Hermione. Maybe because his dark side *wasn't* an imaginary voice like Hufflepuff; Harry might *imagine* his Hufflepuff part as wanting different things from himself, but his dark side wasn't like that. His "dark side", so far as Harry could tell, was a different way that Harry sometimes *was*. Right now, Harry wasn't angry; and trying to ask what "dark Harry" wanted was a phone ringing unanswered. The thought even seemed a little strange; could you owe something to a different way you sometimes were?

Harry stared up at the random stars, the scattered twinkling lights that human brains couldn't help but pattern-match into imaginary constellations.

And then there was that promise Harry had sworn.

Draco to help Harry reform Slytherin House. And Harry to take as an enemy whomever Harry believed, in his best judgment as a rationalist, to have killed Narcissa Malfoy. If Narcissa had never gotten her own hands dirty, if indeed she'd been burned alive, if the killer hadn't been tricked—those were all the conditions Harry could remember making. He probably should've written it down, or better yet, never made a promise requiring that many caveats in the first place.

There were plausible outs, for the sort of person who'd let themselves rationalize an out. Dumbledore hadn't *actually* confessed. He hadn't come right out and said he'd done it. There were plausible reasons for an actually-guilty Dumbledore to behave that way. But it was *also* what you'd expect to see, if someone else had burned Narcissa, and Dumbledore had taken credit.

Harry shook his head, flattening one side of his hair and then another against the stone-tiled floor. There was still a final out, Draco could still release him from the oath at any time. He could, at least, describe the situation to Draco, and talk about options with him, when they met again. It didn't seem like a very likely prospect for release—but the idea of talking something over honestly was enough to satisfy the part of himself that demanded adherence to oaths. Even if it only meant delaying, it was better than taking a good man as an enemy.

But is Dumbledore a good man? asked the voice of Hufflepuff. *If Dumbledore burned someone alive—wasn't the whole point that good people may kill, but never kill with suffering?*

Maybe he killed her instantly, said Slytherin, *and then lied to Lucius about the burning-alive part. But... if there was any possibility of the Death Eaters magically verifying how Narcissa died... and if being caught in a lie would've endangered Light-side families...*

Be careful what we cleverly rationalize, warned Gryffindor.

You have to expect reputational effects on how other people treat you, said Hufflepuff. *If you decide there's sufficient reason to burn a woman alive, one of the predictable side effects is that good people decide you've crossed the line and have to be stopped. Dumbledore should've expected that. He's got no right to complain.*

Or maybe he expects us to be smarter, said Slytherin. *Now that we know this much of the truth—no matter the exact details of the full story—can we really believe that Dumbledore is a terrible, terrible person who ought to be our enemy? In the middle of a horrible bloody war, Dumbledore set one enemy civilian on fire? That's only bad by the standards of comic books, not by any sort of realistic historical standard.*

Harry stared up at the night sky, remembering history.

In real life, in real wars...

During World War II, there had been a project to sabotage the Nazi nuclear weapons program. Years earlier, Leo Szilard, the first person to realize the possibility of a fission chain reaction, had convinced Fermi not to publish the discovery that purified graphite was a cheap and effective neutron moderator. Fermi had wanted to publish, for the sake of the great international project of science, which was above nationalism. But Szilard had persuaded Rabi, and Fermi had abided by the majority vote of their tiny three-person conspiracy. And so, years later, the only neutron moderator the Nazis had known about was deuterium.

The only deuterium source under Nazi control had been a captured facility in occupied Norway, which had been knocked out by bombs and sabotage, causing a total of twenty-four civilian deaths.

The Nazis had tried to ship the deuterium already refined to Germany, aboard a civilian Norwegian ferry, the *SS Hydro*.

Knut Haukelid and his assistants had been discovered by the night watchman of the civilian ferry while they were sneaking on board to sabotage it. Haukelid had told the watchman that they were escaping the Gestapo, and the watchman had let them go. Haukelid had considered warning the night watchman, but that would have endangered the mission, so Haukelid had only shaken his hand. And the civilian ship had sunk in the deepest part of the lake, with eight dead Germans, seven dead crew, and three dead civilian bystanders. Some of the Norwegian rescuers of the ship had thought the German soldiers present should be left to drown, but this view had not prevailed, and the German survivors had been rescued. And that had been the end of the Nazi nuclear weapons program.

Which was to say that Knut Haukelid had killed innocent people. One of whom, the night watchman of the ship, had been a *good* person. Someone who'd gone out of his way to help Haukelid, at risk to himself; from the kindness of his heart, for the highest moral reasons; and been sent to drown in turn. Afterward, in the cold light of history, it had looked like the Nazis had never been close to getting nuclear weapons after all.

And Harry had never read anything suggesting that Haukelid had acted wrongly.

That was war in real life. In terms of total damage and who'd gotten

hit, what Haukelid had done was considerably *worse* than what Dumbledore might have done to Narcissa Malfoy, or what Dumbledore had possibly done to leak the prophecy to Lord Voldemort to get him to attack Harry's parents.

If Haukelid had been a comic-book superhero, he'd have somehow gotten all the civilians off the ferry, he would've attacked the German soldiers directly...

...rather than let a single innocent person die...

...but Knut Haukelid hadn't been a superhero.

And neither had been Albus Dumbledore.

Harry closed his eyes, swallowing hard a few times against the sudden choking sensation. It was abruptly very clear that while Harry was going around trying to live the ideals of the Enlightenment, Dumbledore was the one who'd actually *fought in a war*. Nonviolent ideals were cheap to hold if you were a scientist, living inside the *Protego* bubble cast by the police officers and soldiers whose actions you had the luxury to question. Albus Dumbledore seemed to have started out with ideals at least as strong as Harry's own, if not stronger; and Dumbledore hadn't gotten through his war without killing enemies and sacrificing friends.

Are you so much better than Haukelid and Dumbledore, Harry Potter, that you'll be able to fight without a single casualty? Even in the world of comic books, the only reason a superhero like Batman even looks successful is that the comic-book readers only notice when Important Named Characters die, not when the Joker shoots some random nameless bystander to show off his villainy. Batman is a murderer no less than the Joker, for all the lives the Joker took that Batman could've saved by killing him. That's what the man named Alastor was trying to tell Dumbledore, and afterward Dumbledore regretted having taken so long to change his mind. Are you really going to try to follow the path of the superhero, and never sacrifice a single piece or kill a single enemy?

Fatigued, Harry turned his attention away from the dilemma for a moment, opened his eyes again to regard the hemisphere of night, which required no decisions from him.

Near the edge of his vision, the pale white crescent of the Moon, the light from which had left one-and-a-quarter seconds ago, around 375,000 kilometers of distance in Earth's space of simultaneity.

Above and to the side, Polaris, the North Star; the first star Harry had learned to identify in the sky, by following the edge of the Big Dipper. That was actually a five-star system with a brilliant central supergiant, 434 light-years from Earth. It was the first 'star' whose name Harry had ever learned from his father, so long ago that he couldn't have guessed how old he'd been.

The dim fog that was the Milky Way, so many billions of distant stars that they became an indistinct river, the plane of a galaxy that stretched 100,000 light-years across. If Harry had experienced any sense of wonder when he'd *first* been told that, he'd been too young for him to remember now that first time, across a few years' distance.

In the center of the constellation Andromeda, the star Andromeda, which was really the Andromeda Galaxy. The nearest galaxy to the Milky Way, 2.4 million light-years away, containing an estimated trillion stars.

Numbers like those made 'infinity' pale by comparison, because 'infinity' was just featureless and blank. Thinking that the stars were 'infinitely' distant was a lot less scary than trying to work out what 2.4 million light-years amounted to in meters. 2.4 million light-years, times 31 million seconds in a year, times a photon moving at 300,000,000 meters per second...

It was strange to think that such distances might *not* be unreachably far away. Magic was loose in the universe, things like Time-Turners and broomsticks. Had any wizard ever tried to measure the speed of a portkey, or a phoenix?

And the human understanding of magic couldn't possibly be anywhere *near* the underlying laws. What would you be able to do with magic if you *really* understood it?

A year ago, Dad had gone to the Australian National University in Canberra for a conference where he'd been an invited speaker, and he'd taken Mum and Harry along. And they'd all visited the National Museum of Australia, because, it had turned out, there was basically nothing else to do in Canberra. The glass display cases had shown rock-throwers crafted by the Australian aborigines—like giant wooden shoehorns, they'd looked, but smoothed and carved and ornamented with painstaking care. In the 40,000 years since anatomically modern

humans had migrated to Australia from Asia, nobody had invented the bow-and-arrow. It really made you appreciate how *non-obvious* was the idea of Progress. Why would you even think of Invention as something important, if all your history's heroic tales were of great warriors and defenders instead of Thomas Edison? How could anyone have suspected, while carving a rock-thrower with painstaking care, that someday human beings would invent rocket ships and nuclear energy?

Could you have looked up into the sky, at the brilliant light of the Sun, and deduced that the universe contained greater sources of power than mere fire? Would you have realized that if the fundamental physical laws permitted it, someday humans would tap the same energies as the Sun? Even if nothing you could imagine doing with rock-throwers or woven pouches—no pattern of running across the savannah and nothing you could obtain by hunting animals—would accomplish that even in imagination?

It wasn't like modern-day Muggles had gotten anywhere near the limits of what Muggle physics said was possible. And yet like hunter-gatherers conceptually bound to their rock-throwers, most Muggles lived in a world defined by the limits of what you could do with cars and telephones. Even though Muggle physics explicitly permitted possibilities like molecular nanotechnology or the Penrose process for extracting energy from black holes, most people filed that away in the same section of their brain that stored fairy tales and history books, well away from their personal realities: *Long ago and far away, ever so long ago*. No surprise, then, that the wizarding world lived in a conceptual universe bounded—not by fundamental laws of magic that nobody even knew—but just by the surface rules of known Charms and enchantments. You couldn't observe the way magic was practiced nowadays and *not* be reminded of the National Museum of Australia, once you realized what you were seeing. Even if Harry's first guess had been mistaken, one way or another it was still inconceivable that the *fundamental* laws of the universe contained a special case for human lips shaping the phrase 'Wingardium Leviosa'. And yet even that fumbling grasp of magic was enough to do things that Muggle physics said should be *forever impossible*: the Time-Turner, water conjured out of nothingness by *Aguamenti*. What were the *ultimate* pos-

sibilities of invention, if the underlying laws of the universe permitted an eleven-year-old with a stick to violate almost every constraint in the Muggle version of physics?

Like a hunter-gatherer trying to look up at the Sun, and guess that the universe had to be shaped in a way that allowed for nuclear energy...

It made you wonder if maybe twenty thousand million million million meters wasn't so much distance, after all.

There was a step beyond Abstract Reasoning Harry which he could take, given time enough to compose himself and the right surroundings; something beyond Abstract Reasoning Harry, as that was beyond Harry In The Moment. Looking up at the stars, you could try to imagine what the distant descendants of humanity would think of your dilemma—in a hundred million years, when the stars would have spun through great galactic movements into entirely new positions, every constellation scattered. It was an elementary theorem of probability that if you knew what your answer would be after updating on future evidence, you ought to adopt that answer right now. If you *knew* your destination, you were already there. And by analogy, if not quite by theorem, if you could guess what the descendants of humanity would think of something, you ought to go ahead and take that as your own best guess.

From that vantage point the idea of killing off two-thirds of the Wizengamot seemed a lot less appealing than it had a few hours earlier. Even if you *had* to do it, even if you knew for a solid fact that it would be the best thing for magical Britain and that the complete Story of Time would look worse if you didn't do it... even as a necessity, the deaths of sentient beings would still be a tragedy. One more element of the sorrows of Earth; the Most Ancient Earth from which everything had begun, long ago and far away, ever so long ago.

He is not like Grindelwald. There is nothing human left in him. Him you must destroy. Save your fury for that, and that alone—

Harry shook his head slightly, tilting the stars a little in his vision, as he lay on the stone floor looking upward and outward and forward in time. Even if Dumbledore was right, and the true enemy was utterly mad and evil... in a hundred million years the organic lifeform known as Lord Voldemort probably wouldn't seem much different from all the

other bewildered children of Ancient Earth. Whatever Lord Voldemort had done to himself, whatever Dark rituals seemed so horribly irrevocable on a merely human scale, it wouldn't be beyond curing with the technology of a hundred million years. Killing him, even if you *had* to do it to save the lives of others, would be just one more death for future sentient beings to be sad about. How could you look up at the stars, and believe anything else?

Harry stared up at the twinkling lights of Eternity and wondered what the children's children's children would think of what Dumbledore had maybe-done to Narcissa.

But even if you tried framing the question that way, asking what humanity's descendants would think, it still drew only on your own knowledge, not theirs. The answer still came from inside yourself, and it could still be mistaken. If you didn't know the hundredth decimal digit of pi yourself, then you didn't know how the children's children's children would calculate it, for all that the fact was trivial.

*
*

Slowly—he'd been lying there, looking at the stars, for longer than he'd planned—Harry sat up from the ground. Pushing himself to his feet, the muscles protesting, he walked over to the edge of the stone platform at the height of the Ravenclaw tower. The stone crenellations surrounding the edge of the tower weren't high, not high enough to be safe. They were markers, clearly, rather than railings. Harry didn't approach too close to the edge; there was no point in taking chances. Looking down at the Hogwarts grounds below, he was predictably feeling a sense of dizziness, the wobbly affliction called vertigo. His brain was alarmed, it seemed, because the ground below was so *distant*. It might have been fully 50 meters away.

The lesson, it seemed, was that things had to be *incredibly* close by before your brain could comprehend them well enough to feel fear.

It was a rare brain that could feel strongly about anything, if it wasn't close in space, close in time, near at hand, within easy reach...

Before, Harry had imagined that going to Azkaban would require planning and cooperation from a grownup confederate. Portkeys, broomsticks, invisibility spells. Some way of getting to the bottom levels without the Aurors noticing, so he could carve his way into the central pit where the shadows of Death waited.

And that had been enough to put the prospect away, into the future, safely apart from the *now*.

He hadn't realized until today that it might be as simple as finding Fawkes and telling the phoenix that it was time.

Memories were rising up again, memories that Harry could never manage to forget for long. Though the stones beneath his feet were not smooth like metal, though the moonlit sky stretched all around him, somehow it was very easy to imagine himself trapped in a long metal corridor lit by dim orange light.

The night was quiet, quiet enough for memories to be clearly audible.

No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!

No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!

Don't take it away, don't don't don't—

The world blurred, and Harry wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

If *Hermione* had been the one behind that door—

If Hermione had been put in Azkaban, Harry would have called the phoenix and gone there and burned away every last Dementor and it wouldn't have made a single difference how crazy it was or what else he'd wanted to do with his life. That was just—that was—that was just how it was.

And the woman who was behind that door—wasn't there someone, somewhere, to whom she too was precious? Wasn't it only Harry's distance from her life that was preventing his brain from being driven to Azkaban to *save her no matter what*? What would it have taken to compel him? Would he have needed to know her face? Her name? Her favorite color? Would he have been driven to Azkaban to save Tracey Davis? Would he have been compelled there to save Professor McGonagall? Mum and Dad—there wasn't even any question. And that woman had said she was someone's mother. How many people had wished for the

power to break Azkaban? How many prisoners of Azkaban dreamed nightly of such a miraculous rescue?

None. It's a happy thought.

Maybe he *should* harrow Azkaban. All he had to do was find Fawkes and tell him it was time. Visualize the center of the Dementor's pit as he'd seen it from the broomstick, and let the phoenix take him there. Cast the True Patronus Charm at point-blank range and to hell with what came after.

All he had to do was go find Fawkes.

It might be as simple as thinking of the flame, calling for the fire-bird in his heart—

A star flashed in the night.

By the time Harry's eyes had jumped with a reflex action trained on meteor showers, another part of him was surprised that the astronomical phenomenon was still there; a faint star whose brightness was slowly visibly waxing. There was a startled moment when Harry wondered whether he was seeing, not a meteor, but a nova or supernova—could you *see* them getting brighter like that? Was the first stage of a nova supposed to be that yellow-orange color?

Then the new star moved again, and seemed to grow as well as brightening. It looked *closer* suddenly, no longer so far away that distance became moot. Like what you thought was a star, turning out to be an airplane, a lighted form whose shape you could actually see...

...no, not a plane...

The realization seemed to spread out from Harry's chest in a wave of prickling, sweat preparing to break out.

...a bird.

A piercing cry split the night, echoing from the rooftops of Hogwarts.

The approaching creature trailed fire as it flew, shedding golden flames like sparks from its feathers as the mighty wings beat and beat again. Even as it swooped up in a great curve to hover a few paces away from Harry, even as the flames surrounding its passage diminished, the creature seemed no dimmer, no less bright; as though some unseen Sun shone upon it and illuminated it.

Great shining wings red like a sunset, and eyes like incandescent pearls, blazing with golden fire and determination.

The phoenix's beak opened, and let out a great caw that Harry understood as though it had been a spoken word:

COME!

Not even realizing, the boy stumbled back from the edge of the rooftop, eyes still locked on the phoenix, his whole body trembling and tensed, his fists clutching and releasing at his side; stepping back, stepping away.

The phoenix cawed again, a desperate, pleading, sound. It didn't come through in words, this time, but it came through in feelings, an echo of everything that Harry had ever felt about Azkaban and every temptation to *action*, to just *do* something about it, the desperate need to do something *now* and not delay any longer, all spoken in the cry of a bird.

Let's go. It's time. The voice that spoke came from inside Harry, not from the phoenix; from so deep inside it couldn't be given a separate name like 'Gryffindor'.

All he had to do was step forward and touch the phoenix's talons, and it would take him where he needed to be, where he kept thinking he ought to be, down into the central pit of Azkaban. Harry could see the image in his mind, shining with unbearable clarity, the image of himself suddenly smiling with joyous release as he threw all his fears away and *chose*—

"But I—" Harry whispered, not even aware of what he was saying. Harry lifted his shaking hands to wipe at his eyes from which tears had sprung, as the phoenix hovered before him with great wing-sweeps. "But I—there's other people I also have to save, other things I have to do—"

The fire-bird let out a piercing scream, and the boy flinched back as though from a blow. It wasn't a command, it wasn't an objection, it was the *knowledge*—

The corridors lit by dim orange light.

It felt like a tightening compulsion in Harry's chest, the desire to just *do* it and get it over with. He might die, but if he didn't die he could feel *clean* again. Have principles that were more than excuses for inaction. It was *his* life. His to spend, if he chose. He could do it any time he wanted...

...if he wasn't a good person.

*
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The boy stood there on the rooftop, his own eyes locked with two points of fire. The stars might have had time to shift in their constellations while he stood there, agonizing over the decision...

...that wouldn't...

...change.

The boy's eyes flickered once to the stars above; and then he looked at the phoenix.

"Not yet," the boy said in a voice hardly audible. "Not yet. There's too much else I have to do. Please come back later, when I've found others who can cast the True Patronus—in six months, maybe—"

Without word, without sound, a sphere of fire surrounded the bird's form, crackling and blazing with white and crimson veins as though it meant to consume that which lay within; and when the fire dispersed into grey smoke, no phoenix remained.

There was silence on the top of the Ravenclaw tower. The boy gradually lowered his hands from his ears, pausing only to wipe at his wet cheeks.

Slowly, the boy turned—

Then cried out and leapt back and almost fell off the Ravenclaw tower; though the misstep would hardly have mattered, with that other wizard standing there.

"And so it was done," Albus Dumbledore said, almost in a whisper. "So it was done." Fawkes was on his shoulder, staring at where the other phoenix had been with an indecipherable avian gaze.

"What are you doing here?"

"Ah?" said the ancient man standing on the roof-platform's opposite corner. "I felt the presence of a creature Hogwarts did not know, and came to see, of course." Slowly the old wizard's shaking hand came up to remove the half-moon glasses, his other hand wiped at his eyes and

forehead with his robe's sleeve. "I dared—I dared not speak—I knew, I knew this choice above all choices must be your own—"

A strange apprehension was beginning to fill Harry, welling up in him like a sick feeling in his stomach.

"That everything depended on this," Albus Dumbledore said, still in that almost-whisper, "that much I knew. But which choice led into darkness, that I could not guess. At least the choice was your own."

"I don't—" Harry said, and then his voice stopped.

A terrible hypothesis, rising in credibility...

"The phoenix comes," said the old wizard. "To those who would fight, to those who would act even at cost of their lives, the phoenix comes. Phoenixes are not wise, Harry, they know no means to judge us, save witnessing the choice. I thought it was to my death I went, when the phoenix took me to fight Grindelwald. I did not know that Fawkes would sustain me, and heal me, and stay by my side—" The old wizard's voice quavered, for a moment. "It is not spoken of—you should realize, Harry, why it is never spoken of—if the one knew, the phoenix could not judge. But to you, Harry, I may say it now, for the phoenix comes only once."

The old wizard walked across the top of the Ravenclaw tower to where a boy stood rooted in dawning horror, in dawning and utter horror.

In my duel with Grindelwald I could not win, only fight him for long hours until he collapsed in exhaustion; and I would have died of it afterward, if not for Fawkes—

Harry didn't even know he was speaking, until the whisper had escaped him—

"Then I *could* have—"

"Could you have?" said the ancient wizard, his voice sounding far older than his normal tones. "Three times, now, a phoenix has come for my student. One did send hers away, and the grief of it broke her, I think. And the last was cousin to your young friend Lavender Brown, and he—" The old wizard's voice cracked. "He did not return, did poor John, and he saved none of those he meant to save. It is said, among the few scholars of phoenix-lore, that not one in four returns from their ordeal. And even if you did survive—for the life you must lead, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres—the choices you must make and the path you must walk—"

to always hear the phoenix's cries—who is to say it would not have driven you mad?" The old wizard raised his sleeve again, drawing it once more across his face. "I had more joy of Fawkes's companionship, in the days before I fought Voldemort."

The boy did not seem to be listening, all his eyes were on the red-gold bird on the ancient wizard's shoulder. "Fawkes?" the boy said in shaking voice. "Why won't you look at me, Fawkes?"

Fawkes craned his head to peer at the boy curiously, then turned back and resumed gazing at his master.

"See?" said the old wizard. "He does not reject you. Fawkes may not be interested in you in quite that way, now; and he knows—" the wizard smiled wryly, "—that you are not exactly loyal to his master. But one to whom the phoenix comes at all—cannot be one whom a phoenix would dislike." The wizard's voice fell to a whisper again. "There never was a bird seen on Godric Gryffindor's shoulder. Though it is not written even in his secrets, I think he must have sent his phoenix away, before he chose the red and gold for his colors. Perhaps the guilt of it urged him to greater lengths than he ever would have dared otherwise. Or it might have taught him humility, and respect for human frailty, and failure..." The wizard bowed his head. "I truly do not know if your choice was wise. I truly do not know if it was the right thing, or the wrong thing. If I knew, Harry, I would have spoken. But I—" Dumbledore's voice broke, then. "I am nothing but a foolish young boy who has become a foolish old man, and I have no wisdom."

Harry couldn't breathe, the nausea seeming to fill and overflow his whole body, stomach locked solid. He was suddenly and terribly certain that he had failed, in some final sense failed, failed this very night—

The boy whirled and ran out to the curb of the Ravenclaw rooftop. "Come back!" His voice cracked, rising to a shriek. "*Come back!*"

✱
✱

TABOO TRADEOFFS, AFTERMATH III:
DISTANCE

✱
✱

FINAL AFTERMATH:

She came awake with a gasp of horror, she woke with an unvoiced scream on her lips and no words came forth, she could not understand what she had seen, *she could not understand what she had seen—*

“What time is it?” she whispered.

Her golden jeweled alarm clock whispered back, “Around eleven at night. Go back to sleep.”

Her sheets were soaked in sweat, her nightclothes soaked in sweat, she took her wand from beside the pillow and cleaned herself up before she tried to go back to sleep and eventually succeeded.

Sybill Trelawney went back to sleep.

In the Forbidden Forest, a centaur woken by a nameless apprehension ceased scanning the night sky, having found only questions there and no answers; and with a folding of his many legs, Firenze went back to sleep.

In the distant lands of magical Asia, an ancient witch named Fan Tong, sleeping the tired days away, told her anxious great-great-grandson that she was fine, it had only been a nightmare, and went back to sleep.

In a land where Muggleborns received no letters of any kind, a girl-child too young to have a name of her own was rocked in the arms of her annoyed but loving mother until she stopped crying and went back to sleep.

None of them slept well.

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