

HARRY POTTER

AND THE METHODS OF RATIONALITY



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Chapter 38 – 63

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

THE CARDINAL SIN

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

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

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

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

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

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

The warmth flowed through him.

And the Boy-Who-Lived was back.

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

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

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

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

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

"*Harry Potter?*" gasped the vendor.

"No, Mr. Durian," said Harry, eyes dipping briefly to the man's nametag, "just an amazing imitation—"

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

SLOSHED SEER SPILLS SECRETS:
DARK LORD TO RETURN,

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

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

"Oh, no worries, Mr. Potter!" said the vendor hastily, waving his hands. "It's—never mind, just—"

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

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

"It's free," said the vendor, "for *you*, I mean—"

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

The vendor took the coins, and Harry read on.

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

"Not me," said the vendor.

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

"Yup," said the vendor. "Pretty clever disguise, innit?"

"And I'm secretly sixty-five years old."

"You don't look half that," the vendor said amiably.

"And I'm betrothed to Hermione Granger, *and* Bellatrix Black, *and* Luna Lovegood, and oh yes, Draco Malfoy too..."

"Goin' ter be one interesting wedding," said the vendor.

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

The vendor stared at Harry.

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

"You," said the vendor.

Harry wandered off to read his newspaper.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry looked up.

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

Lucius inclined his head courteously, sending his long white hair drifting over his shoulders. The man was still carrying that same cane, lacquered in black with a silver snake's head for its handle; and something about his grip silently said *this is a weapon of deadly power, not I am feeble and leaning on this*. His face was expressionless.

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

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

"I have received none of your owls," Harry said calmly. "Dumbledore intercepted them, I presume. But I would not have answered them if

I had, except through Draco. For me to deal with you directly, without Draco's knowledge, would trespass on our friendship."

Please go away, please go away...

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

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

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

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

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

There was a slight pause.

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

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

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

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

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

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

in a public train station anyway—

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

"*What?*" whispered Lucius. His face showed sheer shock.

Then—

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

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

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

"Madam Longbottom," Lucius said icily.

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

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

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

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

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

"*What?*" blurted Neville.

"I was under the *Imperius*, young man," said Lucius, now sounding tired. "The Dark Lord could hardly have begun recruiting among pure-blood families without the support of House Malfoy. I demurred, and he simply made sure of me. His own Death Eaters did not know it until afterward, hence the false Mark I bear; though since I did not truly consent, it does not bind me. Some of the Death Eaters still believe I was foremost

among their number, and for the peace of this nation I let them believe it, to keep them controlled. But I was not such a fool as to support that ill-fated adventurer of my own choice—”

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

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

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

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

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

Harry met the gaze, and said nothing.

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

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

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

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

“How *dare* you!” she hissed.

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

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

A silence followed.

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

Harry shrugged helplessly. Then he looked at Neville.

There was sweat on Neville's forehead.

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

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

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

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

Neville groaned, but said nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

The two boys sat quietly for a moment.

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

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

*
*

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

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

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

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

Oh, hell...

"What did you talk about?" demanded Draco.

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

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

"I don't know, actually," said Harry, "so it's very important that I *not* just make stuff up—"

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

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

PRETENDING TO BE WISE, PART I

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

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

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

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

“Thank you for coming, Harry,” said the Headmaster. The old wizard rose from his throne, began to slowly pace through the room and the

strange devices. "First, do you have with you the notes of yesterday's encounter with Lucius Malfoy?"

"Notes?" blurted Harry.

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

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

"All right," said the Headmaster, "from memory then."

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

Harry finished his recollections honestly.

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

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

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

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

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

Not like the Headmaster blackmailing Zabini... for which they had only Zabini's word, and Zabini was wildly untrustworthy, in fact it was

hard to see why Zabini *wouldn't* just tell the story that got him the most sympathy from Professor Quirrell...

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

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

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

"Many of those letters," the old wizard said quietly, "will be asking you for things you cannot give. I have not read them, of course, only turned them back to their senders undelivered. But I know, for I receive them too. And you are too young, Harry, to have your heart broken six times before breakfast each morning."

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

"Thank you," Harry muttered.

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

"Transfiguration?" said Harry, surprised and flattered.

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

*
*

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

"Professor Quirrell is unable to cast the Patronus Charm himself," said Dumbledore, as he paced slowly through the devices. "Which is never a good sign. But then, he *volunteered* that fact to me in the course of

demanding that outside instructors be brought in to teach the Patronus Charm to every student who wished to learn; he offered to pay the expense himself, if I would not. This impressed me greatly. But now he insists on bringing in a Dementor—”

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

Now the Headmaster was giving Harry a strange look.

“*In character?*” said the old wizard.

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

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

Harry frowned. “Then I really don’t see why you’re suspicious—”

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

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

“Me?” said Harry.

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

Was Harry *ever* going to live that down?

“Headmaster,” Harry said wearily, “I know it doesn’t sound good, but in all seriousness: I’m not evil, I’m just very creative—”

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

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

Dumbledore was asking him to outwit Professor Quirrell.

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

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

Point three...

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

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

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

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

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

How much does he know...?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And then he thought of the Dementor.

And it was obvious.

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

Dumbledore stared at Harry for a moment, and then gave a slow nod. "Yes..." said the Headmaster. "And I do believe I know what it might be a

distraction *from*, if Professor Quirrell means ill... thank you, Harry."

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

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

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

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

Harry stared at the Headmaster in surprise.

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

"Yes!" said Dumbledore. "My own great foe was Grindelwald, and *him* I understood very well indeed. Grindelwald was my dark mirror, the man I could so easily have been, had I given in to the temptation to believe that I was a good person, and therefore always in the right. *For the greater good*, that was his slogan; and he truly believed it himself, even as he tore at all Europe like a wounded animal. And him, I defeated in the end. But then after him came Voldemort, to destroy everything I had protected in Britain." The hurt was plain now in Dumbledore's voice, exposed upon his face. "He committed acts worse by far than Grindelwald's worst, horror for the sake of horror. I sacrificed everything only to hold him back, and I still don't understand *why!* *Why*, Harry? Why did he do it? He was never my destined foe, but yours, so if you have any guesses at all, Harry, please tell me! *Why?*"

Harry stared down at his hands. The truth was that Harry hadn't read up on the Dark Lord yet, and right now he hadn't the tiniest clue. And somehow that didn't seem like an answer the Headmaster wanted to hear. "Too many Dark rituals, maybe? In the beginning he thought he'd do just

one, but it sacrificed part of his good side, and that made him less reluctant to perform other Dark rituals, so he did more and more rituals in a positive feedback cycle until he ended up as a tremendously powerful monster—”

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

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

“Have you *no* wisdom to share?” said Dumbledore. There was pleading in the old wizard’s voice, almost begging.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Headmaster nodded gravely, and said, "Indeed."

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

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

Great.

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

"Er," said Harry, "sorry, I've got to back the Dark Wizards on that one."

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

"*What?*" said Dumbledore.

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

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

"Okay," said Harry, "let me put it this way. Do you *want* to die? Because if so, there's this Muggle thing called a suicide prevention hotline—"

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

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

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

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

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

"I have lived a hundred and ten years," the old wizard said quietly (taking his beard out of the bowl, and jiggling it to shake out the color). "I have seen and done a great many things, too many of which I wish I had never seen or done. And yet I do not regret being alive, for watching my

students grow is a joy that has not begun to wear on me. But I would not wish to live so long that it does! What would you *do* with eternity, Harry?"

Harry took a deep breath. "Meet all the interesting people in the world, read all the good books and then write something even better, celebrate my first grandchild's tenth birthday party on the Moon, celebrate my first great-great-great grandchild's hundredth birthday party around the Rings of Saturn, learn the deepest and final rules of Nature, understand the nature of consciousness, find out why anything exists in the first place, visit other stars, discover aliens, create aliens, rendezvous with everyone for a party on the other side of the Milky Way once we've explored the whole thing, meet up with everyone else who was born on Old Earth to watch the Sun finally go out, and I used to worry about finding a way to escape this universe before it ran out of negentropy but I'm a lot more hopeful now that I've discovered the so-called laws of physics are just optional guidelines."

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

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

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

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

"Perhaps," the old wizard said peacefully. "I would not wish to die

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

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

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Toot. Beep. Thud.

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

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

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

"All right," Harry said, trying to keep his voice calm, "I'll hear out your evidence, because *that's what a scientist does*. But first, Headmaster, let me tell you a little story." Harry's voice was trembling. "You know, when I got here, when I got off the train from King's Cross, I don't mean yesterday but back in September, when I got off the train then, Headmaster, I'd never seen a ghost. I wasn't *expecting* ghosts. So when I saw them, Headmaster, I did something really dumb. I *jumped to conclusions*. I, I thought there *was* an afterlife, I thought no one had ever really died, I

thought that everyone the human species had ever lost was really fine after all, I thought that wizards could talk to people who'd passed on, that it just took the right spell to summon them, that wizards could *do* that, I thought I could meet my parents who died for me, and tell them that I'd heard about their sacrifice and that I'd begun to call them my mother and father—"

"Harry," whispered Dumbledore. Water glittered in the old wizard's eyes. He took a step closer across the office—

"And *then*," spat Harry, the fury coming fully into his voice, the cold rage at the universe for being like that and at himself for being so stupid, "I asked Hermione and she said that they were just *afterimages*, burned into the stone of the castle by the death of a wizard, like the silhouettes left on the walls of Hiroshima. And I should have known! I should have known without even having to ask! I shouldn't have believed it even for all of thirty seconds! Because if people had souls there wouldn't be any such thing as brain damage, if your soul could go on speaking after your whole brain was gone, how could damage to the left cerebral hemisphere take away your ability to talk? And Professor McGonagall, when she told me about how my parents had died, she didn't act like they'd just gone away on a long trip to another country, like they'd emigrated to Australia back in the days of sailing ships, which is the way people would act if they *actually knew* that death was just going somewhere else, if they had hard evidence for an afterlife, instead of making stuff up to console themselves, it would change *everything*, it wouldn't *matter* that everyone had lost someone in the war, it would be a little sad but not *horrible*! And I'd already seen that people in the wizarding world didn't act like that! So I should have known better! And that was when I knew that my parents were really dead and gone forever and ever, that there wasn't anything left of them, that I'd never get a chance to meet them and, and, and the other children thought I was crying because I was *scared of ghosts*—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In all politeness, Harry raised his hand.

"Yes?" the Headmaster said reluctantly.

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

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

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

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

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

Dumbledore stared at Harry.

Harry gazed equably back at the Headmaster.

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

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

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

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

Dumbledore appeared to be fighting a struggle within himself. "Harry," the old wizard said, his voice rising, "this is a dangerous road you are walking, I am not sure I do the right thing by saying this, but I

must wrench you from this way! Harry, how could Voldemort have survived the death of his body if he did not have a soul?"

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

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

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

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

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Tick, crackle, fzzzt...

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

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

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

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

"Bwa ha ha!" said Harry.

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

"Well *obviously* I'm not going to popularize a method of immortality that requires killing people! That would defeat the *entire point!*"

There was a startled pause.

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

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

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

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

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

"And you think *you're* not afraid of death?" Harry said, not even trying to mask the incredulity in his voice.

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

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

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

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

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

in his voice.

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

A look of puzzlement crossed the old wizard's face. "What do you mean?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh?" said Harry. "Understand what?"

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

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

"Tell me, Harry," said the old wizard, "will *you* become a monster?"

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

"Why not?" said the old wizard.

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

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

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

CHAPTER FORTY

PRETENDING TO BE WISE, PART II

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

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

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

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

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

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

Professor Quirrell's expression was drawn and thoughtful. "No," Professor Quirrell said, "you should *not* have told the Headmaster about

your conversation with Lord Malfoy. Please try to think faster next time, Mr. Potter.”

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

“Lord Malfoy is Albus Dumbledore’s opponent,” said Professor Quirrell. “At least for this present time. All Britain is their chessboard, all wizards their pieces. Consider: Lord Malfoy threatened to throw away everything, abandon his game, to take vengeance on you if Mr. Malfoy was hurt. In which case, Mr. Potter...?”

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

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

Professor Quirrell shrugged, and sipped his tea.

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

“Professor Quirrell,” Harry said suddenly, “is there an afterlife?”

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

The Defense Professor raised his cup to his lips again before answering. His face was thoughtful. “If there is, Mr. Potter,” said Professor Quir-

rell, "then quite a few wizards have wasted a great deal of effort in their searches for immortality."

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

Professor Quirrell set down his teacup with a small, high-pitched tacking sound on his saucer. "Some of those wizards were reasonably intelligent, Mr. Potter, so you may take it that the existence of an afterlife is not obvious. I have looked into the matter myself. There have been many claims of the sort which hope and fear would be expected to produce. Among those reports whose veracity is not in doubt, there is nothing which could not be the result of mere wizardry. There are certain devices said to communicate with the dead, but these, I suspect, only project an image from the mind; the result seems indistinguishable from memory because it is memory. The alleged spirits tell no secrets they knew in life, nor could have learned after death, which are not known to the wielder—"

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

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

Harry nodded.

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

"Heck no," said Harry. "Didn't fool me for a second."

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

"I don't think the Headmaster believed it himself, actually," Harry said. He sipped his own tea again. "He asked me what I could possibly do with eternity, gave me the usual line about it being boring, and he

didn't seem to see any conflict between that and his own claim to have an immortal soul. In fact, he gave me a whole long lecture about how awful it was to want immortality before he claimed to have an immortal soul. I can't quite visualize what must have been going on inside his head, but I don't think he *actually* had a mental model of himself continuing forever in the afterlife..."

The temperature of the room seemed to be dropping.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Defense Professor laughed. Harry didn't.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

FRONTAL OVERRIDE

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

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

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

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

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EARLIER:

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

Only a single soldier now stood between them and Harry, a Slytherin boy named Samuel Clamons, whose hand was clenched white around his wand, held upward to sustain his Prismatic Wall. The boy's breathing was coming rapidly, but his face showed the same cold determination that lit the eyes of his general, Harry Potter, who was standing behind the Prismatic Wall at the dead end of the corridor next to an open window, with his hands held mysteriously behind his back.

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

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

You couldn't bring devices into the game from outside, but you could Transfigure anything you wanted *during* the game, so long as it was safe. And that just wasn't fair when you were fighting a boy raised by scientists,

who knew about things like ball bearings and skateboards and bungee cords.

And so it had come to this.

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a brief, tense silence.

And then Harry spoke.

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

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

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

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

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

Harry was already in motion.

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

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The icy wind howled around them.

Draco's arms were already starting to feel tired.

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

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

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

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

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

Professor Quirrell was watching them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stick. Plop.

"How sweet of him," said Granger.

Stick. Plop.

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

Stick. Plop.

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

Stick. Plop.

The icy wind howled around them.

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

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

Then you would be *sadly mistaken*.

"*Luminos!*" shouted Draco.

"*Luminos!*" shouted Granger.

"*Luminos!*" shouted Draco.

"*Luminos!*" shouted Granger.

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

Until Granger slipped.

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

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

There was a hard, painful impact, not just Draco's weight hitting the rooftop but some of Granger's weight too, and if she'd hit just a little bit

closer to the edge they could have made it, but instead her body tipped again and her legs slipped off and her other hand grabbed frantically...

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

"Hermione!" Harry's voice shrieked distantly.

"Draco," whispered Granger's voice, and Draco looked down.

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

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

It should have been the easiest thing in the world.

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

She wouldn't even be *hurt!*

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

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

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

Oh, be rational...

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

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

AFTERMATH, 1:

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

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

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

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

All the listening girls except Pansy Parkinson nodded.

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

There was a stunned pause.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You mean—?" gasped Tracey.

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

"The next Drop Lord!" said Tracey.

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

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AFTERMATH, 2:

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

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

"Um," said Harry Potter's voice.

Hermione kept reading.

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

It had been quite an entertaining experience, in fact.

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

She kept reading the book in silence.

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

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

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

COURAGE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They silently walked toward the edge of the roof.

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

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

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

There was a pause.

Then—

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

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

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COURAGE

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

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

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

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

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

"Okay!" said Draco, and let go of Harry's arm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry remembered the last thing he'd seen, the falling body, and managed to gasp, "Professor... Quirrell..."

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

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

Harry carefully balanced himself, and nodded to the man.

He let go, and Harry promptly fell over.

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

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

"Not murder," said a strained voice. "Just stupidity."

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

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

"Good heavens!" gasped the man. "You shouldn't be—"

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

Professor Quirrell didn't stand up, though.

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

"What happened?" said the man.

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

Oh.

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

"Sir!" said the man—Mr. Lupin, apparently. "You should not say such things to the boy!"

"Who is—" Harry started to say.

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

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

"Where did we meet?" said Harry.

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

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

unspeakably evil, obviously; but that didn't mean Hermione was doing the right thing *now* by denying sentient beings the drudgery they had been shaped to enjoy.)

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

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

"Thank you for coming," the man said.

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

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

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

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

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

"Ah," said Mr. Lupin. And then, "Ah" again. He seemed to be blinking rather hard. "I... that is good to hear, Harry, Dumbledore would tell none of us where you were... I was afraid he might think you ought to have wicked stepparents, or some such..."

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

"A tall order," Mr. Lupin said. He wiped a hand across his forehead. "Well, let us begin at the beginning. When you were born, James was so happy that he couldn't touch his wand without it glowing gold, for a whole

week. And even after that, whenever he held you, or saw Lily holding you, or just thought of you, it would happen again—”

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

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

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

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

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

“Was my father a bully?” said Harry.

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

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

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

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

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

“I'm a young boy,” Harry said, “and I judge *myself*.”

Remus blinked twice at that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Remus nodded, water glittering in his own eyes now. "I think, Harry, that if Peter had known it would end that way—" the man's voice choked up. "Peter was more afraid of the Dark Lord than any of us, and if he'd known it would end that way, I don't think he would have done it. But Peter knew the *risk*, Harry, he knew the risk was real, that it *could* happen,

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

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

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

Harry nodded.

A brief silence fell.

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

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

"That means there *is* something," said Harry.

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

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

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

Harry couldn't have put his finger on exactly what tipped him off; it might have been something about the exact tone of nervousness in Remus's voice, or the way the man had said *when you're older*, that sparked the sudden leap of Harry's intuition...

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

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

"They were lovers, weren't they?"

There was an awkward pause.

Remus gave a slow, grave nod.

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

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

HUMANISM, PART I

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Expecto Patronum!" cried Harry.

Nothing happened.

Not a single flicker of light.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Did Anthony love his own father more?

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

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

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

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

Instead Harry turned around, and stalked to where the other failures were sitting. The other students whose wandwork had also been proclaimed perfect, and who were now supposed to be searching for happier thoughts; by the looks of them they weren't making much progress. There were many robes there trimmed in dark blue, and a handful of red, and one lone Hufflepuff girl who was still crying. The Slytherins hadn't even bothered showing up, except for Daphne Greengrass and Tracey Davis, who were still trying to get the gestures.

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

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

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

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

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

Harry hadn't been able to cast the Patronus Charm no matter what happy thought he tried. People hadn't seemed surprised by that, which

made it even worse. Hermione hadn't been able to do it either. People had been *very* surprised by that, and Harry had seen her starting to get the same sidelong looks as him. The other Ravenclaws who'd failed weren't getting those looks. But Hermione was the Sunshine General, and her fans were treating it like she'd failed them, somehow, like she'd betrayed a promise she'd never made.

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

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

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

It was the day the Dementor came to Hogwarts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry...

Harry didn't want that.

To be in that book.

Harry didn't want that.

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

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

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

"An otter," Hermione said at once.

"An *otter*?" Harry whispered incredulously.

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

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

Hermione smiled, but didn't say anything.

And the vast doors of Hogwarts swung open.

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

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HUMANISM I

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

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

Harry squinted.

Something...

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

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

Up to twenty seconds of exposure at five paces was certainly safe, even for an eleven-year-old wizard with weak resistance and a still-maturing brain. There was a lot of variance in how hard the Dementor's power hit people, which was another thing not quite understood; but twenty seconds was definitely safe.

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

It was harsh training even by the standards of Hogwarts, where the way you learned to fly on a hippogriff was by being tossed on one and told to get going. Harry was no fan of overprotectiveness, and if you looked at the difference in maturity between a fourth-year in Hogwarts

and a fourteen-year-old Muggle, it was clear that Muggles were smothering their children... but even Harry had started to wonder if this was pushing it. Not every hurt could be healed afterward.

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

The Headmaster was taking security seriously, and so were the three Aurors standing guard. Their leader was an Asianish-looking man, solemn without being grim, Auror Komodo, whose wand never left his hand. His Patronus, an orangutan of solid moonlight, paced back and forth between the Dementor and the first-years awaiting their turn; beside the orangutan moved the bright white panther of Auror Butnaru, a man with a piercing gaze, long black hair in a ponytail, and a long braided goatee. Those two Aurors, and their two Patronuses, were all watching the Dementor. On the opposite side of the students was the resting Auror Goryanof, tall and thin and pale and unshaven, sitting back on a chair he'd conjured without word or wand, and maintaining an absentminded pokerface as he scanned the entire scene. Professor Quirrell had shown up not long after the first-years began their attempts, and his eyes never strayed far from Harry. The tiny Professor Flitwick, who had been a champion duellist, was fiddling absently with his wand; and *his* eyes, peering out from within the huge puffy beard that served as his face, stayed focused on Professor Quirrell.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry spun around to look—

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

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

Shut up, Harry said to the thought, *do you want us to be a Dark Wizard? What's the point? You're going to end up as one eventually.*

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

It's a placebo effect, Harry told himself again. *The Dementor can't actually get to me through three corporeal Patronuses, I'm just imagining what I think it's like. When I actually face the Dementor, it'll feel completely different, and then I'll know I was just being silly before.*

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

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

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

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

She looked stressed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Professor Quirrell said, in tones that did not invite further comments, "I am allowed to teach the Killing Curse to students who wish to learn it. Which will render them considerably safer from Dark Wizards and other pests, and it is foolish to think they will otherwise know no deadly magics." Professor Quirrell paused, his eyes narrowing. "Headmaster, I respectfully observe that you are not looking well. I suggest leaving the remainder of the day's task to Professor Flitwick."

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

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

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

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

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

Hermione straightened her shoulders, and followed him.

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

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

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

Hermione raised her wand into position for the first gestures.

The Headmaster's phoenix winked out of existence.

And Hermione gave a tiny, pathetic shriek, flinched—

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

Nothing happened.

Hermione turned and ran.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" said the Headmaster's deeper voice, and the silver phoenix blazed back to life.

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

"*Hermione!*" Susan yelled it, and Hannah, and Daphne, and Ernie, and they all started to run toward her; even as Harry, who was always thinking one step ahead, spun on his own heel and ran for the table with the chocolate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"All his tastiest parts first," said Hermione, "it would—it would eat—" Hermione blinked. Some sanity seemed to come back into her eyes. Then she started crying.

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

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

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

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

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

It was the worst thing anyone had yet described seeing. Neville had been able to produce a small flicker of light from his wand before, but he

had, intelligently and with great presence of mind, turned and run away instead of trying to cast his own Patronus Charm.

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

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

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

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

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

"Ah," Harry said. "Logical."

Something strange flickered in Professor Quirrell's eyes, then, as he looked at Harry. "Let us hope," Professor Quirrell said, "that you succeed upon this try, Mr. Potter. For if you do, the Headmaster may teach you his trick of using a Patronus to send messages that cannot be forged or intercepted, and the military importance of that is impossible to overstate. It would be a tremendous advantage to the Chaos Legion, and someday, I suspect, this entire country. But if you do *not* succeed, Mr. Potter... well, I shall understand."

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

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

And then it was Harry's turn.

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

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

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

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

What is my worst memory...?

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

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

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

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

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

The Headmaster's voice was also calm. "The Dementors are creatures of fear, and as your fear of the Dementor diminishes, so does the fear-someness of its form. I see a tall, thin, naked man. He is not decaying. He is only slightly painful to look upon. That is all. What do you see, Harry?"

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

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

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

Harry looked under the cloak and saw...

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

Just that it was far worse than any decaying mummy.

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

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

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

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

Why am I still here?

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

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

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

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

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

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

The bright silver shining phoenix vanished.

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

FEAR / COLD / DARKNESS

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

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

Harry's wand came up in the final brandish.

It felt wrong.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Avadakedavra."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a hideous silence.

Lord Voldemort began to laugh, horrible contemptuous laughter.

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

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

"Avadakedavra."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a moment of frozen horror.

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

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

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

Hermione didn't know what to do, she didn't know what to do, she didn't understand what was happening, and the most powerful wizard

in the world seemed equally at a loss.

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

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

Horror and confusion and sudden babble.

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

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

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

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

Seconds ticked past, uncounted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was no time for deciding, Harry was dying.

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

She started to run toward the Dementor.

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

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

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

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

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The eyes opened, dead and vacant.

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

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

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

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

HUMANISM, PART II

“Fawkes,” said Albus Dumbledore, his voice cracking, “help him, please—”

A brilliant creature of red-gold shuffled into the field of vision, looking down quizzically; and it began to croon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry spat the chocolate back out again.

"Go away," said a voice so empty it wasn't even cold.

...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hermione saw the looks of shock that crossed their faces.

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

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

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

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

But if that person was *already there*—

Does the Headmaster know?

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

Words came into her mind.

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

You know, thought Hermione. *About his dark side.*

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

What can we—

I have a plan, sent the Headmaster. *Patience.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

The thought came to Hermione—

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

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CHAPTER 44

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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HUMANISM II

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

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

HUMANISM, PART III

Fawkes's song gently trailed off into nothing.

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

There were intakes of breath from all around him.

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

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

Fawkes cawed at him.

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

Fawkes bobbed its head in the direction of the Dementor.

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

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

Harry climbed to his feet and turned.

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

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

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

The peace of the phoenix lingered.

Harry turned back. "Hermione?" he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fawkes nuzzled his cheek, briefly.

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

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

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

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

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

"They are not undying," said the Headmaster. The words mild, the gaze sharp. "They do not possess eternal life. They are wounds in the world, and attacking a wound only makes it larger."

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

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

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

"I see," Harry said.

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

The peace faded, a little.

The warmth faded, a little.

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

"Yep," Harry said. "Still alive."

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

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

That started a bit of an argument, in which Professor Quirrell was right and everyone else was wrong. The Defense Professor pointed out

that, despite the understandable emotions of all concerned, the chance of a similar mishap occurring to any other student verged on the infinitesimal; the more so as they now knew to avoid mischances with wands. And meanwhile, there were other students who needed to take their own best chance at casting a corporeal Patronus Charm, or else learn the feeling of a Dementor so they could flee, and discover their own degree of vulnerability...

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

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

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

And just like that, it was obvious.

Harry looked at the tarnished, slightly corroded cage.

He saw what lay beneath the tall, tattered cloak.

That was it, then.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Fawkes told me to," Harry said.

This did not overcome all the opposition, despite the look of shock it produced on Dumbledore's face. The argument went on, and it was starting to wear the edges off the phoenix's remaining peace, which annoyed Harry, though only a little.

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

This did not prove persuasive either.

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

There was an appalled pause at this. It seemed like a good time to play his trump card.

"I don't mind if the Headmaster keeps his own Patronus up," Harry said. *For I will be in the presence of a Dementor just the same, Patronus or no.*

There was confusion at this, even Professor Quirrell looked puzzled; but the Headmaster finally acceded, since it didn't seem likely that Harry could be hurt through four Patronuses.

If the Dementor could not reach through your Patronus on some level, Albus Dumbledore, you would not see a naked man painful to look upon...

Harry didn't say it out loud, for obvious reasons.

And they began to walk toward the Dementor.

"Headmaster," Harry said, "suppose the Ravenclaw door asked you this riddle: What lies at the center of a Dementor? What would you say?"

"Fear," said the Headmaster.

It was a simple enough mistake. The Dementor approached, and the fear came over you. The fear hurt, you felt the fear weakening you, you wanted the fear to go away.

It was natural to think the fear was the problem.

So they'd concluded that the Dementor was a creature of pure fear, that there was nothing there to fear but fear itself, that the Dementor couldn't hurt you if you weren't afraid...

But...

What lies at the center of a Dementor?

Fear.

What is so horrible that the mind refuses to see it?

Fear.

What is impossible to kill?

Fear.

...it didn't quite fit, once you thought about it.

Though it was clear enough why people would be reluctant to look beyond the first answer.

People *understood* fear.

People knew what they were supposed to *do* about fear.

So, faced with a Dementor, it wouldn't exactly be comforting to ask: "What if the fear is just a side effect rather than the main problem?"

They had come very close to the Dementor's cage guarded by four Patronuses, when there came sharp intakes of breath from the three Aurors and Professor Quirrell. Everyone's faces turned to look at the Dementor, seeming to listen; there was horror on Auror Goryanof's face.

Then Professor Quirrell raised his head, his face hard, and spat toward the Dementor.

"It did not like having its prey taken from it, I suppose," Dumbledore said quietly. "Well. If it becomes necessary, Quirinus, there will always be a refuge for you at Hogwarts."

"What did it say?" said Harry.

Every head swung to stare at him.

"You didn't hear it...?" Dumbledore said.

Harry shook his head.

"It said to me," said Professor Quirrell, "that it knew me, and that it would hunt me down someday, wherever I tried to hide." His face was rigid, showing no fright.

"Ah," Harry said. "I wouldn't worry about that, Professor Quirrell." *It's not like Dementors can actually talk, or think; the structure they have is borrowed from your own mind and expectations...*

Now everyone was giving him very strange looks. The Aurors were glancing nervously at each other, at the Dementor, at Harry.

And they stood directly before the Dementor's cage.

"They are wounds in the world," Harry said. "It's just a wild guess, but I'm guessing the one who said that was Godric Gryffindor."

"Yes..." said Dumbledore. "How did you know?"

It is a common misconception, thought Harry, that all the best rationalists are Sorted into Ravenclaw, leaving none for other Houses. This is not so; being Sorted into Ravenclaw indicates that your strongest virtue is curiosity, wondering and desiring to know the true answer. And this is not the only virtue a rationalist needs. Sometimes you have to work hard on a problem, and stick to it for a while. Sometimes you need a clever plan for finding out. And sometimes what you need more than anything else to see an answer, is the courage to face it...

Harry's gaze went to what lay beneath the cloak, the horror far worse than any decaying mummy. Rowena Ravenclaw might also have known, for it was an obvious enough riddle once you saw it as a riddle.

And it was also obvious why the Patronuses were animals. The animals didn't know, and so were sheltered from the fear.

But Harry knew, and would always know, and would never be able to forget. He'd tried to teach himself to face reality without flinching, and though Harry had not yet mastered that art, still those grooves had been worn into his mind, the learned reflex to look *toward* the painful thought instead of away. Harry would never be able to forget by thinking warm happy thoughts about something else, and that was why the spell hadn't worked for him.

So Harry would think a warm happy thought that *wasn't* about something else.

Harry drew forth his wand that Professor Flitwick had returned to him, put his feet into the beginning stance for the Patronus Charm.

Within his mind, Harry discarded the last remnants of the peace of the phoenix, put aside the calm, the dreamlike state, remembered instead Fawkes's piercing cry, and roused himself for battle. Called upon all the pieces and elements of himself to awaken. Raised up within himself all the strength that the Patronus Charm could ever draw upon, to put himself into the right frame of mind for the final warm and happy thought; remembered all bright things.

The books his father had bought him.

Mum's smile when Harry had handmade her a mother's day card, an elaborate thing that had used half a pound of spare electronics parts from the garage to flash lights and beep a little tune, and had taken him three days to make.

Professor McGonagall telling him that his parents had died well, protecting him. As they had.

Realizing that Hermione was keeping up with him and even running faster, that they could be true rivals and friends.

Coaxing Draco out of the darkness, watching him slowly move toward the light.

Neville and Seamus and Lavender and Dean and everyone else who looked up to him, everyone that he would have fought to protect if anything threatened Hogwarts.

Everything that made life worth living.

His wand rose into the starting position for the Patronus Charm.

Harry thought of the stars, the image that had almost held off the Dementor even without a Patronus. Only this time, Harry added the missing ingredient, he'd never truly seen it but he'd seen the pictures and the video. The Earth, blazing blue and white with reflected sunlight as it hung in space, amid the black void and the brilliant points of light. It belonged there, within that image, because it was what gave everything else its meaning. The Earth was what made the stars significant, made them more than uncontrolled fusion reactions, because it was Earth that

would someday colonize the galaxy, and fulfill the promise of the night sky.

Would they still be plagued by Dementors, the children's children's children, the distant descendants of humankind as they strode from star to star? No. Of course not. The Dementors were only little nuisances, paling into nothingness in the light of that promise; not unkillable, not invincible, not even close. You had to put up with little nuisances, if you were one of the lucky and unlucky few to be born on Earth; on Ancient Earth, as it would be remembered someday. That too was part of what it meant to be alive, if you were one of the tiny handful of sentient beings born into the beginning of all things, before intelligent life had come fully into its power. That the much vaster future depended on what you did here, now, in the earliest days of dawn, when there was still so much darkness to be fought, and temporary nuisances like Dementors.

Mum and Dad, Hermione's friendship and Draco's journey, Neville and Seamus and Lavender and Dean, the blue sky and brilliant Sun and all bright things, the Earth, the stars, the promise, everything humanity was and everything it would become...

On the wand, Harry's fingers moved into their starting positions; he was ready, now, to think the right sort of warm and happy thought.

And Harry's eyes stared directly at that which lay beneath the tattered cloak, looked straight at that which had been named Dementor. The void, the emptiness, the hole in the universe, the absence of color and space, the open drain through which warmth poured out of the world.

The fear it exuded stole away all happy thoughts, its closeness drained your power and strength, its kiss would destroy everything that you were.

I know you now, Harry thought as his wand twitched once, twice, thrice and four times, as his fingers slid exactly the right distances, I comprehend your nature, you symbolize Death, through some law of magic you are a shadow that Death casts into the world.

And Death is not something I will ever embrace.

It is only a childish thing, that the human species has not yet outgrown.

And someday...

We'll get over it...

And people won't have to say goodbye any more...

The wand rose up and leveled straight at the Dementor.

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

The thought exploded from him like a breaking dam, surged down his arm into his wand, burst from it as blazing white light. Light that became corporeal, took on shape and substance.

A figure with two arms, two legs, and a head, standing upright; the animal *Homo sapiens*, the shape of a human being.

Glowing brighter and brighter as Harry poured all his strength into his spell, blazing with incandescent light brighter than the fading sunset, the Aurors and Professor Quirrell shielding their eyes in shock—

And someday when the descendants of humanity have spread from star to star, they won't tell the children about the history of Ancient Earth until they're old enough to bear it; and when they learn they'll weep to hear that such a thing as Death had ever once existed!

The figure of a human shone more brilliant now than the noonday Sun, so radiant that Harry could feel the warmth of it on his skin; and Harry sent out all his defiance at the shadow of Death, opening all the floodgates inside him to make that bright shape blaze even brighter and yet brighter.

You are not invincible, and someday the human species will end you.

I will end you if I can, by the power of mind and magic and science.

I won't cower in fear of Death, not while I have a chance of winning.

I won't let Death touch me, I won't let Death touch the ones I love.

And even if you do end me before I end you,

Another will take my place, and another,

Until the wound in the world is healed at last...

Harry lowered his wand, and the bright figure of a human faded away.

Slowly, he exhaled.

Like waking up from a dream, like opening his eyes after sleep, Harry's gaze moved away from the cage, he looked around and saw that everyone was staring at him.

Albus Dumbledore was staring at him.

Professor Quirrell was staring at him.

The Auror trio was staring at him.

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HUMANISM III

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They were all looking at him like they'd just seen him destroy a De-mentor.

The tattered cloak lay empty within the cage.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

HUMANISM, PART IV

The last tip of the Sun was sinking below the horizon, the red light fading from the treetops, only the blue sky illuminating the six people standing upon the winter-dried and snow-spotted grass, near a vacant cage on whose floor lay an empty, tattered cloak.

Harry felt... well, *normal* again. Sane-ish. The spell hadn't undone the day and its damage, hadn't made the injuries as if they had never been, but his hurts had been... bandaged, meliorated? It was hard to describe.

Dumbledore was also looking healthier, though not fully restored. The old wizard's head turned for a moment, locked eyes with Professor Quirrell, then looked back to Harry. "Harry," Dumbledore said, "are you about to collapse in exhaustion and possibly die?"

"No, strangely enough," Harry said. "That took something out of me, but a lot less than I thought it would." *Or maybe it gave something back, as well as taking...* "Honestly, I expected my body to be hitting the ground with a thud about now."

There was a distinct body-hitting-the-ground-with-a-thuddish sort of sound.

"Thank you for taking care of that, Quirinus," said Dumbledore to Professor Quirrell, who was now standing above and behind the unconscious forms of the three Aurors. "I confess I am still feeling a bit peaky. Though I shall handle the Memory Charms myself."

Professor Quirrell inclined his head, and then looked at Harry. "I will omit a good deal of useless incredulity," said Professor Quirrell, "remarks to the effect that Merlin himself failed to do that, et cetera. Let us go straight to asking the important question. What the sweet slithering snakes was *that*?"

"The Patronus Charm," Harry said. "Version 2.0."

"I rejoice to see that you are your usual self again," said Dumbledore. "But you are not going *anywhere*, young Ravenclaw, until you tell me what exactly was that warm and happy thought."

"Hm..." said Harry. He tapped a contemplative finger on his cheek. "I wonder if I should?"

Professor Quirrell suddenly grinned.

"Please?" said the Headmaster. "Pretty please with sugar on top?"

Harry felt an impulse and decided to go with it. It was dangerous, but there might not ever be a better opportunity until the end of time.

"Three sodas," Harry said to his pouch, then looked up at the Defense Professor and the Headmaster of Hogwarts. "Gentlemen," Harry said, "I bought these sodas on my first visit to Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, on the day I entered into Hogwarts. I have been saving them for special occasions; there is a minor enchantment on them to ensure they are drunk at the right time. This is the last of my supply, but I do not think there will ever come a finer occasion. Shall we?"

Dumbledore took a soda can from Harry, and Harry tossed another to Professor Quirrell. The two older men each muttered identical charms over the can and frowned briefly at the result. Harry, for his part, simply popped the top and drank.

The Defense Professor and the Headmaster of Hogwarts politely followed suit.

Harry said, "I thought of my absolute rejection of death as the natural order."

It might not be the right kind of warm feeling you needed to cast a Patronus Charm, but it was going into Harry's Top 10 nonetheless.

The looks he got from the Defense Professor and the Headmaster briefly made Harry nervous, as the spilled Comed-Tea faded out of existence; but then the two of them each glanced at the other and both apparently decided that they couldn't get away with doing anything really awful to Harry in the other's presence.

"Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell, "even *I* know that is not how things are supposed to work."

"Indeed," said Dumbledore. "Explain."

Harry opened his mouth, and then, as realization hit him, rapidly snapped his mouth shut again. Godric hadn't told anyone, nor had Rowena if she'd known; there might have been any number of wizards who'd figured it out and kept their mouths shut. You couldn't forget if you *knew* that was what you were trying to do; once you realized *how* it worked, the animal form of the Patronus Charm would never work for you again—and most wizards didn't have the right upbringing to turn on Dementors and destroy them—

"Erm, sorry about this," said Harry. "But I've just this instant realized that explaining would be an *incredibly* bad idea until you work some things out on your own."

"Is that the truth, Harry?" Dumbledore said slowly. "Or are you just pretending to be wise—"

"*Headmaster!*" said Professor Quirrell, sounding genuinely shocked. "Mr. Potter has told you that this spell is not spoken of with those who cannot cast it! You do not press a wizard on such matters!"

"If I told you—" Harry began.

"No," Professor Quirrell said, sounding rather severe. "You don't tell us *why*, Mr. Potter, you simply tell us that we are not to know. If you wish to devise a hint, you do so carefully, at leisure, not in the midst of conversation."

Harry nodded.

"But," said the Headmaster. "But, but what am I to tell the Ministry? You can't just *lose* a Dementor!"

"Tell them I ate it," said Professor Quirrell, causing Harry to choke on the soda he had unthinkingly raised to his lips. "I don't mind. Shall we head on back, Mr. Potter?"

The two of them began to walk the dirt path back to Hogwarts, leaving behind Albus Dumbledore staring forlornly at the empty cage and the three sleeping Aurors awaiting their Memory Charms.

AFTERMATH, HARRY POTTER AND PROFESSOR QUIRRELL:

They walked for a while before Professor Quirrell spoke, and all background noise dropped into silence when he did.

"You are exceptionally good at killing things, my student," said Professor Quirrell.

"Thank you," Harry said sincerely.

"I am not prying," said Professor Quirrell, "but on the off-chance that it was *only* the Headmaster who you did not trust with the secret...?"

Harry considered this. Professor Quirrell already couldn't cast the animal Patronus Charm.

But you couldn't untell a secret, and Harry was a fast enough learner to realize that he ought to at least *think* for a while before unleashing this one upon the world.

Harry shook his head, and Professor Quirrell nodded acceptance.

"Out of curiosity, Professor Quirrell," said Harry, "if your bringing the Dementor to Hogwarts had been part of an evil plot, what would have been its goal?"

"Assassinate Dumbledore while he was weakened," Professor Quirrell said without even hesitating. "Hm. The Headmaster told you he was suspicious of me?"

Harry said nothing for a second while he tried to think of a reply, and then gave up when he realized he'd already answered.

"Interesting..." Professor Quirrell said. "Mr. Potter, it is not out of the question that there *was* a plot at work today. Your wand ending up that close to the Dementor's cage *could* have been an accident. Or one of the Aurors could have been Imperiused, Confunded, or Legilimized to exert an influence. Flitwick and myself should not be excluded as suspects, in your calculation. One notes that Professor Snape canceled all his classes today, and I suspect he is powerful enough to Disillusion himself; the Aurors cast detection charms early on, but they did not repeat them immediately before your turn. But most easily of all, Mr. Potter, the deed could have been plotted by Dumbledore himself; and if he *did*, why, he might also take steps in advance to cast your suspicion elsewhere."

They walked on for a few steps.

"But why *would* he?" Harry said.

The Defense Professor stayed quiet a moment, and then said, "Mr. Potter, what steps have you taken to investigate the Headmaster's character?"

"Not many," said Harry. He'd only recently realized... "Not nearly enough."

"Then I will observe," said Professor Quirrell, "that you do not find out all there is to know about a man by asking only his friends."

Now it was Harry's turn to walk a few steps in silence on the slightly beaten dirt path that led back to Hogwarts. He'd really been supposed to know better than that already. Confirmation bias was the technical term; it meant, among other things, that when you chose your information sources, there was a notable tendency to choose information sources that agreed with your current opinions.

"Thank you," Harry said. "Actually... I didn't say it earlier, did I? Thank you for *everything*. If another Dementor ever threatens you, or for that matter, slightly annoys you, just let me know and I'll introduce it to Mister Glowy Person. I don't like it when Dementors slightly annoy my friends."

That got him an indecipherable glance from Professor Quirrell. "You destroyed the Dementor because it threatened me?"

"Erm," Harry said, "I'd sort of decided on it before then, but yes, that would have been sufficient reason by itself."

"I see," said Professor Quirrell. "And what would you have done about the threat to me if your spell *hadn't* worked for destroying the Dementor?"

"Plan B," said Harry. "Encase the Dementor in dense metal with a high melting point, probably tungsten, drop it into an active volcano, and hope it ends up inside Earth's mantle. Ah, the whole planet is filled with molten lava under its surface—"

"Yes," said Professor Quirrell. "I know." The Defense Professor was wearing a very odd smile. "I really should have thought of that myself, all things considered. Tell me, Mr. Potter, if you wanted to lose something where no one would ever find it again, where would you put it?"

Harry considered this question. "I suppose I shouldn't ask *what* you've found that needs losing—"

"Quite," said Professor Quirrell, as Harry had expected; and then, "Perhaps you will be told when you are older," which Harry hadn't.

"Well," said Harry, "besides trying to get it into the molten core of the planet, you could bury it in solid rock a kilometer underground in a randomly selected location—maybe teleport it in, if there's some way to do that blindly, or drill a hole and repair the hole afterward; the important thing would be not to leave any traces leading there, so it's just an anonymous cubic meter somewhere in the Earth's crust. You could drop it into the Mariana Trench, that's the deepest depth of ocean on the planet—or just pick some random other ocean trench, to make it less obvious. If you could make it buoyant and invisible, then you could throw it into the stratosphere. Or ideally you would launch it into space, with a cloak against detection, and a randomly fluctuating acceleration factor that would take it out of the Solar System. And afterward, of course, you'd Obliviate yourself, so even you didn't know exactly where it was."

The Defense Professor was laughing, and it sounded even odder than his smile.

"Professor Quirrell?" Harry said.

"All excellent suggestions," said Professor Quirrell. "But tell me, Mr. Potter, why those exact five?"

"Huh?" said Harry. "They just seemed like the obvious sorts of ideas."

"Oh?" said Professor Quirrell. "But there is an interesting pattern to them, you see. One might say it sounds like something of a riddle. I must admit, Mr. Potter, that although it has had its ups and downs, on the whole, this has been a surprisingly good day."

And they continued walking down the path that led to the gates of Hogwarts, quite some distance apart; as Harry, without even thinking about it, automatically stayed far enough away from the Defense Professor not to trigger that sense of doom, which for some reason seemed unusually strong right now.

AFTERMATH, DAPHNE GREENGRASS:

Hermione had refused to answer any questions, and as soon as they'd passed the split leading to the Slytherin dungeons, Daphne and Tracey had peeled off at once, walking as quickly as they could. Rumor traveled fast in Hogwarts, so they'd have to go to the dungeons right away if they wanted to be the first to tell everyone the story.

"Now remember," said Daphne, "don't just blurt out about the kiss as soon as we walk in, okay? It works better if we tell the whole story in order."

Tracey nodded excitedly.

And as soon as they burst into the Slytherin common room, Tracey Davis took a deep breath and shouted, "*Everyone! Harry Potter couldn't cast the Patronus Charm and the Dementor almost ate him and Professor Quirrell saved him but then Potter was all evil until Granger brought him back with a kiss! It's true love for sure!*"

It was ordered storytelling of a sort, Daphne supposed.

The news failed to produce the expected reaction. Most of the girls glanced over and then stayed in their couches, or the boys simply kept reading in their chairs.

"Yes," said Pansy sourly, from where she was sitting with Gregory's feet in her lap, leaning back and reading what seemed to be a coloring book, "Millicent already told us."

How—

"Why didn't *you* kiss him first, Tracey?" said Flora and Hestia Carrow from their own chairs. "Now Potter's going to marry a mudblood girl! *You* could've been his true love and gotten into a rich Noble House and everything if you'd just kissed him first!"

Tracey's face was a picture in stunned realization.

"*What?*" shrieked Daphne. "Love does not work like that!"

"Of course it does," stated Millicent from where she was practicing some sort of Charm while looking out a window at the swirling waters of the Hogwarts Lake. "First kiss gets the prince."

"*It wasn't their first kiss!*" shouted Daphne. "Hermione was *already* his true love! That's why *she* could bring him back!" Then Daphne realized

what she'd just said and winced internally, but as the saying went, you had to fit the tongue to the ear.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, what?" said Gregory, swinging his feet off Pansy's lap. "What's this? Miss Bulstrode didn't tell that part."

Everyone else was also looking at Daphne, now.

"Oh, yeah," said Daphne, "Harry shoved her away and shouted, 'I told you, no kissing!' Then Harry screamed like he was dying and Fawkes started singing to him—I'm not sure which one of those happened first, actually—"

"That doesn't sound like true love to *me*," said the Carrow twins. "That sounds like the *wrong person* kissed him."

"It was supposed to be *me*," whispered Tracey. Her face was still stunned. "I was supposed to be his true love. Harry Potter was *my* general. I should've, I should've fought Granger for him—"

Daphne spun on Tracey, incensed. "*You?* Take Harry away from Hermione?"

"Yeah!" said Tracey. "Me!"

"You're nuts," Daphne stated with conviction. "Even if you *had* kissed him first, you know what that would make you? The sad little lovestruck girl who dies at the end of Act Two."

"*You take that back!*" shouted Tracey.

Meanwhile, Gregory had crossed the room to where Vincent was doing his homework. "Mr. Crabbe," Gregory said in a low voice, "I think Mr. Malfoy needs to know about this."

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AFTERMATH, HERMIONE GRANGER:

Hermione stared at the wax-sealed paper, on the surface of which was inscribed simply the number 42.

I figured out why we couldn't cast the Patronus Charm, Hermione, it doesn't have anything to do with us not being happy enough. But I can't tell you. I couldn't even tell the Headmaster. It needs to be even more secret than partial Transfiguration, for now, anyway. But if you ever need to fight Dementors, the secret is written here, cryptically, so that if someone doesn't know it's about Dementors and the Patronus Charm, they won't know what it means...

She'd told Harry about seeing him dying, her parents dying, all her friends dying, everyone dying. She hadn't told him about her terror of dying alone, somehow that was still too painful.

Harry had told her about remembering his parents dying, and that he'd thought it was funny.

There's no light in the place the Dementor takes you, Hermione. No warmth. No caring. It's somewhere that you can't even understand happiness. There's pain, and fear, and those can still drive you. You can hate, and take pleasure in destroying what you hate. You can laugh, when you see other people hurting. But you can't ever be happy, you can't even remember what it is that isn't there anymore... I don't think there's any way I can ever explain just what you saved me from. I'm usually ashamed to put people to trouble, I usually can't stand it when people make sacrifices for me, but this one time I'll say that no matter what it ends up costing you to have kissed me, don't ever doubt for a second that it was the right thing to do.

Hermione hadn't realized how *little* the Dementor had touched her, how small and shallow had been the darkness into which it had taken her.

She'd seen everyone dying, and that had still been able to hurt.

Hermione put the paper back into her pouch, like a good girl ought to.

She'd really wanted to read it, though.

She was frightened of Dementors.

AFTERMATH, MINERVA MCGONAGALL:

She felt frozen; she shouldn't have been so shocked, she shouldn't have found Harry so hard to face, but after what he'd been through... She had searched the young boy in front of her for any signs of Dementation, and failed to find them. But something about the calm with which he had asked such a foreboding question seemed deeply worrying. "Mr. Potter, I can't possibly speak of such matters without the Headmaster's permission!"

The boy in her office took this in without changing expression. "I would prefer not to disturb the Headmaster over this matter," Harry Potter said calmly. "I *insist* on not disturbing him, in fact, and you did promise that our conversation would be kept private. So let me put it this way. I know that there was, in fact, a prophecy. I know that you are the one who originally heard it from Professor Trelawney. I know that the prophecy identified the child of James and Lily as someone dangerous to the Dark Lord. And I know who I am, indeed everyone now knows who I am, so you are revealing nothing new or dangerous, if you tell me only this: What was the *exact wording* which identified *me*, the child of James and Lily?"

Trelawney's hollow voice echoed in her mind—

BORN TO THOSE WHO HAVE THRICE DEFIED HIM,
BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES...

"Harry," said Professor McGonagall, "I can't possibly tell you that!" It chilled her to the bone that Harry knew so much already, she couldn't imagine how Harry had learned—

The boy looked at her with strange, sorrowful eyes. "Can you not sneeze without the Headmaster's permission, Professor McGonagall? For I do promise to you that I have good reason to ask, and good reason to keep the question private."

"Please don't, Harry," she whispered.

"All right," Harry said. "One simple question. Please. Was the Potter family mentioned by *name*? Does the prophecy literally say 'Potter'?"

She stared at Harry for a while. She couldn't have said why or where she got the sense that this was a critical point, that she could not lightly refuse the request, nor lightly accede to it—

"No," she finally said. "Please, Harry, don't ask any more."

The boy smiled, a little sadly it seemed, and said, "Thank you, Minerva. You are a good woman and true."

And while her mouth was still open in utter shock, Harry Potter got up and left the office; and only then did she realize that Harry had taken her refusal as an answer, and the true answer at that—

Harry closed the door behind himself.

The logic had presented itself with a strange diamondlike clarity. Harry couldn't have said if it had come to him during Fawkes's singing, or maybe even before.

Lord Voldemort had killed James Potter. He had preferred to spare Lily Potter's life. He had continued his attack, therefore, with the sole purpose of killing their infant child.

Dark Lords were not usually scared of infant children.

So there was a prophecy about Harry Potter being dangerous to Lord Voldemort, and Lord Voldemort had known that prophecy.

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

Had it been a whim, to give her that chance? But then Lord Voldemort would not have tried to persuade her. Had the prophecy warned Lord Voldemort against killing Lily Potter? Then Lord Voldemort *would* have troubled himself to subdue her. Lord Voldemort had been *mildly* inclined not to kill Lily Potter. The preference had been stronger than a whim, but not as strong as a warning.

So suppose that someone whom Lord Voldemort considered a lesser ally or servant, useful but not indispensable, had begged the Dark Lord to spare Lily's life. Lily's, but not James's.

This person had known that Lord Voldemort would attack the house of the Potters. Had known both the prophecy, and the fact that the Dark Lord knew it. Otherwise he would not have begged Lily's life.

According to Professor McGonagall, besides herself, the other two who knew of the prophecy were Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape.

Severus Snape, who had loved Lily before she was Lily Potter, and hated James.

Severus, then, had learned of the prophecy, and told it to the Dark Lord. Which he had done because the prophecy had not described the Potters by name. It had been a riddle, and Severus had solved that riddle only too late.

But if Severus had been the *first* to hear the prophecy, and disposed to tell it to the Dark Lord, then why would he also have told Dumbledore or Professor McGonagall?

Therefore Dumbledore or Professor McGonagall had heard it first.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts had no obvious reason to tell the Transfiguration Professor about an extremely sensitive and crucial prophecy. But the Transfiguration Professor had every reason to tell the Headmaster.

It seemed likely, then, that Professor McGonagall had been the first to hear it.

The prior probabilities said that it had been Professor Trelawney, Hogwarts's resident seer. Seers were rare, so if you counted up most of the seconds Professor McGonagall had spent in the presence of a seer over the course of her lifetime, most of those seer-seconds would be Trelawney-seconds.

Professor McGonagall had told Dumbledore, and would have told no one else about the prophecy without permission.

Therefore, it was Albus Dumbledore who had arranged for Severus Snape to somehow learn of the prophecy. And Dumbledore himself had solved the riddle successfully, or he would not have selected *Severus*, who had once loved Lily, as the intermediary.

Dumbledore had deliberately arranged for Lord Voldemort to hear about the prophecy, in hopes of luring him to his death. Perhaps Dumbledore had arranged for Severus to learn only *some* of the prophecy, or there were other prophecies of which Severus had remained innocent... somehow Dumbledore had known that an *immediate* attack on the Potters would still lead to Lord Voldemort's *immediate* defeat, although Lord

Voldemort himself had not believed this. Or maybe that had just been a lucky stroke of Dumbledore's insanity, his taste for bizarre plots...

Severus had ended up serving Dumbledore afterward; perhaps the Death Eaters would not look kindly on Severus if Dumbledore revealed his role in their defeat.

Dumbledore had tried to arrange for Harry's mother to be spared. But that part of his plot had failed. And he had knowingly condemned James Potter to his death.

Dumbledore was responsible for the deaths of Harry's parents. *If* the whole chain of logic was correct. Harry could not, in justice, say that successfully ending the Wizarding War did not count as extenuating circumstances. But somehow this still... *bothered him a great deal.*

And it was time and past time to ask Draco Malfoy what the *other* side of that war had to say about the character of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

PERSONHOOD THEORY

There comes a point in every plot where the victim starts to suspect; and looks back, and sees a trail of events all pointing in a single direction. And when that point comes, Father had explained, the prospect of the loss may seem so unbearable, and admitting themselves tricked may seem so humiliating, that the victim will yet deny the plot, and the game may continue long after.

Father had warned Draco not to do that again.

First, though, he'd let Mr. Avery finish eating all of the cookies he'd swindled from Draco, while Draco watched and cried. The whole lovely jar of cookies that Father had given him just a few hours earlier, for Draco had lost all of them to Mr. Avery, down to the very last one.

So it was a familiar feeling that Draco had felt in the pit of his stomach, when Gregory told him about The Kiss.

Sometimes you looked back, and saw things...

(In a lightless classroom—you couldn't quite call it *unused* any more, since it'd seen weekly use over the last few months—a boy sat enshrouded in a hooded cowl, with an unlighted crystal globe on the desk in front of him. Thinking in silence, thinking in darkness, waiting for an opening door to let in the light.)

Harry had shoved Granger away and said, *I told you, no kissing!*

Harry would probably say something like, *She just did it to annoy me, last time, just like she made me go on that date.*

But the verified story was that Granger had been willing to face the Dementor again in order to help Harry; that she had kissed Harry, crying, when he was lost in the depths of Dementation; and that her kiss had brought him back.

That didn't sound like rivalry, even friendly rivalry.

That sounded like the kind of friendship you usually didn't see even in plays.

Then why had Harry made his friend climb the icy walls of Hogwarts?

Because that was the sort of thing Harry Potter did to his friends?

Father had told Draco that to fathom a strange plot, one technique was to look at what *ended up* happening, assume it was the *intended* result, and ask who benefited.

What had ended up happening as the result of Draco and Granger fighting Harry Potter together... was that Draco had started to feel a lot friendlier toward Granger.

Who benefited from the scion of Malfoy becoming friends with a mudblood witch?

Who benefited, that was famous for exactly that sort of plot?

Who benefited, that could possibly be pulling Harry Potter's strings? Dumbledore.

And if that was true then Draco would *have* to go to Father and tell him everything, no matter what happened after that, Draco couldn't imagine what would happen after that, it was awful beyond imagining. Which made him want to cling desperately to the last shred of hope that it wasn't all what it looked like...

...Draco remembered that, too, from Mr. Avery's lesson.

Draco hadn't planned to confront Harry yet. He was still trying to think of an experimental test, something that Harry wouldn't just see through and fake. But then Vincent had come with the message that Harry wanted to meet early this week, on Friday instead of Saturday.

And so here Draco was, in a dark classroom, an unlit crystal globe on his desk, waiting.

Minutes passed.

Footsteps approached.

The door made a gentle creak as it swung open into the classroom, revealing Harry Potter dressed in his own hood and cowl; Harry stepped forward into the dark classroom, and the sturdy door closed behind him with a faint click.

Draco tapped the crystal globe, and the classroom lit with bright green light. Green light projected shadows of the desks onto the floor, and glared back at him from the curved chair-backs, photons bouncing off the wood in such fashion that the angle of incidence equaled the angle of reflection.

At least *that* much of what he'd learned wasn't likely to be a lie.

Harry had flinched as the light went on, halting for a moment, then resumed his approach. "Hello, Draco," Harry said quietly, drawing back his hood as he came to Draco's desk. "Thank you for coming, I know it's not our usual time—"

"You're welcome," Draco said flatly.

Harry dragged one of the chairs to face Draco across his desk, the legs making a slight screeching sound on the floor. He spun the chair so that it was facing the wrong way, and sat down straddling it, his arms folded across the back of the chair. The boy's face was pensive, frowning, serious, looking very adult even for Harry Potter.

"I have an important question to ask you," said Harry, "but there's something else I want us to do before that."

Draco said nothing, feeling a certain weariness. Part of him just wanted it all to be over with already.

"Tell me, Draco," said Harry. "Why don't Muggles ever leave ghosts behind when they die?"

"Because Muggles don't have souls, obviously," Draco said. He didn't even realize until after he'd said it that it might contradict Harry's politics, and then he didn't care. Besides, it *was* obvious.

Harry's face showed no surprise. "Before I ask my important question, I want to see if you can learn the Patronus Charm."

For a moment the sheer nonsequitur stumped Draco. Good old impossible-to-predict-or-understand Harry Potter. There were times when Draco wondered whether Harry was deliberately this disorienting as a tactic.

Then Draco understood, and shoved himself up and away from his desk in a single angry motion. That was it. It was over. "Like *Dumbledore's* servants," he spat.

"Like Salazar Slytherin," Harry said steadily.

Draco almost stumbled over his own feet in the middle of his first stride toward the door.

Slowly, Draco turned back toward Harry.

"I don't know where you came up with that," said Draco, "but it's wrong, everyone knows the Patronus Charm is a Gryffindor spell—"

"Salazar Slytherin could cast a corporeal Patronus Charm," Harry said. Harry's hand darted into his robes, brought out a book whose title was written as white on green, and so almost impossible to read in the green light; but it looked old. "I discovered that when I was researching the Patronus Charm before. And I found the original reference and checked the book out of the library just in case you didn't believe me. The author of this book doesn't think there's anything *unusual* about Salazar being able to cast a Patronus, either; the belief that Slytherins can't do that must be recent. And as a further historical note, though I don't have the book with me, Godric Gryffindor never could."

After the first six times Draco had tried calling Harry's bluff, on six successively more ridiculous occasions, he'd realized that Harry just *didn't* lie about what was written in books. Still, when Harry's hands opened the book and laid it out to the place of a bookmark, Draco leaned over and studied the place where Harry's finger pointed.

Then the fires of Ravenclaw fell upon the darkness that had cloaked the left wing of Lord Foul's army, breaking it, and it was revealed that the Lord Gryffindor had spoken true; the fear they all had felt was not natural in its source, but coming from thrice a dozen Dementors, who had been promised the souls of the defeated. At once the Lady Hufflepuff and Lord Slytherin brought forth their Patronuses, a vast angry badger and a bright silver serpent, and the defenders lifted their heads as the shadow passed from their hearts. And Lady Ravenclaw laughed, remarking that Lord Foul was a great fool, for now his own army would be subject to the fear, but not the defenders of Hogwarts. Yet the Lord Slytherin said, "No fool he, that much I know." And the Lord Gryffindor beside him studied the battlefield with a frown upon his face...

Draco looked back up. "So?"

Harry closed the book and put it into his pouch. "Chaos and Sunshine both have soldiers that can cast corporeal Patronus Charms. Corporeal

Patronuses can be used to convey messages. If you can't learn the spell, Dragon Army will be at a severe military disadvantage—"

Draco didn't care about that right now, and told Harry so. His voice was sharper than it probably should have been.

Harry didn't blink. "Then I'm calling in the favor you owe me from that time I stopped a riot from breaking out, on our first day of broomstick lessons. I'm going to try to teach you the Patronus Charm, and for my favor, I want you to do your honest best to learn and cast it. I trust to the honor of House Malfoy that you will."

Draco felt that certain weariness again. If Harry had asked at any other time, it would have been a fair return on favor owed, given that it wasn't actually a Gryffindor spell. But...

"Why?" Draco said.

"To find out whether you can do this thing that Salazar Slytherin could do," Harry said evenly. "This is an experimental test, and I will not tell you what it means until after you have done it. Will you?"

...It probably *was* a good idea to discharge that favor on something innocuous, all the more so if it was time to break with Harry Potter. "All right."

Harry drew a wand from his robes, and laid it against the globe. "Not really the best color for learning the Patronus Charm," Harry said. "Green light the exact shade of the Killing Curse, I mean. But silver is a Slytherin color too, isn't it? *Dulak*." The light went out, and Harry whispered the first two phrases of the Continual Light enchantment, recasting that part of it, though neither of them could have cast the whole thing by themselves. Then Harry tapped the globe again, and the room lit with a silver radiance, brilliant but still soft and gentle. Color returned to the desks and chairs, and to Harry's slightly sweaty face beneath his shock of black hair.

It took that long for Draco to realize the implication. "You saw a *Killing Curse* cast since the last time we met? When—how—"

"Cast the Patronus Charm," Harry said, looking more serious than ever, "and I'll tell you."

Draco pressed his hands to his eyes, shutting out the silver light. "You know, I really should remember that you're too *weird* for any *normal* plots!"

Within his self-imposed darkness, he heard the sound of Harry snickering.

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Harry watched closely as Draco finished his latest run-through of the preliminary gestures, the part of the spell that was difficult to learn; the final brandish and the pronunciation didn't have to be precise. All three of the last runs had been perfect as far as Harry could see. Harry had also felt an odd impulse to adjust things that Mr. Lupin hadn't said anything about, like the angle of Draco's elbow or the direction his foot was pointing; it could have been entirely his own imagination, and probably was, but Harry had decided to go with it just in case.

"All right," Harry said quietly. There was a tension in his chest that made it a little hard to speak. "Now we don't have a Dementor here, but that's all right. We won't need one. Draco, when your father spoke to me at the train station, he said that you were the one thing in the world that was most precious to him, and he threatened to throw away all his other plans to take vengeance on me, if ever you came to harm."

"He... what?" There was a catch in Draco's voice, and a strange look on his face. "Why are you telling me *that*?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Harry didn't let his expression change, though he could guess what Draco was thinking; that Harry had been plotting to separate Draco from his father, and shouldn't be saying anything that would bring them closer together. "There's always been just one person who matters most to you, and I know exactly what warm and happy thought will let you cast the Patronus Charm. You told it to me at the train station before the first day of school. Once you fell off a broomstick and broke your ribs. It hurt more than anything you'd ever felt, and you thought you were going to die. Pretend that fear is coming from a Dementor, standing in front of you, wearing a tattered black cloak, looking like a dead thing left in water. And then cast the Patronus Charm, and when you brandish the wand to drive the Dementor away, think of how your father held your hand, so that you wouldn't be afraid; and then think of how much he loves you, and how much you love him, and put it all into

your voice when you say *Expecto Patronum*. For the honor of House Malfoy, and not just because you promised me a favor. Show me you didn't lie to me that day in the train station when you told me Lucius was a good father. Show me you can do what Salazar Slytherin could do."

And Harry stepped backward, behind Draco, out of Draco's field of vision, so that Draco only faced the dusty old teacher's desk and blackboard at the front of the unused classroom.

Draco cast one look behind him, that strange look still on his face, and then turned away to face forward. Harry saw the exhalation, the inhalation. The wand twitched once, twice, thrice, and four times. Draco's fingers slid along the wand, exactly the right distances—

Draco lowered his wand.

"This is too—" Draco said, "I can't *think* this right, while you're watching—"

Harry turned around and started walking toward the door. "I'll come back in a minute," Harry said. "Just hold to your happy thought, and the Patronus will stay."

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From behind Draco came the sound of the door opening again.

Draco heard Harry's footsteps entering the classroom, but Draco didn't turn to look.

Harry didn't say anything either. The silence stretched.

Finally—

"What does this *mean*?" Draco said. His voice wavered a bit.

"It means you love your father," Harry's voice said. Which was just what Draco had been thinking, and trying not to cry in front of Harry. It was too right, just too right—

Before Draco, on the floor, was the shining form of a snake that Draco recognized; a Blue Krait, a snake first brought to their manor by Lord Abraxas Malfoy after a visit to some faraway land, and Father had kept a Blue Krait in the ophidiarium ever since. The thing about the Blue Krait was that the bite wouldn't hurt much. Father had said that, and told Draco that he was *never* allowed to pet the snake, no matter who was

watching. The venom killed your nerves so fast that you didn't have time to feel pain as the poison spread. You could die of it even after using Healing Charms. It ate other snakes. It was as Slytherin as any creature could possibly be.

That was why a Blue Krait head had been forged into the handle of Father's cane.

The bright snake darted out its tongue, which was also silver; and seemed to *smile* somehow, in a warmer way than any reptile should.

And then Draco realized—

"But," Draco said, still staring at the beautifully radiant snake, "*you* can't cast the Patronus Charm." Now that Draco had cast it himself, he understood why that was important. You could be evil, like Dumbledore, and still cast the Patronus Charm, so long as you had *something* bright left inside you. But if Harry Potter didn't have a single thought inside him that shone like that—

"The Patronus Charm is more complicated than you think, Draco," Harry said seriously. "Not everyone who fails at casting it is a bad person, or even unhappy. But anyway, I *can* cast it. I did it on my second try, after I realized what I'd done wrong facing the Dementor my first time. But, well, my life gets a little peculiar sometimes, and my Patronus came out strange, and I'm keeping it a secret for now—"

"Am I supposed to just *believe* that?"

"You can ask Professor Quirrell if you don't believe me," said Harry. "Ask him whether Harry Potter can cast a corporeal Patronus, and tell him that I told you to ask. He'd know the request was from me, no one else would know."

Oh, and now Draco was to trust *Professor Quirrell*? Still, knowing Harry, it might be true; and Professor Quirrell wouldn't lie for trivial reasons.

The glowing snake turned its head back and forth, as though seeking a prey that wasn't there, and then coiled itself into a circle, as though to rest.

"I wonder," Harry said softly, "when it was, which year, which generation, that Slytherins stopped trying to learn the Patronus Charm. When it was that people started to think, that Slytherins themselves started

to think, that being cunning and ambitious was the same as being cold and unhappy. And if Salazar knew that his students didn't even bother showing up to learn the Patronus Charm any more, I wonder, would he wish that he'd never been born? I wonder how it all went wrong, when Slytherin's House went wrong."

The shining creature winked out, the turmoil rising in Draco making it impossible to sustain the Charm. Draco spun on Harry, he had to control himself not to raise his wand. "What do *you* know about Slytherin House or Salazar Slytherin? *You* were never Sorted into my House, what gives you the right to—"

And *that* was when Draco *finally* realized.

"*You did get Sorted into Slytherin!*" Draco said. "You *did*, and afterwards you, you somehow, you *snapped your fingers*—" Draco had once asked Father if it would be cleverer to get Sorted into some other House so that everyone would trust him, and Father had smiled and said that he'd thought of that too at Draco's age, but there was no way to fool the Sorting Hat...

...not until *Harry Potter* came along.

How had he ever bought for *one minute* that *Harry* was a *Ravenclaw*?

"An interesting hypothesis," Harry said equably. "Do you know, you're the second person in Hogwarts to come up with a theory along those lines? At least you're the second that's actually said so to my face—"

"Snape," Draco said with certainty. His Head of House was no fool.

"Professor Quirrell, *of course*," said Harry. "Though come to think, Severus did ask me how I managed to stay out of his House, and whether I had something the Sorting Hat wanted. I suppose you could say you're number three. Oh, but Professor Quirrell's theory was a little different than yours, though. May I have your word not to repeat it?"

Draco nodded without even really thinking about it. What was he supposed to do, say no?

"Professor Quirrell thought that Dumbledore wasn't happy with the Hat's choice for the Boy-Who-Lived."

And the instant Harry said it, Draco knew, he *knew* that it was true, it was just *obvious*. Who did Dumbledore even think he was fooling?

...well, besides every single other person in Hogwarts except Snape and Quirrell, Harry might even believe it *himself*...

Draco stumbled back over to his desk in something of a daze, and sat down hard enough to hurt slightly. This sort of thing happened around once a month with Harry, and it hadn't happened yet in January, so it was time.

His fellow Slytherin, who might or might not think himself a Ravenclaw, sat back down in the chair he'd used earlier, now sitting on it cross-wise, and looking up intently at Draco.

Draco didn't know *what* he should be doing now, whether he should be trying to persuade the lost Slytherin boy that, no, he *wasn't* actually a Ravenclaw... or trying to figure out whether Harry was in league with Dumbledore, though that suddenly seemed less likely... but then *why* had Harry set up the whole thing with him and Granger...

He really *should* have remembered that Harry was too weird for any normal plots.

"Harry," Draco said. "Did you deliberately antagonize me and General Sunshine just so we'd work together against you?"

Harry nodded without hesitation, as though it was the most normal thing in the world, and nothing to be ashamed of.

"The whole thing with the gloves and making us climb up the walls of Hogwarts, the *only point* was to make me and Granger more friendly toward each other. And even before then. You've been plotting it for a really long time. Since the *beginning*."

Again the nod.

"WHYYYYYY?"

Harry's eyebrows lifted for a moment, the only reaction he showed to Draco shrieking so loudly in the closed classroom that it hurt his own ears. WHY, WHY, WHY did Harry Potter *DO* this sort of thing...

Then Harry said, "So that Slytherins will be able to cast the Patronus Charm again."

"*That... doesn't... make... SENSE!*" Draco was aware that he was losing control of his voice, but he didn't seem able to stop himself. "*What does that have to do with Granger?*"

"Patterns," Harry said. His face was very serious now, and very grave. "Like a quarter of children born to Squib couples being wizards. A simple, unmistakable pattern you would recognize instantly, if you knew what

you were looking at; even though, if you didn't know, you wouldn't even realize it was a clue. The poison in Slytherin House is something that's been seen before in the Muggle world. This is an *advance* prediction, Draco, I could have written it down for you before our first day of school, just from hearing you talk in King's Cross Station. Let me describe some really pathetic sorts of people that hang around at your father's political rallies, pureblood families that would never be invited to dinner at Malfoy Manor. Bearing in mind that *I've* never met them, I'm just predicting it from recognizing the pattern of what's happening to Slytherin House—"

And Harry Potter proceeded to describe the Parkinsons and Montagues and Boles with a calmly cutting accuracy that Draco wouldn't have dared *think* to himself in case there was a Legilimens around, it was *beyond* insult, they would *kill* Harry if they ever heard...

"To sum up," Harry finished, "they don't have any power themselves. They don't have any wealth themselves. If they didn't have Muggleborns to hate, if all the Muggleborns vanished the way they say they *want*, they'd wake up one morning and find they had *nothing*. But so long as they can say purebloods are superior, they can feel superior themselves, they can feel like part of the master class. Even though your father would never dream of inviting them to dinner, even though there's not one Galleon in their vaults, even if they did worse on their OWLs than the worst Muggleborn in Hogwarts. Even if they can't cast the Patronus Charm any more. Everything is the Muggleborns' fault to them, they have someone besides themselves to blame for their own failures, and that makes them even weaker. That's what Slytherin House is becoming, *pathetic*, and the root of the problem is hating Muggleborns."

"Salazar Slytherin himself said that mudbloods needed to be cast out! That they were weakening our blood—" Draco's voice had risen to a shout.

"*Salazar was wrong as a question of simple fact!* You *know* that, Draco! And that *hatred* is poisoning your whole House, you couldn't cast the Patronus Charm using a thought like that!"

"Then why could *Salazar Slytherin* cast the Patronus Charm?"

Harry was wiping sweat from his forehead. "Because things have *changed* between then and now! Listen, Draco, three hundred years ago you could find great scientists, as great as Salazar in their own way, who

would have told you that some other Muggles were inferior because of their skin color—”

“*Skin color?*” said Draco.

“I know, skin color instead of anything important like blood purity, isn’t it ridiculous? But then something in the world changed, and *now* you can’t find any great scientists who still think skin color should matter, only loser people like the ones I described to you. Salazar Slytherin made the mistake when everyone else was making it, because he grew up believing it, not because he was *desperate for someone to hate*. There were a few people who did better than everyone else around them, and *they* were exceptionally good. But the ones who just accepted what everyone else thought weren’t *exceptionally* evil. The sad fact is that most people just don’t notice a moral issue at all unless someone else is pointing it out to them; and once they’re as old as Salazar was when he met Godric, they’ve lost the ability to change their minds. Only *then* Hogwarts was built, and Hogwarts started sending acceptance letters to Muggleborns like Godric insisted, and more and more people began to notice that Muggleborns *weren’t* any different. Now it’s a big political issue instead of something that everyone just believes without thinking about it. And the *correct* answer is that Muggleborns *aren’t* any weaker than purebloods. So *now* the people who end up siding with what Salazar once believed, are either people who grew up in very closed pureblood environments like you, *or* people who are so pathetic themselves that they’re desperate for someone to feel superior to, people who love to hate.”

“That doesn’t... that doesn’t sound right...” Draco’s voice said. His ears listened, and wondered that he couldn’t come up with anything better to say.

“It doesn’t? Draco, you *know* now there’s nothing wrong with Hermione Granger. You had trouble dropping her off a roof, I hear. Even though you knew she’d taken a Feather-Falling Potion, even though you knew she was safe. What sort of person do you think wants to *kill* her, not for any wrong she did to them, just because she’s a Muggleborn? Even though she’s, she’s just a young girl who would help them with their homework in a second, if they ever asked her,” Harry’s voice broke, “what sort of person wants her to *die*?”

Father—

Draco felt split in two, he seemed to be having a problem with dual vision, *Granger is a mudblood, she should die* and a girl hanging from his hand on the rooftop, like seeing double, seeing double—

“And anyone who *doesn’t* want Hermione Granger to die, won’t want to hang around the sort of people who *do*! That’s all people think Slytherin is now, not clever planning, not trying to achieve greatness, just hating Muggleborns! I paid Morag a Sickie to ask Padma why she hadn’t gone to Slytherin, we both know she got the option. And Morag told me that Padma just gave her a *look* and said that she wasn’t Pansy Parkinson. You see? The *best* students with the virtues of more than one House, the students with *choices*, they go under the Hat thinking *anywhere but Slytherin*, and someone like Padma ends up in Ravenclaw. And... I think the Sorting Hat tries to maintain a balance in the Sorting, so it fills out the ranks of Slytherin with anyone who *isn’t* repelled by all the hatred. So instead of Padma Patil, Slytherin gets Pansy Parkinson. She’s not very cunning, and she’s not very ambitious, but she’s the sort of person who doesn’t mind what Slytherin is turning into. And the more Padmas go to Ravenclaw and the more Pansies go to Slytherin, the more the process accelerates. *It’s destroying Slytherin House, Draco!*”

It had a ring of awful truth, Padma *had* belonged in Slytherin... and instead Slytherin got Pansy... Father rallied lesser families like the Parkinsons because they were convenient sources of support, but Father hadn’t realized the *consequences* of associating Slytherin’s name with them...

“I can’t—” Draco said, but he wasn’t even sure what he couldn’t do—“What do you *want* from me?”

“I’m not sure how to heal Slytherin House,” Harry said slowly. “But I know it’s something you and I will end up having to do. It took centuries for science to dawn over the Muggle world, it only happened slowly, but the stronger science got, the further that sort of hatred retreated.” Harry’s voice was quiet, now. “I don’t know exactly why it worked that way, but that’s how it happened historically. As though there’s something in science like the shine of the Patronus Charm, driving back all sorts of darkness and madness, not right away, but it seems to follow wherever science goes. The Enlightenment, that was what it was called in the Mug-

gle world. It has something to do with seeking the truth, I think... with being able to change your mind from what you grew up believing... with thinking *logically*, realizing that there's no *reason* to hate someone because their skin is a different color, just like there's no reason to hate Hermione Granger... or maybe there's something to it that even I don't understand. But the Enlightenment is something that you and I belong to now, both of us. Fixing Slytherin House is just one of the things we have to do."

"Let me think," Draco said, his voice coming out in something of a croak, "please," and he rested his head in his hands, and thought.

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Draco thought for a while, with his palms over his eyes to shut out the world, no sound but his and Harry's breathing. All the persuasive reasonableness of what Harry said, the evident grains of truth that it contained; and against that, the obvious, the perfectly and entirely obvious hypothesis about what was *really* going on...

After a time, Draco finally raised his head.

"It sounds right," Draco said quietly.

A huge smile broke out on Harry's face.

"So," Draco continued, "is this where you bring me to Dumbledore, to make it official?"

He kept his voice very casual as he said it.

"Oh, yeah," Harry said. "That was the thing I was going to ask you about, actually—"

Draco's blood froze in his veins, froze solid and shattered—

"Professor Quirrell said something to me that got me thinking, and, well, no matter how you answer this question, I'm already stupid for having not asked you a lot earlier. Everyone in Gryffindor thinks Dumbledore is a saint, the Hufflepuffs think he's crazy, the Ravenclaws are all proud of themselves for having worked out that he's only pretending to be crazy, but I never asked anyone in Slytherin. I'm supposed to know

better than to make that sort of mistake. But if even *you* think Dumbledore's okay to conspire with on fixing Slytherin House, I guess I didn't miss anything important."

...

...

...

"You know," Draco said, his voice remarkably calm, all things considered, "every time I wonder if you do things like this just to annoy me, I tell myself that it *has* to be accidental, *no one* could possibly do this sort of thing on purpose even if they tried until blood trickled out of their ears. That's the only reason I'm not going to strangle you now."

"Huh?"

And then strangle *himself*, because Harry *had* grown up with Muggles, and then Dumbledore had smoothly diverted him from Slytherin to Ravenclaw, so it was perfectly plausible that Harry might *not* know anything, and Draco had never thought to *tell him*.

Or else Harry had guessed that Draco wouldn't join up with Dumbledore so readily, and this itself was just the next step of Dumbledore's plan...

But if Harry *really* didn't know about Dumbledore, then warning him had to take precedence over *everything*.

"All right," Draco said, after he'd had a chance to organize his thoughts. "I don't know where to start, so I'll just start somewhere." Draco drew a deep breath. This was going to take a while. "Dumbledore murdered his little sister, and got away with it because his brother wouldn't testify against him—"

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Harry listened with increasing worry and dismay. Harry had been prepared, he'd thought, to take the blood purist side of the story with a grain of salt. The trouble was that even after you added an enormous amount of salt, it *still* didn't sound good.

Dumbledore's father had been convicted of using Unforgivable Curses on children, and died in Azkaban. That was no sin of Dumbledore's, but it would be a matter of public record. Harry could check that part, and see whether all of this had been made up out of thin air by the blood purists.

Dumbledore's mother had died mysteriously, shortly before his younger sister died in what the Aurors had ruled to be murder. Supposedly that sister had been brutalized by Muggles and never spoken again after that; which, Draco pointed out, sounded remarkably like a botched Obliviation.

After Harry's first few interruptions, Draco had seemed to pick up on the general principle, and was now presenting the observations first and the inferences afterward.

"—so you don't have to take my word for it," said Draco, "you can *see* it, right? Anyone in Slytherin can. Dumbledore waited to fight his duel with Grindelwald until the exact moment when it would look best for Dumbledore, *after* Grindelwald had ruined most of Europe and built up a reputation as the most terrible Dark Wizard in history, and just when Grindelwald had lost the gold and blood sacrifices he was getting from his Muggle pawns and was about to start heading downhill. If Dumbledore was really the noble wizard he pretended to be, he'd have fought Grindelwald long before that. Dumbledore probably *wanted* Europe ruined, it was probably part of their plan together, he only attacked Grindelwald after his puppet *failed* him. And that big flashy duel wasn't real, there's no way two wizards would be so exactly matched that they'd fight for twenty whole hours until one of them fell over from exhaustion, that was just Dumbledore making it look more spectacular." Here Draco's voice became more indignant. "And that got Dumbledore made *Chief Warlock of the Wizen-gamot!* The Line of Merlin Unbroken, corrupted after fifteen hundred years! And *then* he became Supreme Mugwump on top of that, and he *already* had Hogwarts to use as an invincible fortress—Headmaster *and* Chief Warlock *and* Supreme Mugwump, no normal person would try to do all that at once, *how can anyone not see that Dumbledore's trying to take over the world?*"

"Pause," Harry said, and closed his eyes to think.

It wasn't any worse than what you would have heard about the West in Stalin's Russia, and none of that would have been true. Though the blood purists wouldn't be able to get away with making stuff up entirely... or would they? The *Daily Prophet* had shown a pronounced tendency to make stuff up... but then again, when they stuck out their neck too far on the Weasley betrothal, they *had* been called on it and they *had* been embarrassed...

Harry opened his eyes, and saw that Draco was watching him with a steady, waiting gaze.

"So when you asked me if it was time to join up with Dumbledore, that was just a test."

Draco nodded.

"And before that, when you said it sounded right—"

"It *sounds* right," said Draco. "But I don't know if I can trust you. Are you going to complain about my *testing* you, Mr. Potter? Are you going to say that I *fooled* you? That I *led you on*?"

Harry knew he should smile like a good sport, but he couldn't really, it was too much of a disappointment.

"You're right, it's fair, I can't complain," Harry said instead. "So what about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? Not as bad as he was made out to be?"

Draco looked bitter, at that. "So you think it's all just making Father's side look good and Dumbledore's side look bad, and that I believe it all myself just because Father told me."

"It's a possibility I'm considering," Harry said evenly.

Draco's voice was low and intense. "They *knew*. My father knew, his friends knew. They *knew* the Dark Lord was evil. *But he was the only chance anyone had against Dumbledore!* The only wizard anywhere who was powerful enough to fight him! Some of the other Death Eaters were truly evil too, like Bellatrix Black—Father isn't like that—but Father and his friends *had* to do it, Harry, they *had* to, Dumbledore was taking over everything, the Dark Lord was the only hope anyone had left!"

Draco was staring hard at Harry. Harry met the gaze, trying to think. Nobody ever thought of themselves as the villain of their own story—maybe Lord Voldemort did, maybe Bellatrix did, but Draco certainly

didn't. That the Death Eaters were bad guys was not in question. The question was whether they were *the* bad guys; whether there was *one* villain in the story, or *two*...

"You're not convinced," Draco said. He looked worried, and a little angry. Which didn't surprise Harry. He was pretty sure Draco himself believed all this.

"*Should* I be convinced?" Harry said. He didn't look away. "Just because you believe it? Are you a strong enough rationalist now that your belief is strong evidence to me, because you'd be very unlikely to believe it if it weren't true? When I met you, you weren't that strong. Everything you told me, did you rethink it after you awakened as a scientist, or is it just something you grew up believing? Can you look me in the eyes and swear to me upon the honor of House Malfoy that if there's one untruth buried in what you said, one thing that got added on just to make Dumbledore look a little worse, you would have noticed?"

Draco started to open his mouth, and Harry said, "Don't. Don't stain the honor of House Malfoy. You're *not* that strong yet, and you should know it. Listen, Draco, I've started to notice some worrying things myself. But there's nothing *definite*, nothing *certain*, it's all just deductions and hypotheses and untrustworthy witnesses... And there's nothing certain in your story, either. Dumbledore might've had some other good reason not to fight Grindelwald years earlier—though it *would* have to be a pretty good excuse, especially considering what was happening on the Muggle side of things... but still. Is there one clearly evil thing that Dumbledore's done for *certain*, so I don't have to wonder?"

Draco's breathing was harsh. "All right," Draco said in an uneven voice, "I'll tell you what Dumbledore did." From Draco's robes came a wand, and Draco said "Quietus", then "Quietus" again, but he got the pronunciation wrong a second time, and finally Harry took out his own wand and did it.

"There," said Draco hoarsely, "once upon a time there, there was a girl, and her name was Narcissa, and she was the prettiest, the smartest, the most cunning girl that was ever Sorted into Slytherin, and my father loved her, and they married, and she wasn't a Death Eater, she wasn't a fighter, *all she ever did was love Father*—" Draco stopped there, because he

was crying.

Harry felt sick to his stomach. Draco had never talked about his *mother*, not once, he should have noticed that earlier. “She... got in the way of a curse?”

Draco’s voice came out in a scream. “*Dumbledore burned her to death in her own bedroom!*”

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In a classroom filled with soft silver light, one boy is staring at another boy, who is sobbing, wiping frantically at his eyes with the sleeves of his robes.

It was hard for Harry to stay balanced, to keep withholding judgment, it was too emotional, there was something that either wanted to start tears from his own eyes in sympathy with Draco, or *know* that it wasn’t true...

Dumbledore burned her to death in her own bedroom!

That...

...didn’t sound like Dumbledore’s style...

...but you could only think that thought so many times, before you started to wonder about the trustworthiness of that whole ‘style’ concept.

“It, it must have hurt horribly,” Draco said, his voice shaking, “Father never talks about it at all, you don’t ever talk about it in front of him, but Mr. Macnair told me, there were scorch marks all over the bedroom, from how Mother must have struggled while Dumbledore *burned her alive*. That is the debt Dumbledore owes to House Malfoy and *we will have his life for it!*”

“Draco,” Harry said, he let all of the hoarseness into his own voice, it would be *wrong* to sound calm, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry for asking, but I *have* to know, *how* do you know it was Dumble—”

“Dumbledore *said* he did it, he told Father it was a *warning!* And Father couldn’t testify under Veritaserum because he was an Occlumens, he couldn’t even get Dumbledore put on trial, Father’s own allies didn’t believe him after Dumbledore just denied everything in public, but we know, the Death Eaters know, Father wouldn’t have any reason to lie

about that, Father would want us to take revenge on the *right person*, can't you see that Harry?" Draco's voice was wild.

Unless Lucius did it himself, of course, and found it more convenient to blame Dumbledore.

Although... it also didn't seem like *Lucius's* style. And if he *had* murdered Narcissa, it would have been smarter to pin the blame on an easier victim instead of losing political capital and credibility by going after Dumbledore...

In time, Draco stopped crying, and looked at Harry. "Well?" said Draco, sounding like he wanted to spit the words. "Is that *evil* enough for you, Mr. Potter?"

Harry looked down at where his arms rested on the back of his chair. He couldn't meet Draco's eyes any more, the pain in them was too raw. "I wasn't expecting to hear that," Harry said softly. "I don't know what to think any more."

"You *don't know*?" Draco's voice rose to a shriek, and he stood up abruptly from his desk—

"I remembered the Dark Lord killing my parents," Harry said. "When I went in front of the Dementor the first time, that was what I remembered, the worst memory. Even though it was so long ago. I heard them dying. My mother begged the Dark Lord not to kill me, *not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead!* That's what she said. And the Dark Lord mocked her, and laughed. Then, I remember, the flash of green light—"

Harry looked up at Draco.

"So we could fight," Harry said, "we could just keep on with the same fight. You could tell me that it was right for my mother to die, because she was the wife of James, who killed a Death Eater. But bad for *your* mother to die, because *she* was innocent. And I could tell you that it was right for your mother to die, that Dumbledore must have had some *reason* that made it *okay* to burn her alive in her own bedroom; but bad for *my* mother to die. But you know, Draco, either way, wouldn't it be *obvious* that we were just being biased? Because the rule that says that it's wrong to kill innocent people, that rule can't switch on for my mother and off for yours, and it can't switch on for your mother and off for mine. If you tell me that Lily was an enemy of the Death Eaters and it's right to kill

your enemies, then the same rule says that Dumbledore was right to kill Narcissa, since she was *his* enemy.” Harry’s voice went hoarse. “So if the two of us are going to agree on anything, it’s going to be that *neither* of their deaths were right and that *no one’s* mother should die any more.”

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The fury boiling inside Draco was so great that he could barely stop himself from storming out of the room; all that halted him was the recognition of a critical moment; and a small remnant of friendship, a tiny flash of sympathy, for he had forgotten, he’d *forgotten*, that Harry’s mother *and* father were dead by the Dark Lord’s hand.

The silence stretched.

“You can talk,” Harry said, “Draco, talk to me, I won’t get angry—are you thinking, I don’t know, that Narcissa dying was much worse than Lily dying? That it’s wrong for me even to make the comparison?”

“I guess I was stupid too,” Draco said. “All this time, all this time I forgot that you must hate the Death Eaters for killing your parents, hate Death Eaters the way I hate Dumbledore.” And Harry had never said anything, never reacted when Draco talked about Death Eaters, kept it *hidden*—Draco was a fool.

“No,” Harry said. “It’s not—it’s not like that, Draco, I, I don’t even know how to explain to you, except to say that a thought like that, wouldn’t,” Harry’s voice choked, “you wouldn’t ever be able to use it, to cast the Patronus Charm...”

Draco felt a sudden wrench in his heart, unwanted but he felt it. “Are you pretending you’re just going to *forget* about your own parents? Are you saying I should just *forget* about Mother?”

“So you and I *have* to be enemies then?” Now Harry’s voice was growing equally wild. “What have *we* ever done to *each other* that means we have to be enemies? I refuse to be trapped like that! Justice can’t mean that *both* of us should attack *each other*, it doesn’t make sense!” Harry stopped, took a deep breath, ran his fingers back through the deliberate mess of his hair—the fingers came away sweaty, Draco could see it. “Draco, listen, we

can't expect to meet on everything right away, you and I. So I won't ask you to say that the Dark Lord was *wrong* to kill my mother, just say that it was... *sad*. We won't talk about whether or not it was *necessary*, whether it was *justified*. I'll just ask you to say that it was sad that it happened, that my mother's life was valuable too, you'll just say that for now. And I'll say it was sad that Narcissa died, because her life was also worth something. We can't expect to agree on everything right away, but if we start out by saying that every life is precious, that it's sad when *anyone* dies, then I know we'll meet someday. That's what I want you to say. Not who was right. Not who was wrong. Just that it was sad when your mother died, and sad when my mother died, and it would be sad if Hermione Granger died, every life is precious, can we agree on that and let the rest go by for now, is it enough if we just agree on that? Can we, Draco? That seems... more like a thought someone could use to cast the Patronus Charm."

There were tears in Harry's eyes.

And Draco was getting angry again. "Dumbledore *killed* Mother, it's not enough to just say it's *sad*! I don't understand what you think *you* have to do, but the Malfoys *have* to take revenge!" Not avenging the deaths of family went *beyond* weakness, beyond dishonor, you might as well not *exist*.

"I'm not arguing with that," Harry said quietly. "But will you say that Lily Potter's death was sad? Just say that one thing?"

"That's..." Draco was having difficulty finding words again. "I know, I know how you feel, but don't you see Harry, even if I just say that Lily Potter's death was *sad*, that's *already* going against the Death Eaters!"

"Draco, you've *got* to be able to say the Death Eaters were wrong about some things! You *have* to, you can't progress as a scientist otherwise, there'll be a roadblock in your way, an authority you can't contradict. Not every change is an improvement, but every improvement is a change, you can't do anything *better* unless you can manage to do it *differently*, you've *got* to let yourself do better than other people! Even your father, Draco, even him. You've got to be able to point to something your father did and say it was mistaken, because he wasn't *perfect*, and if you can't say that, you can't do better."

Father had warned him, every night before he went to sleep for a

month before he went to Hogwarts, that there would be people with this goal.

“You’re trying to break me loose of Father.”

“Trying to break a *part* of you loose,” said Harry. “Trying to let you fix some things your father got mistaken. Trying to let you *do better*. But not... trying to break your *Patronus!*” Harry’s voice got softer. “I wouldn’t want to break something bright like that. Who knows, fixing Slytherin House might need *that*, too...”

It was getting to Draco, that was the thing, despite everything it was getting to him, you had to be really careful around Harry because his arguments sounded so convincing *even when he was wrong*. “And what you’re *not* admitting is that Dumbledore told you that you could avenge your parents’ deaths by taking Lord Malfoy’s son from him—”

“No. No. That part’s just wrong.” Harry took a deep breath. “I did not know who Dumbledore was, or who the Dark Lord was, or who the Death Eaters were, or how my parents died, until three days before I came to Hogwarts. The day you and I first met in the clothes shop, that was the day I learned. And Dumbledore doesn’t even *like* Muggle science, or he says he doesn’t, I got a chance to probe him on it once. The thought of taking revenge on the Death Eaters through you has *never* crossed my mind, not even *once* until now. I didn’t know who the Malfoys were when I met you in the clothes shop, and then I *liked* you.”

There was a long silence.

“I wish I could trust you,” Draco said. His voice was shaking. “If I could just *know* you were telling the truth, everything would be so much simpler—”

And then suddenly it came to Draco.

The way to know whether Harry Potter really meant everything he said, about wanting to fix Slytherin House, about being sad that Mother had died.

It would be illegal, and since he’d have to do it without Father’s help, it would be *dangerous*, he couldn’t even trust Harry Potter to *help*, but...

“All right,” Draco said. “I’ve thought of a definitive experiment.”

“What is it?”

"I want to give you a drop of Veritaserum," Draco said. "Just one drop, so you can't lie, but not enough to *make* you answer anything. I don't know where I'll get it, but I'll make *certain* it's safe—"

"Um," Harry said. There was a helpless look on his face. "Draco, um—"

"Don't say it," Draco said. His voice was firm and calm. "If you say no, that's my experimental result right there."

"Draco, I'm an Occlumens—"

"OH THAT IS SUCH A LIE—"

"I was trained by Mr. Bester. Professor Quirrell set it up. Look, Draco, I'll *take* one drop of Veritaserum if you can get it, I'm just *warning* you that I'm an Occlumens. Not a perfect Occlumens, but Mr. Bester said I was putting up a complete block, and I could probably beat Veritaserum."

"*You're in your first year at Hogwarts! That's just crazy!*"

"Know a Legilimens you can trust? I'll be happy to demonstrate—look, Draco, I'm sorry, but doesn't the fact that I *told* you count for something? I *could* have just let you do it, you know."

"WHY? *Why are you always like this, Harry? Why do you have to mess everything up even when it's IMPOSSIBLE? And stop smiling, this isn't funny!*"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I *know* it's not funny, I—"

It took a while for Draco to get himself under control.

But Harry was right. Harry *could* have just let Draco administer the Veritaserum. *If* he really was an Occlumens... Draco didn't know who he could ask to try Legilimency, but he could at least ask Professor Quirrell if it was true... Could Draco trust *Professor Quirrell*? Maybe Professor Quirrell would just say anything Harry asked him to.

Then Draco remembered the other thing Harry had told him to ask Professor Quirrell, and thought of a different test.

"You *know*," said Draco. "You *know* what it costs me, if I agree that the poison in Slytherin's House is hating Muggleborns, and say that Lily Potter's death was sad. And that's *part of your plan*, don't tell me it's not."

Harry said nothing, which was wise of him.

"There's something I want from you in return," said Draco. "And before then, an experimental test I want to try—"

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Draco pushed open the door to which the portraits had directed them, and this time it was the right door. Before them was a small empty place of stone set against the night sky. Not a roof like the one he'd dropped Harry from, but a tiny and proper courtyard, far above the ground. With proper railings, elaborate traceries of stone that flushed seamlessly into the stone floor... How so much *artistry* had been infused into the creation of Hogwarts was something that still awed Draco every time he thought about it. There must have been some way to do it all at once, no one could have detailed so much piece by piece, the castle *changed* and every new piece was like that. It was so far beyond the wizardry of these fading days that no one would have believed it if they hadn't seen the proof in Hogwarts itself.

Cloudless and cold, the winter night sky; it got dark long before students' curfew, in the final days of January.

The stars shining brightly, in the clear air.

Harry had said that being under the stars would help him.

Draco touched his chest with his wand, slid his fingers in a practiced motion, and said, "*Thermos*." A warmth spread through him, starting from his heart; the wind went on blowing on his face, but he was no longer cold.

"*Thermos*," Harry's voice said behind him.

They went together to the railing, to look down at the ground a long way below. Draco tried to figure if they were in one of the towers that could be seen from outside, and found that right now he couldn't quite seem to picture how Hogwarts looked from outside. But the ground below was always the same; he could see the Forbidden Forest as a vague outline, and moonlight glittering from the Hogwarts Lake.

"You know," Harry's voice said quietly from beside him where his arms leaned on the railing next to Draco's, "one of the things that Muggles get really wrong, is that they don't turn all their lights out at night. Not even for one hour every month, not even for fifteen minutes once a year. The photons scatter in the atmosphere and wash out all but

the brightest stars, and the night sky doesn't look the same at all, not unless you go far away from any cities. Once you've looked up at the sky over Hogwarts, it's hard to imagine living in a Muggle city, where you wouldn't be able to see the stars. You certainly wouldn't want to spend your whole life in Muggle cities, once you'd seen the night sky over Hogwarts."

Draco glanced at Harry, and found that Harry was craning his neck to stare up at where the Milky Way arched across the darkness.

"Of course," Harry went on, his voice still quiet, "you can't ever see the stars properly from *Earth*, either, the air always gets in the way. You have to look from somewhere else, if you want to see the real thing, the stars burning hard and bright, like their true selves. Have you ever wished that you could just whisk yourself up into the night sky, Draco, and go look at what there is to see around other Suns than ours? If there were no limit to the power of your magic, is that one of the things you would do, if you could do anything?"

There was a silence, and then Draco realized that he was expected to answer. "I didn't think of it before," Draco said. Without any conscious decision, his voice came out as soft and hushed as Harry's. "Do you really think anyone would ever be able to do that?"

"I don't think it'll be that easy," said Harry. "But I know I don't mean to spend my whole life on Earth."

It would have been something to laugh at, if Draco hadn't known that some Muggles had already left, without even using magic.

"To pass your test," Harry said, "I'm going to have to say what it means to *me*, that thought, the whole thing, not the shorter version I tried to explain to you before. But you should be able to see it's the same idea, only more general. So *my* version of the thought, Draco, is that when we go out into the stars, we might find other people there. And if so, they certainly won't look like we do. There might be things out there that are grown from crystal, or big pulsating blobs... or they might be made of magic, now that I think about it. So with all that strangeness, how do you recognize a *person*? Not by the shape, not by how many arms or legs it has. Not by the sort of substance it's made out of, whether that's flesh or crystal or stuff I can't imagine. You would have to recognize them as people

from their *minds*. And even their minds wouldn't work just like ours do. But anything that lives and thinks and knows itself and doesn't want to die, it's sad, Draco, it's sad if that person has to die, because it doesn't want to. Compared to what might be out there, every human being who ever lived, we're all like brothers and sisters, you could hardly even tell us apart. The ones out there who met *us*, they wouldn't see British or French, they wouldn't be able to tell the difference, they'd just see a human being. Humans who can love, and hate, and laugh, and cry; and to *them*, the ones out there, that would make us all as alike as peas in the same pod. *They* would be different, though. *Really* different. But that wouldn't stop us, and it wouldn't stop them, if we both wanted to be friends together."

Harry raised his wand then, and Draco turned, and looked away, as he had promised; looked toward the stone floor and stone wall in which the door was set. For Draco had promised not to look, and not to tell anyone of what Harry had said, or anything at all of what happened here this night, though he didn't know why it was to be so secret.

"I have a dream," said Harry's voice, "that one day sentient beings will be judged by the patterns of their minds, and not their color or their shape or the stuff they're made of, or who their parents were. Because if we can get along with crystal things someday, how silly would it be not to get along with Muggleborns, who are shaped like us, and think like us, as alike to us as peas in a pod? The crystal things wouldn't even be able to tell the difference. How impossible is it to imagine that the hatred poisoning Slytherin House would be worth taking with us to the stars? Every life is precious, everything that thinks and knows itself and doesn't want to die. Lily Potter's life was precious, and Narcissa Malfoy's life was precious, even though it's too late for them now, it was sad when they died. But there are other lives that are still alive to be fought for. Your life, and my life, and Hermione Granger's life, all the lives of Earth, and all the lives beyond, to be defended and protected, *EXPECTO PATRONUM!*"

And there was light.

Everything turned to silver in that light, the stone floor, the stone wall, the door, the railings, so dazzling just in the reflection that you could hardly even see them, even the air seemed to shine, and the light grew brighter, and brighter, and brighter—

When the light ended it was like a shock, Draco's hand went automatically to his robe to bring out a handkerchief, and it was only then that he realized he was crying.

"There is your experimental result," Harry's voice said quietly. "I really did mean it, that thought."

Draco slowly turned toward Harry, who had lowered his wand now.

"That, that's got to be a trick, right?" Draco said. He couldn't take many more of these shocks. "Your Patronus—can't *really* be that bright—" And yet it *had* been Patronus light, once you knew what you were looking at, you couldn't mistake it for anything else.

"That was the *true* form of the Patronus Charm," Harry said. "Something that lets you put all your strength into the Patronus, without hindrance from within yourself. And before you ask, I did not learn it from Dumbledore. He does not know the secret, and could not cast the true form if he did. I solved the puzzle for myself. And I knew, once I understood, that this spell must not be spoken of. For your sake, I undertook your test; but you must not speak of it, Draco."

Draco didn't know any more, he didn't know where the true strength lay, or the right of things. Double vision, double vision. Draco wanted to call Harry's ideals weakness, Hufflepuff foolishness, the sort of lie that rulers told to placate the populace and that Harry had been silly enough to believe for himself, foolishness taken seriously and raised up to insane heights, projected out onto the stars themselves—

Something beautiful and hidden, mysterious and bright—

"Will I," whispered Draco, "be able to cast a Patronus like that, someday?"

"If you always keep seeking the truth," Harry said, "and if you don't refuse the warm thoughts when you find them, then I'm sure you will. I think a person could get anywhere if they just kept going long enough, even to the stars."

Draco wiped his eyes with his handkerchief again.

"We should go back inside," Draco said in an unsteady voice, "someone could've seen it, all that light—"

Harry nodded, and moved to and through the door; and Draco looked up at the night sky one last time before he followed.

Who was the Boy-Who-Lived, that he was already an Occlumens, and could cast the true form of the Patronus Charm, and do other strange things? What was Harry's Patronus, why must it stay unseen?

Draco didn't ask any of those questions, because Harry might have *answered*, and Draco just couldn't take any more shocks today. He just *couldn't*. One more shock and his head was going to just fall right off his shoulders and go bounce, bounce, bounce down the corridors of Hogwarts.

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They'd ducked into a small alcove, instead of going all the way back to the classroom, at Draco's request; he was feeling too nervous to put it off any longer.

Draco put up a Quieting barrier, and then looked at Harry in silent question.

"I've been thinking about it," Harry said. "I'll do it, but there are five conditions—"

"Five?"

"Yes, five. Look, Draco, a pledge like this is just *begging* to go terribly wrong somehow, you *know* it would go wrong if this were a play—"

"Well, it's not!" Draco said. "Dumbledore killed Mother. He's evil. It's one of those things you talk about that *doesn't* have to be complicated."

"Draco," Harry said, his voice careful, "all I *know* is that *you* say that *Lucius* says that *Dumbledore* says he killed Narcissa. To believe that unquestioningly, I have to trust you *and* Lucius *and* Dumbledore. So like I said, there are conditions. The first one is that at any point *you* can release me from the pledge, if it no longer seems like a good idea. It has to be a deliberate and intended decision on your part, of course, not a trick of wording or something."

"Okay," said Draco. That sounded safe enough.

"Condition two is that I'm pledging to take as an enemy whoever actually did kill Narcissa, as determined to the honest best of my ability as a rationalist. Whether that's Dumbledore, or someone else. And you have

my word that I'll exercise my best ability as a rationalist to keep that judgment honest, as a question of simple fact. Agreed?"

"I don't like it," said Draco. He didn't, the whole point was to make sure Harry never went with Dumbledore. Still, if Harry *was* honest, he'd catch on to Dumbledore soon enough; and if dishonest, he'd already broken his word... "But I'll agree."

"Condition three is that Narcissa has to have been *burned alive*. If that part of the story turns out to be something exaggerated just to make it sound a little worse, then I get to decide for myself whether or not to still go through with the pledge. Good people sometimes have to kill. But they don't ever torture people to death. It's because Narcissa was *burned alive* that I know whoever did that was evil."

Draco kept his temper, barely.

"Condition four is that if Narcissa got her own hands dirty, and, say, *Crucioed* someone's child into insanity, and that person burned Narcissa for revenge, the deal might be off again. Because then it was still wrong for them to burn her, they still should've just killed her without pain; but it wasn't *evil* the same way as if she was just Lucius's love who never did anything herself, like you said. Condition five is that if whoever killed Narcissa was tricked somehow into doing it, then my enemy is whoever tricked them, not the person who was tricked."

"All this *really* sounds like you're planning to weasel out of it—"

"Draco, I won't take a good person as an enemy, not for you or anyone. I have to really believe they're in the wrong. But I've thought about it, and it seems to me that if Narcissa didn't do any evil with her own hands, just fell in love with Lucius and chose to stay his wife, then whoever burned her alive in her own bedroom isn't likely to be a good guy. And I'll pledge to take as my enemy whoever made that happen, whether it's Dumbledore or anyone else, unless you deliberately release me from that pledge. Hopefully *that* won't go wrong the way it would if this were a play."

"I'm not happy," said Draco. "But okay. You pledge to take my mother's murderer as your enemy, and I'll—"

Harry waited, with a patient look on his face, while Draco tried to make his voice work again.

"I'll help you fix the problem with Slytherin House hating Muggle-borns," Draco finished in a whisper. "And I'll say it was sad that Lily Potter died."

"So be it," said Harry.

And it was done.

The break, Draco knew, had just widened a little more. No, not a little, a *lot*. There was a sensation of drifting away, of being lost, further and further from shore, further and further from home...

"Excuse me," Draco said. He turned away from Harry, and then tried to calm himself, he had to do this test, and he didn't want to fail it from being nervous or ashamed.

Draco raised his wand into the starting position for the Patronus Charm.

Remembered falling from his broomstick, the pain, the fear, imagined it coming from a tall figure in a cloak, looking like a dead thing left in water.

And then Draco closed his eyes, the better to remember Father holding his small, cold hands in his own warm strength.

Don't be frightened, my son, I'm here...

The wand swung up in a broad brandish, to drive the fear away, and Draco was surprised at the strength of it; and he remembered in that moment that *Father* wasn't lost, would never be lost, would always be there and strong in his own person, no matter what happened to Draco, and his voice cried, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Draco opened his eyes.

A shining snake looked back at him, no less bright than before.

Behind him, he heard *Harry* exhale a breath, as though in relief.

Draco gazed into the white light. It seemed he wasn't lost completely, after all.

"That reminds me," said Harry after a while. "Can we test my hypothesis about how to use a Patronus to send messages?"

"Is it going to surprise me?" said Draco. "I don't want any more surprises today."

Harry had claimed that the idea wasn't all that strange and he didn't see how it could possibly shock Draco in any way, which made Draco feel even more nervous, somehow; but Draco could see how important it was to have a way of sending messages in emergencies.

The trick—or so Harry hypothesized—was wanting to spread the good news, wanting the recipient to know the truth of whatever happy thought you'd used to cast the Patronus Charm. Only instead of telling the recipient in words, the Patronus itself was the message. By wanting them to see that, the Patronus would go to them.

"Tell Harry," said Draco to the luminous snake, even though Harry was standing only a few paces away on the other side of the room, "to, um, beware the green monkey," this being a sign from a play Draco had once seen.

And then, just like at King's Cross station, Draco wanted Harry to know that Father had always cared for him; only this time he didn't try to say it in words, but wanted to say it with the happy thought itself.

The bright snake slithered across the room, looking more like it was slithering through the air rather than the stone itself; it got to Harry after traveling that short distance—

—and said to Harry, in a strange voice that Draco recognized as how he himself probably sounded to other people, "Beware the green monkey."

"Hsssss ssss sshsshssss," said Harry.

The snake slithered back across the floor to Draco.

"Harry says the message is received and acknowledged," said the shining Blue Krait in Draco's voice.

"Huh," Harry said. "Talking to Patronuses feels odd."

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"Why are you looking at me like that?" said the Heir of Slytherin.

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PERSONHOOD THEORY

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AFTERMATH:

Harry stared at Draco.

"You mean just *magical* snakes, right?"

"N-no," said Draco. He was looking rather pale, and was still stammering, but had at least stopped the incoherent noises he'd been making earlier. "You're a Parselmouth, you can speak Parseltongue, it's the language of all snakes everywhere. You can understand any snake when it talks, and they can understand when you talk to them... Harry, you can't *possibly* believe you were Sorted into Ravenclaw! *You're the Heir of Slytherin!*"

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"SNAKES ARE SENTIENT?"

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

UTILITARIAN PRIORITIES

It was Saturday, the first morning of February, and at the Ravenclaw table, a boy bearing a breakfast plate heaped high with vegetables was nervously inspecting his servings for the slightest trace of meat.

It *might* have been an overreaction. After he'd gotten over the raw shock, Harry's common sense had woken up and hypothesized that "Parseltongue" was probably just a linguistic user interface for controlling snakes...

...after all, snakes couldn't *really* be human-level intelligent, *someone* would have noticed by now. The smallest-brained creatures Harry had ever heard of with anything like linguistic ability were the African grey parrots taught by Irene Pepperberg. And that was unstructured protolanguage, in a species that played complex games of adultery and needed to model other parrots. While according to what Draco had been able to remember, snakes spoke to Parselmouths in what sounded like normal human language—i.e., full-blown recursive syntactical grammar. That had taken *time* for hominids to evolve, with huge brains and strong social selection pressures. Snakes didn't have much society at all that Harry had ever heard. And with thousands upon thousands of different species of snakes all over the world, how could they all use the *same* version of their supposed language, "Parseltongue"?

Of course that was all merely common sense, in which Harry was starting to lose faith entirely.

But Harry was sure he'd heard snakes hissing on the TV at some point—after all, he knew what that sounded like from *somewhere*—and *that* hadn't sounded to him like language, which had seemed a good deal more reassuring...

...at first. The problem was that Draco had also asserted that Parselmouths could send snakes on extended complex missions. And if that was true, then Parselmouths had to *make snakes persistently intelligent* by talking to them. In the worst-case scenario that would make the snake self-aware, like what Harry had accidentally done to the Sorting Hat.

And when Harry had offered *that* hypothesis, Draco had claimed that he could remember a story—Harry hoped to Cthulhu that *this one* story was just a fairy tale, it had that ring to it, but there *was* a story—about Salazar Slytherin sending a brave young viper on a mission to *gather information from other snakes*.

If any snake a Parselmouth had talked to, could make *other* snakes self-aware by talking to *them*, then...

Then...

Harry didn't even know why his mind was going all "then... then..." when he knew perfectly well how the exponential progression would work, it was just the sheer moral horror of it that was blowing his mind.

And what if someone had invented a spell like that to talk to cows?

What if there were Poultrymouths?

Or for that matter...

Harry froze in sudden realization just as the forkful of carrots was about to enter his mouth.

That couldn't, couldn't possibly be true, surely no wizard would be stupid enough to do THAT...

And Harry knew, with a dreadful sinking feeling, that *of course* they would be that stupid. Salazar Slytherin had probably never considered the moral implications of snake intelligence for even one second, just like it hadn't ever occurred to Salazar that *Muggleborns* were intelligent enough to deserve personhood rights. Most people just didn't see moral issues at all unless someone else was pointing them out...

"Harry?" said Terry from beside him, sounding like he was afraid he would regret asking. "Why are you staring at your fork like that?"

"I'm starting to think magic should be illegal," said Harry. "By the way, have you ever heard any stories about wizards who could speak with plants?"

Terry hadn't heard of anything like that.

Neither had any seventh-year Ravenclaws that Harry had asked.

And now Harry had returned to his place, but not yet sat down again, staring at his plate of vegetables with a forlorn expression. He was getting hungrier, and later in the day he would be visiting Mary's Place for one of their incredibly tasty dishes... Harry was finding himself sorely tempted to just revert back to yesterday's eating habits and be done with it.

You've got to eat something, said his inner Slytherin. And it's not all that much more likely that anyone sneezed self-awareness onto poultry than onto plants, so as long as you're eating food of questionable sentience either way, why not eat the delicious deep-fried Diracawl slices?

I'm not quite sure that's valid utilitarian logic, there—

Oh, you want utilitarian logic? One serving of utilitarian logic coming up: Even in the unlikely chance that some moron did manage to confer sentience on chickens, it's your research that stands the best chance of discovering the fact and doing something about it. If you can complete your work even slightly faster by not messing around with your diet, then, counterintuitive as it may seem, the best thing you can do to save the greatest number of possibly-sentient who-knows-whats is not wasting time on wild guesses about what might be intelligent. It's not like the house elves haven't prepared the food already, regardless of what you take onto your plate.

Harry considered this for a moment. It was a rather seductive line of reasoning—

Good! said Slytherin. *I'm glad you see now that the most moral thing to do is to sacrifice the lives of sentient beings for your own convenience, to feed your dreadful appetites, for the sick pleasure of ripping them apart with your teeth—*

What? Harry thought indignantly. *Which side are you on here?*

His inner Slytherin's mental voice was grim. *You too will someday embrace the doctrine... that the end justifies the meats.* This was followed by some mental snickering.

Ever since Harry had started worrying that plants might also be sentient, his non-Ravenclaw components had been having trouble taking

his moral caution seriously. Hufflepuff was shouting *Cannibalism!* every time Harry tried to think about any food item whatsoever, and Gryffindor would visualize it screaming while he ate it, even if it was, say, a sandwich—

Cannibalism!

AIIEEEE DON'T EAT ME—

Ignore the screams, eat it anyway! It's a safe place to compromise your ethics in the service of higher goals, everyone else thinks it's okay to eat sandwiches so you can't use your usual rationalization about a small probability of a large downside if you get caught—

Harry gave a mental sigh, and thought, *Just so long as you're okay with us being eaten by giant monsters that didn't do enough research into whether we were sentient.*

I'm okay with that, said Slytherin. Is everyone else okay with that? (Internal mental nods.) Great, can we go back to deep-fried Diracawl slices now?

Not until I've done some more research into what's sentient and what isn't. Now shut up. And Harry turned firmly away from his plate full of oh-so-tempting vegetables to head toward the library—

Just eat the students, said Hufflepuff. There's no doubt about whether they're sentient.

You know you want to, said Gryffindor. I bet the young ones are the tastiest.

Harry was starting to wonder if the Dementor had somehow damaged their imaginary personalities.

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“Honestly,” said Hermione. The young girl’s voice sounded a little acerbic as her gaze scanned the bookshelves of the Herbology stacks in the Hogwarts library. Harry had left her a message asking if she could come to the library after she’d finished breakfast, which Harry had skipped; but then when Harry had introduced the day’s topic she’d seemed a bit nonplussed. “You know your problem, Harry? You’ve got no sense of priorities. An idea gets into your head and you just go running straight off after it.”

"I've got a *great* sense of priorities," said Harry. His hand reached out and grabbed *Vegetable Cunning* by Casey McNamara, and began to flip through the starting pages, searching for the table of contents. "That's why I want to find out whether plants can talk *before* I eat my carrots."

"Don't you think that maybe the two of us have more *important* things to worry about?"

You sound just like Draco, Harry thought, but of course didn't say out loud. Out loud he said, "What could *possibly* be more important than plants turning out to be sentient?"

There was a pregnant silence from beside him, as Harry's eyes went down the table of contents. There was indeed a chapter on Plant Language, causing Harry's heart to skip a beat; and then his hands began to rapidly turn the pages, heading for the appropriate page number.

"There are days," said Hermione Granger, "when I really, truly, have absolutely no idea what goes on inside that head of yours."

"Look, it's a question of multiplication, okay? There's a *lot* of plants in the world, if they're *not* sentient then they're not important, but if plants *are* people then they've got more moral weight than all the human beings in the world put together. Now, of course your brain doesn't realize that on an intuitive level, but that's because the brain can't multiply. Like if you ask three separate groups of Canadian households how much they'll pay to save two thousand, twenty thousand, or two hundred thousand birds from dying in oil ponds, the three groups will respectively state that they're willing to pay seventy-eight, eighty-eight, and eighty dollars. No difference, in other words. It's called scope insensitivity. Your brain imagines a single bird struggling in an oil pond, and that image creates some amount of emotion that determines your willingness to pay. But no one can visualize even two thousand of anything, so the *quantity* just gets thrown straight out the window. Now try to *correct* that bias with respect to a *hundred trillion* sentient blades of grass, and you'll realize that this could be thousands of times more important than we used to think the whole human species was... oh thank Azathoth, this says it's just mandrakes that can talk and they speak regular human language out loud, not that there's a spell you can use to talk with *any* plant—"

"Ron came to me at breakfast yesterday morning," Hermione said.

Now her voice sounded a little quiet, a little sad, maybe even a little scared. "He said he'd been dreadfully shocked to see me kiss you. That what you said while you were Demented should've shown me how much evil you were hiding inside. And that if I was going to be a follower of a Dark Wizard, then he wasn't sure he wanted to be in my army anymore."

Harry's hands had stopped turning pages. It seemed that Harry's brain, for all its abstract knowledge, was still incapable of appreciating scope on any real emotional level, because it had just forcibly redirected his attention away from trillions of possibly-sentient blades of grass who might be suffering or dying even as they spoke, and toward the life of a single human being who happened to be nearer and dearer.

"Ron is the world's most gigantic prat," Harry said. "They won't be printing that in the newspaper anytime soon, because it's not news. So after you fired him, how many of his arms and legs did you break?"

"I tried to tell him it wasn't like that," Hermione went on in the same quiet voice. "I tried to tell him *you* weren't like that, and that it wasn't like that between the two of us, but it just seemed to make him even more... more like he was."

"Well, yes," Harry said. He was surprised that he wasn't feeling angrier at Captain Weasley, but his concern for Hermione seemed to be overriding that, for now. "The more you try to justify yourself to people like that, the more it acknowledges that they have the *right* to question you. It shows you think they get to be your inquisitor, and once you grant someone that sort of power over you, they just push more and more." This was one of Draco Malfoy's lessons which Harry had thought was actually pretty smart: people who *tried* to defend themselves got questioned over every little point and could never satisfy their interrogators; but if you made it clear from the start that you were a celebrity and above social conventions, people's minds wouldn't bother tracking most violations. "That's why when Ron came over to *me* as I was sitting down at the Ravenclaw table, and told me to stay away from you, I held my hand out over the floor and said, 'You see how high I'm holding my hand? Your intelligence has to be at least this high to talk to me.' Then he accused me of, quote, sucking you into the darkness, unquote, so I pursed my lips and went *schluuuuurp*, and after that his mouth was still making those talk-

ing noises so I put up a Quieting Charm. I don't think he'll be trying his lectures on me again."

"I understand why you did that," Hermione said, her voice tight, "I *wanted* to tell him off too, but I really wish you hadn't, it will make things harder for *me*, Harry!"

Harry looked up from *Vegetable Cunning* again, he wasn't getting any reading done at this rate; and he saw that Hermione was still reading whatever book she had, not looking up at him. Her hands turned another page even as he watched.

"I think you're taking the wrong approach by trying to defend yourself at all," Harry said. "I really do think that. You are who you are. You're friends with whoever you choose. Tell anyone who questions you to shove it."

Hermione just shook her head, and turned another page.

"Option two," Harry said. "Go to Fred and George and tell them to have a little talk with their wayward brother, *those* two are genuine good guys—"

"It's not just Ron," Hermione said in almost a whisper. "Lots of people are saying it, Harry. Even Mandy is giving me worried looks when she thinks I'm not looking. Isn't it funny? I keep worrying that Professor Quirrell is sucking *you* into the darkness, and now people are warning me just the same way I try to warn you."

"Well, *yeah*," said Harry. "Doesn't that reassure you a bit about me and Professor Quirrell?"

"In a word," said Hermione, "no."

There was a silence that lasted long enough for Hermione to turn another page, and then her voice, in a real whisper this time, "And, and Padma is going around telling everyone that, that since I couldn't cast the P-Patronus Charm, I must only be p-pretending to be n-nice..."

"Padma didn't even *try* herself!" Harry said indignantly. "If you *were* a Dark Witch who was just pretending, you wouldn't have *tried* in front of everyone, do they think you're *stupid*?"

Hermione smiled a little, and blinked a few times.

"Hey, I have to worry about *actually* going evil. *Here* the worst case scenario is that people think you're more evil than you really are. Is that

going to kill you? I mean, is it all *that* bad?"

The young girl nodded, her face screwed up tight.

"Look, Hermione... if you worry that much about what other people think, if you're unhappy whenever other people don't picture you exactly the same way you picture yourself, that's *already* dooming yourself to always be unhappy. No one ever thinks of us just the same way we think of ourselves."

"I don't know how to explain to you," Hermione said in a sad soft voice. "I'm not sure it's something you could ever understand, Harry. All I can think of to say is, how would you feel if *I* thought you were evil?"

"Um..." Harry visualized it. "Yeah, that *would* hurt. A lot. But you're a good person who thinks about that sort of thing intelligently, you've *earned* that power over me, it would *mean* something if you thought I'd gone wrong. I can't think of a single other student, besides you, whose opinion I'd care about the same way—"

"You can live like that," whispered Hermione Granger. "I can't."

The girl had gone through another three pages in silence, and Harry had returned his eyes to his own book and was trying to regain his focus, when Hermione finally said, in a small voice, "Are you really sure I mustn't know how to cast the Patronus Charm?"

"I..." Harry had to swallow a sudden lump in his throat. He suddenly saw himself *not* knowing why the Patronus Charm didn't work for him, *not* being able to show Draco, just being told that there was a reason, and nothing more. "Hermione, your Patronus would shine with the same light but it wouldn't be *normal*, it wouldn't look like people think Patronuses should look, anyone who saw it would know there was something strange going on. Even if I told you the secret you couldn't *demonstrate* to anyone, unless you made them face the other way so they could only see the light, and... and the most important part of any secret is the knowledge that a secret exists, you could only show one or two friends if you swore them to secrecy..." Harry's voice trailed off helplessly.

"I'll take it." Her voice was still small.

It was very hard not to just blurt out the secret, right there in the library.

"I, I shouldn't, I *really* shouldn't, it's *dangerous*, Hermione, it could do a lot of harm if that secret got out! Haven't you heard the saying, three can keep a secret if two are dead? That telling just your closest friends is the same as telling everyone, because you're not just trusting them, you're trusting everyone they trust? It's too important, too much of a risk, it's not the sort of decision that should be made for the sake of fixing someone's reputation at school!"

"Okay," Hermione said. She closed the book and put it back on the shelf. "I can't concentrate right now, Harry, I'm sorry."

"If there's *anything* else I can do—"

"Be nicer to everyone."

The girl didn't look back as she walked out of the stacks, which might have been a good thing, because the boy was frozen in place, unmoving.

After a while, the boy started turning pages again.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

PRIOR INFORMATION

A boy waits at a small clearing at the edge of the non-forbidden forest, beside a dirt trail that runs back to the gates of Hogwarts in one direction, and off into the distance in another. There is a carriage nearby, and the boy is standing well away from it, looking at it, his eyes seldom wavering from its direction.

In the distance, a figure is approaching along the dirt path: A man wearing professorial robes, trudging slowly with his shoulders slumped low, his formal shoes kicking up small clouds of dust as he walks.

Half a minute later, the boy darts another quick glance before returning to his surveillance; and this glimpse shows that the man's shoulders have straightened, his face unslackened, and that his shoes are now walking lightly across the dirt, leaving not a trace of dust in the air behind.

"Hello, Professor Quirrell," Harry said without letting his eyes move again from the direction of their carriage.

"Salutations," said the calm voice of Professor Quirrell. "You seem to be keeping your distance, Mr. Potter. I don't suppose you see something odd about our conveyance?"

"Odd?" Harry echoed. "Why no, I can't say I see anything odd. There seem to be even numbers of everything. Four seats, four wheels, two huge skeletal winged horses..."

A skin-wrapped skull turned to look at him and flashed teeth, solid and white in that black cavernous mouth, as though to indicate that it was just about as fond of him as he was of it. The other black leathery horse-skeleton tossed its head like it was whickering, but there was no sound.

"They are Thestrals, and they have always drawn the carriage," Professor Quirrell said, sounding quite undisturbed as he climbed into the front bench of the carriage, sitting down as far to the right as possible. "They are visible only to those who have seen death and comprehended it, a useful defense against most animal predators. Hm. I suppose that the first time you went in front of the Dementor, your worst memory proved to be the night of your encounter with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

Harry nodded grimly. It was the right guess, even if for the wrong reasons. *Those who have seen Death...*

"Did you recall anything of interest, thereby?"

"Yes," Harry said, "I did," only that and nothing more, for he was not ready as yet to make accusations.

The Defense Professor smiled one of his dry smiles, and beckoned with an impatient finger.

Harry closed the distance and climbed into the carriage, wincing. The sense of doom had grown significantly stronger after the day of the Dementor, even though it had been slowly weakening before then. The greatest distance that the carriage allowed him from Professor Quirrell no longer seemed like nearly far enough.

Then the skeletal horses trotted forward and the carriage started in motion, taking them toward the outer bounds of Hogwarts. As it did, Professor Quirrell slumped back down into zombie-mode, and the sense of doom retreated, though it still hovered at the edge of Harry's perceptions, unignorable...

The forest scrolled by as the carriage rolled along, the trees moving past at a speed that seemed positively glacial by comparison to broomsticks or even cars. There was something oddly relaxing, Harry thought, about traveling that slowly. It had certainly relaxed the Defense Professor, who was slumped over with a small stream of drool coming out of his slack mouth and puddling on his robes.

Harry still hadn't decided what he was allowed to eat for lunch.

His library research hadn't turned up any sign of wizards speaking to nonmagical plants. Or any other nonmagical animals besides snakes, although *Spell and Speak* by Paul Breedlove had recounted the probably-mythical tale of a sorceress called the Lady of Flying Squirrels.

What Harry *wanted* to do was ask Professor Quirrell. The problem was that Professor Quirrell was *too smart*. Judging by what Draco had said, the Heir of Slytherin business was a major bombshell, and Harry wasn't sure he wanted anyone else to know. And the instant Harry asked about Parseltongue, Professor Quirrell would fix him with those pale blue eyes and say, 'I see, Mr. Potter, so you taught Mr. Malfoy the Patronus Charm and accidentally spoke to his snake.'

It wouldn't *matter* that it shouldn't be enough evidence to locate the true explanation as a hypothesis, let alone overcome its burden of prior improbability. Somehow the Defense Professor would deduce it *anyway*. There were times when Harry suspected that Professor Quirrell had way more background information than he was telling, his priors were simply too good. Sometimes he got his amazing deductions right even when his *reasons* were wrong. The problem was that Harry couldn't see how Professor Quirrell could've snuck in an extra clue about half the stuff he guessed. Just *once* Harry would have liked to make some sort of incredible deduction from something Professor Quirrell said which would catch *him* completely off guard.

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"I shall have a bowl of green lentil soup, with soy sauce," Professor Quirrell said to the waitress. "And for Mr. Potter, a plate of Tenorman's family chili."

Harry hesitated in sudden dismay. He'd resolved to stick to vegetarian dishes for the moment, but he'd forgotten in his deliberations that Professor Quirrell did the *actual ordering*—and it would be awkward if he protested now—

The waitress bowed to them, and turned to go—

"Erm, excuse me, any meat in that from snakes or flying squirrels?"

The waitress didn't so much as blink an eye, only turned back to Harry, shook her head, bowed politely to him again, and resumed her walk toward the door.

(The other parts of Harry were snickering at him. Gryffindor was making sardonic comments about how a little social discomfort was

enough to get him to resort to *Cannibalism!* (shouted by Hufflepuff), and Slytherin was remarking on how nice it was that Harry's ethics were flexible when it came to important goals like maintaining his relationship with Professor Quirrell.)

After the waitress had closed the door behind her, Professor Quirrell waved a hand to slide home the locking bar, spoke the usual four Charms to ensure privacy, and then said, "An interesting question, Mr. Potter. I wonder why you asked it?"

Harry kept his face steady. "I was looking up some facts about the Patronus Charm earlier," he said. "According to *The Patronus Charm: Wizards Who Could and Couldn't*, it turns out that Godric couldn't and Salazar could. I was surprised, so I looked up the reference, in *Four Lives of Power*. And *then* I discovered that Salazar Slytherin could supposedly talk to snakes." (Temporal sequence wasn't the same as causation, it wasn't Harry's fault if Professor Quirrell missed that.) "Further research turned up an old story about a mother goddess type who could talk to flying squirrels. I was a bit worried about the prospect of eating something that could talk."

And Harry took a casual sip of his water—

—just as Professor Quirrell said, "Mr. Potter, would I be correct in guessing that you are also a Parselmouth?"

When Harry was done coughing, he set his glass of water back down on the table, fixed his gaze on Professor Quirrell's chin rather than looking him in the eyes, and said, "So you are able to perform Legilimency through my Occlumency barriers, then."

Professor Quirrell was grinning widely. "I shall take that as a compliment, Mr. Potter, but no."

"I'm not buying this anymore," Harry said. "There's no way you came to that conclusion based on that evidence."

"Of course not," Professor Quirrell said equably. "I had planned to ask you that question today in any case, and simply chose an opportune moment. I have suspected since December, in fact—"

"December?" said Harry. "I found out *yesterday!*"

"Ah, so you did not realize the Sorting Hat's message to you was in Parseltongue?"

The Defense Professor had timed it exactly right the second time, too, just as Harry was taking a gulp of water to clear out his throat from the first coughing fit.

Harry *hadn't* realized, not until just now. Of course it was obvious the instant Professor Quirrell said it. Right, Professor McGonagall had even *told* him not to talk to snakes where anyone could see him, but he'd thought she'd meant not to be seen talking to any statues or architectural features in Hogwarts that looked like snakes. Double illusion of transparency, he'd thought he understood her, she'd thought he understood her—but *how the hell*—

"So," Harry said, "you performed Legilimency on me during my first Defense class, to find out what happened with the Sorting Hat—"

"Then I would not have found out in December." Professor Quirell leaned back, smiling. "This is not a puzzle you can solve on your own, Mr. Potter, so I will reveal the answer. Over the winter holiday, I was alerted to the fact that the Headmaster had filed a request for a closed judicial panel to review the case of one Mr. Rubeus Hagrid, whom you know as the Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts, and who was accused of the murder of Abigail Myrtle in 1943."

"Oh, of course," said Harry, "that makes it downright *obvious* that I'm a Parselmouth. Professor, *what* the sweet slithering snakes—"

"The *other* suspect for that murder was Slytherin's Monster, the legendary inhabitant of Slytherin's Chamber of Secrets. Which is why certain sources alerted me to the fact, and why it caught my attention sufficiently that I spent a good deal of bribe money to learn the details of the case. Now in point of fact, Mr. Potter, Mr. Hagrid is innocent. Ridiculously obviously innocent. He is the most blatantly innocent bystander to be convicted by the magical British legal system since Grindelwald's Confunding of Neville Chamberlain was pinned on Amanda Knox. Headmaster Dippet prompted a student puppet to accuse Mr. Hagrid because Dippet needed a scapegoat to take the blame for the death of Miss Myrtle, and our marvelous justice system agreed that this was plausible enough to warrant Mr. Hagrid's expulsion and the snapping of his wand. Our current Headmaster needs merely provide some new item of evidence significant enough to reconvene the case; and with Dumbledore apply-

ing pressure instead of Dippet, the result is a foregone conclusion. Lucius Malfoy has no particular reason to fear Mr. Hagrid's vindication; thus Lucius Malfoy will only resist to the extent that he can do so costlessly in order to impose costs on Dumbledore, and Dumbledore is clearly willing to prosecute the case regardless."

Professor Quirrell took a sip of his water. "But I digress. The new evidence that the Headmaster promises to provide is to exhibit a previously undetected spell on the Sorting Hat, which, the Headmaster asserts, he has personally determined to respond only to Slytherins who are also Parselmouths. The Headmaster further argues that this favors the interpretation that the Chamber of Secrets was indeed opened in 1943, approximately the right time frame for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, a known Parselmouth, to have attended Hogwarts. It is a rather questionable logic, but a judicial panel may rule that it swings the case far enough to bring Mr. Hagrid's guilt into doubt, if they can manage to keep a straight face as they say it. And now we come to the key question: *how* did the Headmaster discover this hidden spell on the Sorting Hat?"

Professor Quirrell was smiling thinly now. "Well now, let us suppose that there was a Parselmouth in this year's crop of students, a potential Heir of Slytherin. You must admit, Mr. Potter, that you stand out as a possibility whenever extraordinary people are considered. And if I then further ask myself which new Slytherin would be most likely to have his mental privacy invaded by the Headmaster, specifically hunting the memories of his Sorting, why, you stand out even more." The smile vanished. "So you see, Mr. Potter, it was not *I* who invaded your mind, though I will not ask you to apologize. It is not your fault that you believed Dumbledore's protestations of respecting your mental privacy."

"My sincere apologies," Harry said, keeping his face expressionless. The rigid control was a confession in its own right, as was the sweat beading his forehead; but he didn't think the Defense Professor would take any evidence from that. Professor Quirrell would just think Harry was nervous at having been discovered as the Heir of Slytherin. Rather than being nervous that Professor Quirrell might realize that Harry had deliberately betrayed Slytherin's secret... which itself was no longer seeming like such a smart move.

"So, Mr. Potter. Any progress on finding the Chamber of Secrets?"

No, thought Harry. But to maintain plausible deniability, you needed a general policy of sometimes evading questions even when you had nothing to hide... "With respect, Professor Quirrell, if I had made such progress, it is not *quite* obvious to me that I should tell you about it."

Professor Quirrell sipped from his own waterglass again. "Well then, Mr. Potter, I shall freely tell you what I know or suspect. First, I believe the Chamber of Secrets is real, as is Slytherin's Monster. Miss Myrtle's death was not discovered until hours after her demise, even though the wards should have alerted the Headmaster instantly. Therefore her murder was performed either by Headmaster Dippet, which is unlikely, or by some entity which Salazar Slytherin keyed into his wards at a higher level than the Headmaster himself. Second, I suspect that contrary to popular legend, the purpose of Slytherin's Monster was *not* to rid Hogwarts of Muggleborns. Unless Slytherin's Monster were powerful enough to defeat the Headmaster of Hogwarts and all the teachers, it could not triumph by force. Multiple murders in secrecy would result in the school's closure, as nearly happened in 1943, or in the placing of new wards. So why Slytherin's Monster, Mr. Potter? What true purpose does it serve?"

"Ah..." Harry dropped his gaze to his waterglass and tried to think. "To kill anyone who got into the Chamber and didn't belong there—"

"A monster powerful enough to defeat a team of wizards that had broken past the best wards Salazar could place on his Chamber? Unlikely."

Harry was feeling a bit pressured now. "Well, it's called the Chamber of Secrets, so maybe the Monster has a secret, or *is* a secret?" For that matter, just what sort of secrets were in the Chamber of Secrets in the first place? Harry hadn't done a lot of research on the subject, in part because he'd gotten the impression that nobody knew anything—

Professor Quirrell was smiling. "Why not just write the secret down?"

"Ahhh..." said Harry. "Because if the Monster spoke Parseltongue, that would ensure that only a true descendant of Slytherin could hear the secret?"

"Easy enough to key the wards on the Chamber to a phrase spoken in Parseltongue. Why go to the trouble of creating Slytherin's Monster? It cannot have been easy to create a creature with a lifespan of centuries.

Come, Mr. Potter, it should be obvious; what are the secrets that can be told from one living mind to another, but never written down?"

Harry saw it then, with a burst of adrenaline that started his heart racing, his breath coming faster. "Oh."

Salazar Slytherin had been very cunning indeed. Cunning enough to come up with a way to bypass the Interdict of Merlin.

Powerful wizardries couldn't be transmitted through books or ghosts, but if you could create a long-lived enough sentient creature with a good enough memory—

"It seems very probable to me," said Professor Quirrell, "that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named began his climb to power with secrets obtained from Slytherin's Monster. That Salazar's lost knowledge is the source of You-Know-Who's extraordinarily powerful wizardry. Hence my interest in the Chamber of Secrets and the case of Mr. Hagrid."

"I see," Harry said. And if *he*, Harry, could find Salazar's Chamber of Secrets... then all of the lost knowledge that Lord Voldemort had obtained would be *his* as well.

Yes. That was *just* how the story should go.

Add in Harry's superior intelligence and some original magical research and some Muggle rocket launchers, and the resulting fight would be completely one-sided, which was exactly how Harry wanted it.

Harry was grinning now, a very evil grin. *New priority: Find everything in Hogwarts that looks remotely like a snake and try speaking to it. Starting with everything you've already tried, only this time be sure to use Parseltongue instead of English—get Draco to let you into the Slytherin dorms—*

"Don't become too excited, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell. His own face had become expressionless, now. "You must *continue* thinking. What were the Dark Lord's parting words to Slytherin's Monster?"

"*What?*" Harry said. "How could either of us possibly know that?"

"Visualize the scene, Mr. Potter. Let your imagination fill in the details. Slytherin's Monster—probably some great serpent, so that only a Parselmouth may speak to it—has finished imparting all of the knowledge it possesses to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. It conveys to him Salazar's final benediction, and warns him that the Chamber of Secrets must now remain closed until the next descendant of Salazar should

prove cunning enough to open it. And he who will become the Dark Lord nods, and says to it—

“Avada Kedavra,” said Harry, suddenly feeling sick to his stomach.

“Rule Twelve,” Professor Quirrell said quietly. “Never leave the source of your power lying around where someone else can find it.”

Harry’s gaze dropped to the tablecloth, which had decorated itself in a mournful pattern of black flowers and shadows. Somehow that seemed... too sad to be imagined, Slytherin’s great snake had only wanted to help Lord Voldemort, and Lord Voldemort had just... there was something unbearably sorrowful about it, what sort of person would *do* that to a being who’d offered them nothing but friendship... “Do you think the Dark Lord would have—”

“Yes,” Professor Quirrell said flatly. “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named left quite a trail of bodies behind him, Mr. Potter; I doubt he would have omitted that one. If there were any artifacts left there that could be moved, the Dark Lord would have taken those with him as well. There might still be something worth seeing in the Chamber of Secrets, and to find it would prove yourself the true Heir of Slytherin. But do not raise your hopes too high. I suspect that all you will find is the remains of Slytherin’s Monster resting quietly in its grave.”

They sat in silence for a while.

“I could be wrong,” said Professor Quirrell. “In the end it is only a guess. But I did wish to warn you, Mr. Potter, so that you would not be too sorely disappointed.”

Harry nodded shortly.

“One might even regret your infant self’s victory,” said Professor Quirrell. His smile twisted. “If only You-Know-Who had lived, you might have persuaded him to teach you some of the knowledge that would have been your heritage, from one Heir of Slytherin to another.” The smile twisted further, as though to mock the obvious impossibility, even given the premise.

Note to self, thought Harry, with a slight chill and an edge of anger, make sure to extract my heritage out of the Dark Lord’s mind, one way or another.

There was another silence. Professor Quirrell was looking at Harry as though waiting for him to ask something.

"Well," said Harry, "so long as we're on the topic, can I ask how you think the whole Parselmouth business actually—"

There came a knock at the door, then. Professor Quirrell raised a cautionary finger, then opened the door with a wave. The waitress entered, balancing a huge platter with their meals as though the whole assembly weighed nothing (which was in fact probably the case). She gave Professor Quirrell his bowl of green soup, and a glass of his usual Chianti; and set down before Harry a plate of small meat strips smothered in a heavy-looking sauce, plus a glass of his accustomed treacle soda. Then she bowed, managing to make it seem like sincere respect rather than perfunctory acknowledgment, and departed.

When she was gone, Professor Quirrell held up a finger for silence again, and drew his wand.

And then Professor Quirrell began performing a certain series of incantations that Harry recognized, making him take a sharp breath. It was the series and ordering that Mr. Bester had used, the full set of twenty-seven spells that you would perform before discussing anything of truly great import.

If the discussion of the Chamber of Secrets *hadn't* counted as important—

When Professor Quirrell was done—he'd performed *thirty* spells, three of which Harry hadn't heard before—the Defense Professor said, "Now we shall not be interrupted for a time. Can you keep a secret, Mr. Potter?"

Harry nodded.

"A serious secret, Mr. Potter," Professor Quirrell said. His eyes were intent, his face grave. "One which could potentially send me to Azkaban. Think about it before you reply."

For a moment Harry didn't even see why the question should be hard, given his growing collection of secrets. Then—

If this secret could send Professor Quirrell to Azkaban, that means he's done something illegal...

Harry's brain performed a few calculations. Whatever the secret, Professor Quirrell did not think his illegal act would reflect badly on him in Harry's eyes. There was no advantage to be gained from *not* hearing it.

And if it did reveal something wrong with Professor Quirrell, then it was very much to Harry's advantage to know it, even if he had promised not to tell anyone.

"I never had very much respect for authority," Harry said. "Legal and governmental authority included. I will keep your secret."

Harry didn't bother asking whether the revelation was worth the danger it would pose to Professor Quirrell. The Defense Professor wasn't stupid.

"Then I must test whether you are truly a descendant of Salazar," said Professor Quirrell, and stood up from his chair. Harry, prompted more by reflex and instinct than calculation, shoved himself up out of his own chair as well.

There was a blur, a shift, a sudden motion.

Harry aborted his panicked backward leap halfway through, leaving him windmilling his arms and trying not to fall over, a frantic flush of adrenaline running through him.

At the other end of the room swayed a snake a meter high, bright green and intricately banded in white and blue. Harry didn't know enough snakelore to recognize it, but he knew that 'brightly colored' meant 'poisonous'.

The constant sense of doom had diminished, ironically enough, after the Defense Professor of Hogwarts had turned into a venomous snake.

Harry swallowed hard and said, "Greetings—ah, hssss, no, ah, *greetingss*."

"Sso," hissed the snake. "*You sspeak, I hear. I sspeak, you hear?*"

"Yess, I hear," hissed Harry. "*You are an Animaguss?*"

"Obvioussly," hissed the snake. "*Thirty-sseven ruless, number thirty-four: Become Animaguss. All ssensible people do, if can. Thuss, very rare.*" The snake's eyes were flat surfaces ensconced within dark pits, sharp black pupils in dark gray fields. "*This iss mosst ssecure way to sspeak. You ssee? No otherss undersstand uss.*"

"Even if they are ssnake Animagi?"

"Not unlesss heir of Slytherin willss." The snake gave a series of short hisses which Harry's brain translated as sardonic laughter. "*Slytherin*

not stupid. Snake Animagus not same as Parselmouth. Would be huge flaw in scheme.

Well that definitely argued that Parseltongue was personal magic, not snakes being sentient beings with a learnable language—

"I am not registered," hissed the snake. The dark pits of its eyes stared at Harry. "Animagus must be registered. Penalty is two years imprisonment. Will you keep my secret, boy?"

"Yes," hissed Harry. "Would never break promise."

The snake seemed to hold still, as though in shock, and then began to sway again. *"We come here next in seven days. Bring cloak to pass unseen, bring hourglass to move through time—"*

"You know?" hissed Harry in shock. "How—"

Again the series of short quick hisses that translated as sardonic laughter. *"You arrive in my first class while still in other classes, strike down enemy with pie, two balls of memory—"*

"Never mind," hissed Harry. "Stupid question, forgot you were smart."

"Foolish thing to forget," said the snake, but the hiss did not seem offended.

"Hourglass is restricted," Harry said. "Cannot use until ninth hour."

The snake twitched its head, a snakish nod. *"Many restrictions. Locked to your use only, cannot be stolen. Cannot transport other humans. But snake carried in pouch, I suspect will go with. Think possible to hold hourglass motionless within shell, without disturbing wards, while you turn shell around it. We will test in seven days. Will not speak of plans beyond this. You say nothing, to no one. Give no sign of expectancy, none. Understand?"*

Harry nodded.

"Answer in speech."

"Yes."

"Will do as I said?"

"Yes. But," Harry gave a wobbling rasp that was how his mind had translated a hesitant 'Ahhh' into snakish, "I do not promise to do whatever this is, you have not said—"

The snake performed a shiver that Harry's mind translated as a severe glare. *"Of course not. Will discuss specifics at next meeting."*

The blur and motion reversed itself, and Professor Quirrell was standing there once more. For a moment the Defense Professor himself seemed to sway, as the snake had swayed, and his eyes seemed cold and flat; and then his shoulders straightened and he was human once more.

And the aura of doom had returned.

Professor Quirrell's chair scooted back for him, and he sat down in it. "No sense in letting this go to waste," Professor Quirrell said as he picked up his spoon, "though at the moment I would much prefer a live mouse. One can never quite disentangle the mind from the body it wears, you see..."

Harry slowly took his seat and began eating.

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"So the line of Salazar did not die with You-Know-Who after all," said Professor Quirrell after a time. "It would seem that rumors have already begun to spread, among our fine student body, that you are Dark; I wonder what they would think, if they knew that."

"Or if they knew that I had destroyed a Dementor," Harry said, and shrugged. "I figure all the fuss will blow over over the next time I do something interesting. Hermione is having trouble, though, and I was wondering if you might have any suggestions for her."

The Defense Professor ate several spoonfuls of soup in silence, then; and when he spoke again, his voice was oddly flat. "You really care about that girl."

"Yes," Harry said quietly.

"I suppose that is why she was able to bring you out of your Dementation?"

"More or less," Harry said. The statement was true in a way, just not exact; it was not that his Demented self had cared, but that it had been confused.

"I did not have any friends like that when I was young." Still the same emotionless voice. "What would have become of you, I wonder, if you had been alone?"

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CHAPTER 49

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Harry shivered before he could stop himself.

“You must be feeling grateful to her.”

Harry just nodded. Not quite exact, but true.

“Then here is what I might have done at your age, if there had been anyone to do it for—”

CHAPTER FIFTY

SELF CENTEREDNESS

Padma Patil had finished her dinner a little late, getting on toward seven-thirty, and was now striding quickly out of the Great Hall on her way to the Ravenclaw dorm and the study rooms. Gossiping was fun and destroying Granger's reputation was more fun, but it could distract from schoolwork. She'd put off a six-inch essay on *lomillialor* wood due in next morning's Herbology class, and she needed to finish it tonight.

It was while she was passing through a long, twisting, narrow stone corridor that the whisper came, sounding like it was coming from right behind her.

"Padma Patil..."

She spun around quick as lightning, her wand already snatched up from a pocket of her robes and leaping into her hands, if Harry Potter thought he could sneak up on and scare *her* that easily—

There was no one there.

Instantly Padma spun around and looked in the other direction, if it had been a Ventriloquism Charm—

There was no one there, either.

The whispering sigh came again, soft and dangerous with a slight hissing undertone.

"Padma Patil, Slytherin girl..."

"Harry Potter, Slytherin boy," she said out loud.

She'd fought Potter and his Chaos Legion a dozen times over, and she *knew* that this was Harry Potter doing this somehow...

...even though the Ventriloquism Charm was only line-of-sight, and in the winding corridor, she could easily see all the way to the nearest twist both forward and backward, and there was no one there...

...it didn't matter. She knew her enemy.

There was a whispery chuckle, now coming from beside her, and she spun around and pointed her wand at the whisper and shouted "*Luminos!*"

The red bolt of light shot out and struck the wall, which lit with a crimson glow that soon faded.

She hadn't really expected it to work. Harry Potter couldn't *possibly* be invisible, not really invisible, that was magic most *grownups* couldn't do, and she'd never believed nine-tenths of the stories about him.

The whispery voice laughed again, now on her other side.

"Harry Potter stands on the precipice," whispered the voice, now sounding very close to her ear, "he is wavering, but you, you are already falling, Slytherin girl..."

"The hat never called out Slytherin for *my* name, Potter!" She backed up against the wall, so she wouldn't have to watch behind herself, and raised her wand in an attack stance.

Again the soft laugh. "Harry Potter has been in the Ravenclaw common room for the last half-hour, helping Kevin Entwhistle and Michael Corner rehearse Potions recipes. But it matters not. I am here to deliver a warning to you, Padma Patil, and if you choose to ignore it, that is your own affair."

"Fine," she said coldly. "Go ahead and warn me, Potter, I'm not afraid of you."

"Slytherin was a great House, once," said the whisper; it sounded sadder, now. "Slytherin was once a House you would have been proud to choose, Padma Patil. But something turned wrong, something turned sour; do you know what went awry in Slytherin House, Padma Patil?"

"No, and I don't care!"

"But you should care," said the whisper, now sounding like it was coming from just behind her head where it stood almost pressed against the wall. "For you are still that girl whom the Sorting Hat offered that choice. Do you think that just choosing Ravenclaw means that you are not Pansy Parkinson, and will not ever become Pansy Parkinson, no matter how you conduct yourself otherwise?"

Despite everything, now, small chills of fear were spreading out from her spine and running over her skin. She'd heard *those* stories about

Harry Potter too, that he was a secret Legilimens. But she still stood straight, and she put all the bite she could into her voice when she said, "The Slytherins went Dark to get power, just like *you* did, Potter. And I won't, not ever."

"But you'll spread vicious rumors about an innocent girl," whispered the voice, "even though it will not help you attain any of your own ambitions, and without considering that she has powerful allies who might take offense. That is not the proud Slytherin of the old days, Padma Patil, that is not the pride of Salazar, that is Slytherin gone rotten, Padma Parkinson not Padma Malfoy..."

She was getting more creeped out than she ever had been in her life, and the possibility was starting to occur to her that this might *really* be a ghost. She hadn't ever heard that ghosts could hide themselves like this, but maybe they just didn't usually do it—not to mention that most ghosts weren't this *eerie*, they were just dead people after all—"Who *are* you? The Bloody Baron?"

"When Harry Potter was bullied and beaten," the voice whispered, "he commanded all his allies to refrain from vengeance; do you remember that, Padma Patil? For Harry Potter is wavering, but not yet lost; he is struggling, he knows himself to be in peril. But Hermione Granger made no such request of her own allies. Harry Potter is angered with you now, Padma Patil, more angered than he would ever be on his own behalf... and *he* has allies of his own."

A shudder went through her, she knew that it was visible and she hated herself for it.

"Oh, don't be afraid," breathed the voice. "I will not hurt you. For you see, Padma Patil, Hermione Granger truly is innocent. *She* does not stand on the precipice, *she* is not falling. She did not ask her allies to refrain from hurting you, because the thought did not even occur to her as a possibility. And Harry Potter knows very well that if he hurt you or caused you to be hurt, for Hermione Granger's sake, then she would never speak to him again until the Sun burned low and the last star failed in the night sky." The voice was very sad now. "She truly is a kindly girl, a person such as I could only wish to be..."

"Granger can't cast the Patronus Charm!" said Padma. "If she was

really as nice as she pretends to be—”

“Can *you* cast the Patronus Charm, Padma Patil? You dared not even attempt it, you feared what the result would be.”

“That’s not *true*! I didn’t have time, that was all!”

The whisper continued. “But Hermione Granger did try, openly before her friends, and when her magic failed she was surprised and dismayed. For there are secrets to the Patronus Charm that few ever knew, and maybe none now know but I.” A soft, whispery chuckle. “Let it stand that it is no stain of her spirit that halts her light from coming forth. Hermione Granger cannot cast the Patronus Charm for the very same reason that Godric Gryffindor, who raised these halls, never could.”

The corridor *was* becoming colder, she was certain of it, as though someone were using the Chilling Charm.

“And Harry Potter is not Hermione Granger’s only ally.” Now there was an undertone of dry amusement in that whisper, it reminded her suddenly and frighteningly of Professor Quirrell. “Filius Flitwick and Minerva McGonagall are quite fond of her, I do believe. Did it occur to you that if those two learned what you were doing to Hermione Granger, they might become less fond of you? They might not intervene openly, perhaps; but they might be a little slower to award you House Points, a little slower to steer opportunities your way—”

“Potter *snarked* on me?”

A ghostly chuckle, a dry heh-heh-heh. “Do you think those two are stupid, deaf and blind?” In a sadder whisper, “Do you think Hermione Granger is not precious to them, that they will not see her hurting? As they might have been fond of you once, their bright young Padma Patil, but you are throwing it away...”

Padma’s throat was dry. She hadn’t thought of that, not at all.

“I wonder how many people will end up caring for you, Padma Patil, on this path that you now tread. Is it worth that much, just to distance yourself further from your sister? To be the shadow to Parvati’s light? Your deepest fear has always been to fall into harmony with her, *back* into harmony with her I should say; but is it worth hurting an innocent girl, just to make yourself that much more different? Must you be the *evil* twin, Padma Patil, can you not find a different good to pursue?”

Her heart was hammering in her chest. She'd, she'd never talked about that with *anyone*—

"I have always wondered at how students bully each other," sighed the voice. "How children make life difficult for themselves, how they turn their schools into prisons even with their own hands. Why do human beings make their own lives so unpleasant? I can give you a part of the answer, Padma Patil. It is because people do not stop and think before causing pain, if they do not imagine that they themselves could also be hurt, that they might also suffer from their own misdeeds. But suffer you will, oh, yes, Padma Patil, suffer you will, if you stay on this road. You will suffer the same pain of loneliness, the same pain of others' fear and distrust, that you now inflict on Hermione Granger. Only for you it will be deserved."

Her wand was shaking in her hand.

"You did not choose sides when you went to Ravenclaw, girl. You choose your side by the way you live your life, what you do to other people and what you do to yourself. Will you illuminate others' lives, or darken them? That is the choice between Light and Dark, not any word the Sorting Hat cries out. And the hard part, Padma Patil, is not saying 'Light', the hard part is deciding which is which, and admitting it to yourself when you begin down the wrong road."

There was silence. It went on for a time, and Padma realized that she had been dismissed.

Padma almost dropped her wand, when she tried to put it back into her pocket. She almost fell, when she took a step forward away from the wall, and turned to go—

"I have not always chosen rightly between Light and Dark," the whisper said, now loud and harsh directly into her ear. "Do not take my wisdom as a final word, girl, do not fear to question it, for though I tried I have sometimes failed, oh, yes, I have failed. But you are hurting a true innocent, and you will achieve none of your ambitions by doing so, it is not for any cunning plan. You are inflicting pain purely for the sake of the pleasure it brings you. I have not always chosen rightly between Light and Dark, but that I know for darkness, for certain. You are hurting an innocent girl, and escaping retribution only because she is too kindly to

tolerate her allies moving against you. I cannot hurt you for that, so know only that I cannot respect it. You are unworthy of Slytherin; go and do your Herbology homework, Ravenclaw girl!”

The final whisper came out in a louder hiss that sounded almost like a snake, and Padma fled, she fled down the corridors like Lethifolds were chasing her, she ran heedless of the rules about running in the corridors, even when she passed other students who looked at her in surprise, she did not stop, she ran all the way to the Ravenclaw dorms with her pulse pounding in her neck, the door asked her “Why does the Sun shine in the day instead of the nighttime?” and it took her three tries before she could make her answer coherent, and then the door came open and she saw—

—a few girls and boys, some young and some old, all staring at her, and in one corner at the pentagonal table, Harry Potter and Michael Corner and Kevin Entwhistle, looking up from their textbooks.

“Sweet Merlin!” exclaimed Penelope Clearwater, rising from a couch. “What happened to you, Padma?”

“I,” she stuttered, “I, I heard—a ghost—”

“It wasn’t the Bloody Baron, was it?” said Clearwater. She drew her wand and a moment later she was holding a cup, and then an *Aguamenti* later the cup was filled with water. “Here, drink this, sit down—”

Padma was already striding toward the pentagonal table. She looked at Harry Potter, who was looking at her with his own gaze, calm and grave and a little sad.

“You did this!” Padma said. “How—you—how dare you!”

There was a sudden hush in the Ravenclaw dorm.

Harry just looked at her.

And said, “Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Don’t deny it,” Padma said, her voice shaking, “you set that ghost on me, it said—”

“I mean it,” Harry said. “Can I help you with anything? Get you some food, or go fetch a soda for you, or help you with your homework, or anything like that?”

Everyone was staring at the two of them.

“Why?” Padma said. She couldn’t think of anything else to say, she didn’t understand.

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SELF CENTEREDNESS

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"Because some of us are standing on the precipice," Harry said. "And the difference is what you do for other people. Will you let me help you with something, Padma, please?"

She stared at him, and knew, in that moment, that he'd gotten his own warning, same as her.

"I..." she said. "I've got to write six inches on *lomillialor*—"

"Let me run up to my dorm room and get my Herbology stuff," Harry said. He rose from the pentagonal table, looked at Entwhistle and Corner. "Sorry, guys, I'll see you later."

They didn't say anything, just stared, along with everyone else in the dorm room, as Harry Potter walked over to the stairs.

And just as he started up, he said, "And no one's to pester her with questions unless *she* wants to talk about it, I hope everyone's *got that*?"

"Got it," said most of the first years and some of the older students, a few of them sounding quite scared.

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And she talked about a lot of things with Harry Potter besides *lomillialor* wood—even her fear of falling back into harmony with Parvati, which she'd never talked about with *anyone* before, but then Harry's ghostly ally already knew. And Harry had reached into his pouch and pulled out some *odd* books, loaning them to her on condition of complete secrecy, saying that if she could comprehend those books it would change the pattern of her thinking enough that she'd never fall into harmony with Parvati again...

At nine o' clock, when Harry said he had to go, the essay was only half done.

And when Harry paused, and looked at her on the way out, and said that *he* thought she was worthy of Slytherin, it made her feel good for a whole minute before she realized what had just been said to her and who had said it.

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*

When Padma got down to breakfast, that morning, she saw Mandy see her and whisper something to the girl sitting beside her at the Ravenclaw table.

She saw that girl get up from the bench and walk toward her.

Last night Padma had been glad that girl roomed in the other dorm; but now that she thought about it, this was worse, now she had to do it in front of *everyone*.

But even though Padma was sweating, she knew what she had to do.

The girl came closer—

“I’m sorry.”

“What?” said Padma. That was *her* line.

“I’m sorry,” repeated Hermione Granger. Her voice was loud so that everyone could hear. “I... I didn’t ask Harry to do that, and I was angry with him when I found out, and I made him promise not to do it again to *anyone*, and I’m not talking to him for a week... I’m really, *really* sorry, Miss Patil.”

Hermione Granger’s back was stiff, her face was stiff, you could see the sweat on her face.

“Um,” said Padma. Her own thoughts were pretty much scrambled, now...

Padma’s gaze flicked to the Ravenclaw table, where one boy was watching them with tight eyes and his hands clenched in his lap.

EARLIER:

"I told you to be *nicer!*" shrieked Hermione.

Harry was starting to sweat. He'd never actually heard Hermione scream at him before, and it was quite loud in the empty classroom.

"I—but—but I *was* nice!" Harry protested. "I practically *redeemed* her, Padma was going down the wrong path and I turned her off it! I probably changed her whole life to be happier! Besides, you should've heard the *original* version of what Professor Quirrell suggested I do—" at which point Harry realized what he was saying and closed his mouth a second too late.

Hermione clutched at her chestnut curls, a gesture Harry hadn't seen from her before. "What'd *he* say to do? *Kill* her?"

The Defense Professor had suggested that Harry identify all the key influential students inside and outside his year and try to gain control of the entire Hogwarts rumor mill, remarking that this was a generally useful and amusing challenge for any true Slytherin attending Hogwarts.

"Nothing like *that*," Harry said quickly, "he just said in a general way that I should get influence over the people spreading rumors, and I decided that the *nice* version of that would be to just inform Padma directly about the meaning of what she was doing, and the possible consequences of her actions, instead of trying to threaten her or anything like that—"

"*You call that not threatening someone?*" Hermione's hands were pulling at her hair now.

"Um..." Harry said. "I guess she might've felt a *little* threatened, but Hermione, people will do whatever they think they can get away with, they don't care about how much it hurts other people if it doesn't hurt themselves, if Padma thinks there's *no* consequences to spreading lies about you then of *course* she'll just go on doing it—"

"And you think there's going to be no consequences to what *you* did?"

Harry got a sudden sick feeling to his stomach.

Hermione had the angriest look on her that he'd ever seen. "What do you think the other students think of you now, Harry? Of *me*? If Harry doesn't like the way you talk about Hermione, you'll get ghosts set on you, is that what you want them to think?"

Harry opened his mouth and no words came out, he just... hadn't thought about it that way, actually...

Hermione reached down to grab her books from the table where she'd slammed them. "I'm not talking to you for a week, and I'll *tell* everyone I'm not talking to you for a week, and I'll tell them *why*, and *maybe* that'll undo some of what you just did. And after that week, I'll—I'll decide then what to do, I guess—"

"*Hermione!*" Harry's own voice rose to a shriek of desperation. "I was *trying to help!*"

The girl turned back and looked at him as she opened the classroom door.

"Harry," she said, and her voice trembled a little beneath the anger, "Professor Quirrell is sucking you into the darkness, he really is, I mean it, Harry."

"This... wasn't him, this wasn't what he said to do, this was just *me*—"

Hermione's voice was almost a whisper now. "Someday you're going to go out to lunch with him, and it will be your dark side that comes back, or maybe even you won't come back at all."

"I promise you," Harry said, "that I *will* come back from lunch."

He wasn't even thinking as he said it.

And Hermione just turned around and strode out and slammed the door behind her.

Way to invoke the laws of dramatic irony, moron, observed Harry's Internal Critic. *Now you're going to die this Saturday, your last words will be 'I'm sorry, Hermione', and she'll always regret that the last thing she did was slam the door—*

Oh, shut up.

*
*

When Padma sat down with Hermione for breakfast, and said in a voice loud enough for others to hear that the ghost had just told her things that were important for her to hear, and Harry Potter had been right to do it, there were some people who were less frightened afterward, and some who were frightened more.

And afterward people *did* say fewer nasty things about Hermione, at least in the first year, at least in public where Harry Potter might hear about it.

When Professor Flitwick asked Harry if he was responsible for what had happened to Padma, and Harry said yes, Professor Flitwick told him that he was to serve two days' detention. Even if it had only been a ghost and Padma hadn't been hurt, still, that wasn't acceptable behavior for a Ravenclaw student. Harry nodded and said that he understood why the Professor had to do that, and wouldn't protest; but considering that it *did* seem to have turned Padma around, did Professor Flitwick really think, off the record, that he'd done the wrong thing? And Professor Flitwick paused, seeming to actually think about it, and then said to Harry, in a solemnly squeaky voice, that he needed to learn how to relate to other students the normal way.

And Harry couldn't help but think that this was advice that Professor Quirrell would never give him.

Harry couldn't help but think that if he'd done it Professor Quirrell's way, the normal *Slytherin* way, a mixture of positive and negative incentives to bring Padma and the other rumor-mongers under his explicit control, then Padma wouldn't have talked about it, and Hermione would have never found out...

...in which case Padma wouldn't have been redeemed, she would have stayed on the wrong path, and she herself would have suffered from that eventually. It wasn't as if Harry had *lied* to Padma in any way, when he was Time-Turned and invisible and using the Ventriloquism Charm.

Harry still wasn't sure whether he'd done the right thing, or *a* right thing, and Hermione hadn't relented on not talking to him—though she was talking a lot with Padma. It hurt more than Harry had expected, going back to studying by himself; like his brain had already started to forget its long-honed skill of being alone.

The days until Saturday's lunch with Professor Quirrell seemed to go by very, very slowly.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART I

Saturday.

Harry had run into trouble falling asleep Friday night, which he had anticipated might happen, and so he had decided to take the obvious advance precaution of buying a sleeping potion; and to prevent it from constituting a visible sign that he was nervous, he had decided to buy it off Fred and George a couple of months earlier. (*Be prepared, that's the Boy Scout's marching song...*)

Thus Harry was fully rested, and his pouch contained almost everything which he owned and might conceivably need. Harry had, in fact, run into the volume limitation on the pouch; and keeping in mind that he would need to store a large snake, and might need to store who-knew-what-else, he had removed some of the bulkier items, like the car battery. He was up to the point now where he could Transfigure something the size of a car battery in four minutes flat, so it wasn't much of a loss.

Harry *had* kept the emergency flares and the oxyacetylene welding torch and fuel tank, since you couldn't just Transfigure things that were to be burned.

(*Be prepared, as through life you march along...*)

Mary's Place.

After the waitress had taken their order and bowed to them and left the room, Professor Quirrell had performed only four Charms, and then they'd talked about nothing of any vast consequence, just Professor Quirrell's complex thesis about how the Dark Lord's curse on the Defense position had led to the decline of dueling and how this had changed social

customs in magical Britain. Harry listened and nodded and said intelligent things, while he tried to control the pounding of his heart.

Then the waitress came in again bearing their food, and this time, a minute after the waitress had departed, Professor Quirrell gestured for the door to close and lock, and began to speak twenty-nine security Charms, one of the ones in Mr. Bester's sequence being left out this time, which somewhat puzzled Harry.

Professor Quirrell finished his Charms—
—stood up from his chair—
—blurred into a green snake, banded in blue and white—
—hissed, *"Hungry, boy? Eat your fill sswiftly, we sshall need both sstrength and time."*

Harry's eyes were a bit wide, but he hissed, *"I ate well at breakfasst,"* and then rapidly began forking noodles into his mouth.

The snake watched him for a moment, with those flat eyes, and then hissed, *"Do not wissh to explain here. Prefer to be elsewhere firsst. Need to leave unobserved, without ssign we have ever departed room."*

"Sso no one can track uss," hissed Harry.

"Yess. Do you trusst me that much, boy? Think before ansswer. I will have important requesst of you, which requiress trusst; if ssay no regardless, then ssay no now."

Harry dropped his gaze from the snake's flat eyes, and looked back down at his sauce-coated noodles, and ate another bite, then another, while he thought.

The Defense Professor... was an ambiguous figure, to put it mildly; Harry thought he had unraveled some of his goals, but others remained mysterious.

But Professor Quirrell had knocked down two hundred girls to stop the ones summoning Harry. Professor Quirrell had deduced that the Dementor was draining Harry through his wand. The Defense Professor had saved Harry's life, twice, in a two-week period.

Which could mean that the Defense Professor was just saving Harry *for later*, that there were ulterior motives. Indeed, it was *certain* that there were ulterior motives. Professor Quirrell wasn't doing this on a whim. But then Professor Quirrell had also seen Harry taught Occlumency, he had taught Harry how to lose... if the Defense Professor wanted to make

some use of Harry Potter, it was a use that required a strengthened Harry Potter, not a weakened one. That was what it meant to be used by a friend, that they would want the use to make you stronger instead of weaker.

And if there was sometimes a cold atmosphere about the Defense Professor, bitterness in his voice or emptiness in his gaze, then Harry was the only one who Professor Quirrell allowed to see it.

Harry didn't quite know how to describe in words the sense of kinship he felt with Professor Quirrell, except to say that the Defense Professor was the only *clear-thinking* person Harry had met in the wizarding world. Sooner or later everyone else started playing Quidditch, or not putting protective shells on their time machines, or thinking that Death was their friend. It didn't matter how good their intentions were. Sooner or later, and usually sooner, they demonstrated that something deep inside their brain was confused. Everyone except Professor Quirrell. It was a bond that went beyond anything of debts owed, or even anything of personal liking, that the two of them were alone in the wizarding world. And if the Defense Professor occasionally seemed a little scary or a little Dark, well, that was just the same thing some people said about Harry.

"*I trusst you*," hissed Harry.

And the snake explained the first stage of the plan.

*
*

Harry took a final forkful of noodles, chewed. Beside him, Professor Quirrell, now in human form again, was eating his soup placidly, as though nothing of special interest were occurring.

Then Harry swallowed, and in the same moment stood up from his chair, already feeling his heart start to hammer hard in his chest. The security precautions they were taking were literally the most stringent possible...

"Are you ready to test it, Mr. Potter?" Professor Quirrell said calmly.

It *wasn't* a test, but Professor Quirrell wouldn't say that, not out loud in human speech, even in this room screened to the limit that Professor Quirrell had secured with further Charms.

"Yep," Harry said as casually as he could.

Step one.

Harry said "Cloak" to his pouch, drew forth the Cloak of Invisibility, and then unstuck the pouch from his belt and threw it toward the other side of the table.

The Defense Professor stood up from his own seat, drew his wand, bent down, and touched his wand to the pouch, murmuring a quiet incantation. The new enchantments would ensure that Professor Quirrell could enter the pouch on his own in snakeform, and leave it on his own, and hear what went on outside while he was in the pouch.

Step two.

As Professor Quirrell stood up from where he'd bent over by the pouch, and put away his wand, his wand happened to point in Harry's direction, and there was a brief crawling sensation on Harry's chest near where the Time-Turner lay, like something creepy had passed very close by without touching him.

Step three.

The Defense Professor turned into a snake again, and the sense of doom diminished; the snake crawled to the pouch and into it, the pouch's mouth opening to admit the green shape, and as the mouth closed again behind the tail, the sense of doom diminished further.

Step four.

Harry drew his wand, being careful to stand still as he did it, so that the Time-Turner would not move from where Professor Quirrell had anchored the hourglass within the shell in its current orientation. "*Wingardium Leviosa*," murmured Harry, and the pouch began to float toward him.

Slowly, slowly, as Professor Quirrell had instructed, the pouch began to float toward Harry, who waited alert for any sign the pouch was opening, in which case Harry was to use the Hover Charm to propel it away from him as fast as possible.

As the pouch came within a meter of Harry, the sense of doom returned.

As Harry reattached the pouch to his belt, the sense of doom was stronger than it had ever been, but still not overwhelming; it was tolera-

ble.

Even with Professor Quirrell's Animagus form lying within the extended space of the pouch resting on Harry's very hip.

Step five.

Harry sheathed his wand. His other hand still held the Cloak of Invisibility, and Harry drew that cloak over himself.

Step six.

And so in that room shielded from every possible scrying, which Professor Quirrell had personally and further secured, it was not until *after* Harry was wearing the true Cloak of Invisibility that he reached beneath his shirt and twisted the outer shell of the Time-Turner just once.

The Time-Turner's inner hourglass stayed anchored and motionless, the setting twisted around it—

The food vanished from the table, the chairs leaped back into place, the door sprang open.

Mary's Room was deserted, as it should have been, because Professor Quirrell had earlier contacted Mary's Place under a false name to inquire whether the room would be available at this hour—not to reserve it, not to place a canceled reservation that might be noted, but only to inquire.

Step seven.

Staying under the Cloak of Invisibility, Harry left through the open door. He navigated the tiled hallways of Mary's Place to the well-stocked bar that greeted new entrants, tended by the owner, Jake. There were only a few people at the bar, in the morning before proper lunchtime, and Harry had to wait invisibly by the door for several minutes, listening to the murmur of conversation and the gurgle of alcohol, before the door opened to admit a huge genial Irishman, and Harry slipped out silently in his wake.

Step eight.

Harry walked for a while. He was well away from Mary's Place when he turned off Diagon Alley into a smaller alley, at the end of which lay a shop that was dark, the windows enchanted to blackness.

Step nine.

"Sword fish melon friend," Harry spoke the passphrase to the lock, and it clicked open.

Within the shop was also darkness, the light from the open door briefly illuminating it to show a wide, empty room. The furniture shop which had once operated here had gone bankrupt a few months ago, according to the Defense Professor, and the shop had been repossessed, but not yet resold. The walls were painted a simple white, the wooden floor scratched and unpolished, a single closed door set in the back wall; this had been a showroom, once, but now it showed nothing.

The door clicked shut behind Harry, and then the darkness was pitch and complete.

Step ten.

Harry took out his wand and said "*Lumos*", lighting the room with white glow; he took his pouch from his belt (the sense of doom growing a little sharper as he grasped it with his fingers) and lightly tossed it to the opposite side of the room (the sense of doom fading almost completely). And then he began to take off the Cloak of Invisibility, even as his voice hissed, "*It iss done.*"

Step eleven.

From the pouch poked a green head, followed shortly by a meter-long green body as the snake slithered out. A moment later, the snake blurred into Professor Quirrell.

Step twelve.

Harry waited in silence while the Defense Professor recited thirty Charms.

"All right," Professor Quirrell said calmly, when he had finished. "If anyone is still watching us now, we are in any case doomed, so I will speak plainly and in human form. Parseltongue does not quite suit me, I fear, as I am neither a descendant of Salazar nor a true snake."

Harry nodded.

"So, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell. His gaze intent, his pale blue eyes dark and shadowed in the white light coming from Harry's wand. "We are alone and unobserved, and I have an important question to ask you."

"Go ahead," said Harry, his heart starting to beat faster.

"What is your opinion of the government of magical Britain?"

That wasn't quite what Harry had been expecting, but it was close enough, so Harry said, "Based on my limited knowledge, I would say that both the Ministry and the Wizengamot appear to be stupid, corrupt, and evil."

"Correct," Professor Quirrell said. "Do you understand why I ask?"

Harry took a deep breath, and looked Professor Quirrell straight in the eyes, unflinching. Harry had finally worked out that the way to make amazing deductions from scanty evidence was to know the answer in advance, and he had guessed this answer fully a week ago. It needed only a slight adjustment...

"You are about to invite me to join a secret organization full of interesting people like yourself," said Harry, "one of whose goals is to reform or overthrow the government of magical Britain, and yes, I'm in."

There was a slight pause.

"I'm afraid that is not quite where I intended to direct this conversation," said Professor Quirrell. The corners of his lips were twitching slightly. "I merely planned to ask for your help in doing something extremely treasonous and illegal."

Darn, thought Harry. Still, Professor Quirrell hadn't *denied* it... "Go on."

"Before I do," said Professor Quirrell. There was no levity in his voice, now. "Are you open to such requests, Mr. Potter? I say again that if you are likely to say no regardless, you must say no now. If your curiosity impels you otherwise, squash it."

"Treasonous and illegal doesn't bother me," said Harry. "Risks bother me and the stakes would need to be commensurate, but I can't imagine *you* taking risks frivolously."

Professor Quirrell nodded. "I would not. It is a terrible abuse of my friendship with you, and of such trust as is placed in my teaching position at Hogwarts—"

"You can skip this part," Harry said.

The lips twitched again, and then went flat. "Then I shall skip it. Mr. Potter, you sometimes make a game of lying with truths, playing with words to conceal your meanings in plain sight. I, too, have been known to find that amusing. But if I so much as *tell* you what I hope we

shall do this day, Mr. Potter, you will *lie* about it. You will lie straight out, without hesitation, without wordplay or hints, to anyone who asks about it, be they foe or closest friend. You will lie to Malfoy, to Granger, and to McGonagall. You will speak, always and without hesitation, in *exactly* the fashion you would speak if you knew nothing, with no concern for your honor. That also is how it must be.”

There was silence, then, for a time.

That was a price measured in a fraction of Harry’s soul.

“Without telling me yet...” said Harry. “Can you say if the need is desperate?”

“There is someone in the most terrible want of your help,” Professor Quirrell said simply, “and there is no one who can help them but you.”

There was another silence, but not a long one.

“All right,” Harry said quietly. “Tell me of the mission.”

The dark robes of the Defense Professor seemed to blur against the shadow on the wall, cast by his silhouette blocking the white light of Harry’s wand. “The ordinary Patronus Charm, Mr. Potter, wards off a Dementor’s fear. But the Dementors still see you through it, they know that you are there. Only not your Patronus Charm. It blinds them, or more than blinds them. What I saw beneath the cloak wasn’t even looking in our direction as you killed it; as though it had forgotten our existence, even as it died.”

Harry nodded. That wasn’t surprising, not when you confronted a Dementor on the level of its true existence, beyond anthropomorphism. Death might be the last enemy, but it wasn’t a sentient enemy. When humanity had wiped out smallpox, smallpox hadn’t fought back.

“Mr. Potter, the central branch of Gringotts is guarded by every spell high and low that the goblins know. Even so those vaults have been successfully robbed; for what wizardry can do, wizardry can undo. And yet no one has ever escaped from Azkaban. No one. For every Charm there is a counter-Charm, for every ward there is a bypass. How can it be that no one has ever been rescued from Azkaban?”

“Because Azkaban has something invincible,” Harry said. “Something so terrible that no one can defeat it.”

That was the keystone of their perfect security, it had to be, nothing human. It was Death that guarded Azkaban.

"The Dementors don't like their meals being taken away from them," Professor Quirrell said. Coldness had entered that voice, now. "They know if anyone tries. There are more than a hundred Dementors there, and they speak to the guards as well. It's that simple, Mr. Potter. If you're a powerful wizard then Azkaban isn't hard to enter, and it isn't hard to leave. So long as you don't try to take anything out of it that belongs to the Dementors."

"But the Dementors are *not* invincible," said Harry. He could have cast the Patronus Charm with that thought, in that very moment. "Never believe that they are."

Professor Quirrell's voice was very quiet. "Do you remember what it was like when you went before the Dementor, the first time, when you failed?"

"I remember."

And then with a sudden sickening lurch in his stomach, Harry knew where this was going; he should have seen it before.

"There is an innocent person in Azkaban," Professor Quirrell said.

Harry nodded, there was a burning sensation in his throat, but he didn't cry.

"The one of whom I speak was not under the Imperius Curse," said the Defense Professor, dark robes silhouetted against a greater shadow. "There are surer ways to break wills than the Imperius, if you have the time for torture, and Legilimency, and rituals of which I will not speak. I cannot tell you how I know this, how I know any of this, cannot hint at it even to you, you will have to trust me. But there is a person in Azkaban who never once chose to serve the Dark Lord, who has spent years suffering alone in the most terrible cold and darkness imaginable, and never deserved a single minute of it."

Harry saw it in a single leap of intuition, his mouth racing almost ahead of his thoughts.

There was no hint, no warning, we all thought—

"A person by the name of Black," Harry said.

There was silence. Silence, while the pale blue eyes stared at him.

“Well,” said Professor Quirrell after a while. “So much for not telling you the name until after you had accepted the mission. I would ask whether you’re reading *my* mind, but that’s flatly impossible.”

Harry said nothing, but it was simple enough if you *believed* in the processes of modern democracy. The most obvious person in Azkaban to be innocent was the one who hadn’t gotten a trial—

“I am *certainly* impressed, Mr. Potter,” said Professor Quirrell. His face was grave. “But this is a serious matter, and if there is some way others could make the same deduction, I *must* know. So tell me, Mr. Potter. How in the name of Merlin, of Atlantis, and the void between the stars, did you guess that I was talking about Bellatrix?”

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART II

The adrenaline was already flowing in Harry's veins, his heart already hammering in his chest, there in that darkened and bankrupt store. Professor Quirrell had finished explaining, and in one hand, Harry held a tiny wooden twig that would be the key. This was it, this was the day and the moment when Harry started acting the part. His first true adventure, a dungeon to be pierced, an evil government to be defied, a maiden in distress to be rescued. Harry should have been more frightened, more reluctant, but instead he felt only that it was time and past time to start becoming the people he had read about in his books; to begin his journey toward what he had always known he was meant to be, a hero. To take the first step on the road that led to Kimball Kinnison and Captain Picard and Liono of Thundera and definitely *not* Raistlin Majere. So far as Harry's brain knew from watching early morning cartoons, when you grew up you were supposed to gain amazing powers and save the universe, that was what Harry's brain had seen adults doing and adopted as its role model for the maturation process, and Harry very much wanted to start growing up.

And if the pattern of the story called for the hero to lose some part of his innocence, as the result of his first adventure; then for now, at least, in this still-innocent moment, it seemed time and past time for him to experience that pain. Like casting off clothes too small for him; or like finally advancing to the next stage of the game, after being stuck for eleven years on world 3, level 2 of Super Mario Brothers.

Harry had read enough novels to suspect that he wouldn't feel this enthusiastic afterward, so he was enjoying it while it lasted.

There was a popping sound as something near Harry disappeared, and then there was no more time for heroic brooding.

Harry's hand snapped the small wooden twig.

A hook yanked motionlessly at Harry's abdomen as the portkey activated, feeling like a much harder pull this time than the smaller transports between the Hogwarts grounds and Diagon Alley—

—and dropped him into the middle of a huge roll of thunder dying away, and a lash of cold rain whipping him across the face, the water coating Harry's glasses and blinding him in an instant, turning the world into a blur even as he began to fall toward the raging ocean waves far below.

He had arrived high, high, high above the empty North Sea.

The shock of the blasting storm almost made Harry let go of the broomstick that Professor Quirrell had given him, which would not have been a good idea. It took nearly a full second for Harry to get his wits together and bring his broomstick back up in an easy swoop.

"I'm here," said an unfamiliar voice from a patch of empty air above him; low and gravelly, the voice of the sallow lanky bearded man Professor Quirrell had Polyjuiced into before Disillusioning himself and his broomstick.

"I'm here," Harry said from beneath the Cloak of Invisibility. He hadn't used Polyjuice himself. Wearing a different body hindered your magic, and Harry might need all of his little magic about him; thus the plan called for Harry to stay invisible at nearly all times, instead of Polyjuicing.

(Neither of them had spoken the other's name. You simply didn't use your names at any point during an illegal mission, even invisibly hovering over an anonymous patch of water in the North Sea. You simply didn't. It would be stupid.)

Carefully keeping a grip on the broomstick with one hand, while the rain and wind howled around him, Harry raised his wand in an equally careful grip and Imperviused his glasses.

Then, with the lenses clear, Harry looked around.

He was surrounded by wind and rain, it might have been five degrees Celsius if he was lucky; he'd already had a Warming Charm cast on himself just from being outside in February, but it wasn't standing up to the driving cold droplets. Worse than snow, the rain soaked into every exposed surface. The Cloak of Invisibility turned all of you invisible, but it didn't *cover* all of you, and that meant it didn't protect all of you from rain. Harry's face was exposed to the full force of the driven water, and it was driving straight into his neck and soaking down into his shirt, also the sleeves of his robes and the cuffs of his pants and his shoes, the water took every bit of cloth as an avenue to sneak in.

"This way," said the Polyjuiced voice, and a spark of green light lit up in front of Harry's broomstick, and then darted away in a direction that seemed to Harry like every other direction.

Through the blinding rain, Harry followed. He lost it sometimes, that small green spark, and each time he did, Harry called out, and the spark would reappear in front of him a few seconds later.

When Harry had caught the trick of following the spark, it accelerated, and Harry kicked the broomstick into high gear and followed. The rain whipped him harder, feeling like Harry imagined it must feel to get a faceful of shotgun pellets, but his glasses stayed clear and protected his eyes.

It was only a few minutes later, at the broomstick's full speed, that Harry caught a glimpse of a huge shadow through the rain, towering far across the waters.

And felt a distant, hollow echo of emptiness radiating from where Death waited, washing over Harry's mind and parting around it, like a wave breaking on stone. Harry knew his enemy this time, and his will was steel and all of the light.

"I can already feel the Dementors," said the gravelly voice of the Polyjuiced Quirrell. "I did not expect that, not this soon."

"Think of the stars," Harry said, over a distant rumble of thunder. "Don't allow any anger in you, nothing negative, just think of the stars, what it feels like to forget yourself and fall bodilessly through space. Hold to that thought like an Occlumency barrier across your entire mind. The Dementors will have some trouble reaching past that."

There was silence for a moment, then, "Interesting."

The green spark lifted, and Harry inclined his broomstick slightly upward to follow, even as it steered them into a fogbank, a cloud hovering low on the waters.

Soon they were hovering above and slightly oblique of the huge three-sided metal building, as it loomed far below. The triangle of steel was hollow, not solid, it was a building of three thick solid walls and no center. The Aurors on guard roomed in the top level and southern side of the building, Professor Quirrell had said, protected by their Patronus Charms. The legal entrance into Azkaban was on the roof of the southwest corner of the building. Which the two of them wouldn't use, of course. Instead they would use a corridor that ran directly beneath the northern corner of the building. Professor Quirrell would go down first, and puncture a hole in the roof and its wards right at the northern tip, leaving behind an illusion to cover the gap.

The prisoners were kept in the side of the building, in levels corresponding to their crimes. And at the bottom, in the uttermost center and depth of Azkaban, lay a nest of more than a hundred Dementors. Loads of dirt were occasionally dropped in to keep up the level, as the matter directly exposed to the Dementors broke down into mud and nothingness...

"Wait one minute," said the rough voice, "follow me at speed, and pass through with care."

"Got it," Harry said lowly.

The spark winked out, and Harry began to count, *one one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand...*

...sixty one thousand, and Harry dived, the wind shrieking around him as he dived, down toward the vast metal structure, down toward where he could feel the shadows of Death waiting for him, draining light and radiating emptiness, as the metal structure grew larger and larger. Plain and featureless loomed the vast grey shape, but for a single raised boxlike structure in the southwest corner. The north corner was simply blank, Professor Quirrell's hole undetectable.

Harry pulled up sharply as he approached the north corner, giving himself more safety margin than he would have bothered with in flying classes, but not too much. As soon as he'd come to a halt, he began to

slowly lower his broomstick again, toward what looked like the solid roof of the tip of the north corner.

Descending through the illusory roof while invisible was a strange experience, and then Harry found himself in a metal corridor lighted with a dim orange light—which, Harry realized after a startled glance, was coming from an old-fashioned mantled gas lamp...

...for magic would fail, be drained away after a time, in the presence of Dementors.

Harry dismounted his broom.

The pull of the emptiness was stronger now, as it parted and flowed around Harry without touching him. They were distant but they were many, the wounds in the world; Harry could have pointed to them with his eyes closed.

"*Casst your Patronuss*," hissed a snake from the floor, looking more discolored than green in the dim orange light.

The note of stress came through even in Parseltongue. Harry was surprised; Professor Quirrell had said that Animagi in their Animagus forms were much less vulnerable to Dementors. (For the same reason the Patronuses were animals, Harry assumed.) If Professor Quirrell was in this much trouble in his snake form, what had been happening to him while he was in the human form that let him use his magic...?

Harry's wand was already rising in his hand.

This would be the beginning.

Even if it was only one person, just one person that he could save from the darkness, even if he wasn't powerful enough yet to teleport *all* of Azkaban's prisoners to safety and burn the triangular hell down to bedrock...

Even so it was a start, it was a beginning, it was a down payment on everything that Harry meant to accomplish with his life. No more waiting, no more hoping, no more mere promising, it would all begin here. Here and *now*.

Harry's wand slashed down to point at where the Dementors waited far below.

"*Expecto Patronum!*"

The glowing humanoid figure blazed up into existence. It wasn't the sun-bright thing that it had been before... probably because Harry hadn't

quite been able to stop himself from thinking about all the *other* prisoners in their cells, the ones that he *wasn't* here to save.

It might be for the best, though. Harry would need to keep this Patronus going for a while, and it might be better if it wasn't quite so bright.

The Patronus dimmed a little further, at that thought; and then further again, as Harry tried to put a little less of his strength into it, until finally the brilliant humanoid figure was glowing only slightly brighter than the brightest animal Patronus, and Harry felt that he could dim it no further without risking losing it entirely.

And then, "*It iss sstable*," Harry hissed, and began feeding his broomstick into his pouch. His wand stayed in his hand, and a slight, sustainable flow from him replaced the slight losses from his Patronus.

The snake blurred into the form of a lanky, sallow man, holding Professor Quirrell's wand in one hand and a broomstick in the other. The lanky man staggered as he came back into existence, and went to lean against the wall for a moment.

"Well done, if perhaps a trifle slow," murmured the gravelly voice. Professor Quirrell's dryness was in it, even though it didn't fit the voice, nor did the grave look on the thickly bearded face. "I cannot feel them at all, now."

A moment later, the broomstick went into the man's robes and vanished. Then the man's wand rose and tapped on his head, and with a sound like a cracking eggshell he disappeared once more.

Within the air blossomed a faint green spark, and Harry, still enshrouded in the Cloak of Invisibility, followed after.

If you had been watching from outside, you would have seen nothing but a small green spark drifting through the air, and a brilliantly silver humanoid walking after it.

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They went down, and down, and down, passing gas lamp after gas lamp, and the occasional huge metal door, descending into Azkaban within what seemed like utter silence. Professor Quirrell had set up some type

of barrier by which *he* could hear what went on nearby, but no sounds could pass outward, and no sounds could reach Harry.

Harry hadn't quite been able to stop his mind from wondering *why* the silence, or stop his mind from giving the answer. The answer he'd already known on some wordless level of anticipation that had prompted him to futilely try not to think about it.

Somewhere behind those huge metal doors, people were screaming.

The silver humanoid figure wavered, brightening and dimming, every time Harry thought about it.

Harry had been told to cast a Bubble-Head Charm on himself. To prevent himself from smelling anything.

All the enthusiasm and heroism had worn off already, as Harry had known it would, it hadn't taken long even by his standards, the process had completed itself the very first time they passed one of those metal doors. Every metal door was locked with a huge lock, a lock of simple unmagical metal that wouldn't have stopped a first-year Hogwarts student—if you still had a wand, if you still had your magic, which the prisoners didn't. Those metal doors were not the doors of individual cells, Professor Quirrell had said, each one opened into a corridor in which there would be a group of cells. Somehow that helped a little, not thinking that each door corresponded directly to a prisoner who was waiting right behind it. Instead there might be *more* than one prisoner, which diminished the emotional impact; just like the study showing that people contributed more when they were told that a given amount of money was required to save one child's life, than when told the same total amount was needed to save eight children...

Harry was finding it increasingly hard not to think about it, and every time he did, the light of his Patronus fluctuated.

They came to the place where the passageway turned left, at the corner of the triangular building. Once again there were descending metal steps, another flight of stairs; once again they went down.

Mere murderers were not put into the lowest of cells. There was always a lower place you could go, an even worse punishment to fear. No matter how low you had already sunk, the government of magical Britain had some threat remaining against you if you did even worse.

But Bellatrix Black had been the Death Eater who inspired more fear than anyone save Lord Voldemort himself, a beautiful and deadly sorceress absolutely loyal to her master; she had been, if such a thing were possible, more sadistic and evil even than You-Know-Who, as though she were trying to outdo her master...

...that was what the world knew of her, what the world believed of her.

But before then, Professor Quirrell had told Harry, before the debut of the Dark Lord's most terrible servant, there had been a girl in Slytherin who had been quiet, keeping mostly to herself, harming no one. Afterward there had been made-up stories told about her, memories changing in retrospect (Harry knew well the research on that). But at the time, while she still attended school, the most talented witch in Hogwarts had been known as a gentle girl (Professor Quirrell had said). Her few friends had been surprised when she'd joined the Death Eaters, and more surprised that she'd been hiding so much darkness behind that sad, wistful smile.

That was who Bellatrix had once been, the most promising witch of her own generation, before the Dark Lord stole her and broke her, shattered her and reshaped her, binding her to him on a deeper level and with darker arts than any Imperius.

Ten years Bellatrix had served the Dark Lord, killing who he bade her kill, torturing who he bade her torture.

And then the Dark Lord had finally been defeated.

And Bellatrix's nightmare had continued.

Somewhere inside Bellatrix there might be something that was still screaming, that had been screaming the whole time, something a psychiatric Healer could bring back; or there might not be, Professor Quirrell had no way of knowing. But either way, they could...

...they could at least get her out of Azkaban...

Bellatrix Black had been put into the lowest level of Azkaban.

Harry was having trouble not imagining what he would see when they got to her cell. Bellatrix must have had almost no fear of death, in the beginning, if she was still alive at all.

They descended another flight of stairs, coming that much closer to Death and Bellatrix, the clacking of their invisible shoes the only sound

that Harry could hear. Dim orange light coming from the gas lights, the faint green spark drifting through the air, the shining figure following with its silver light fluctuating from time to time.

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After descending many times, they came in time to a corridor that did not end in stairs, and a final metal door, and the green spark halted before it.

Harry's heart had calmed a little, as they descended far into the depths of Azkaban without anything happening. But now it was hammering his chest once more. They were at the bottom, and the shadows of Death were very close at hand.

A soft metal click came from the lock, as Professor Quirrell opened the way.

Harry took a deep breath and remembered everything that Professor Quirrell had told him. The hard part wouldn't just be getting the pretended personality right enough to fool Bellatrix Black herself, the hard part would be keeping his Patronus going at the same time...

The green spark winked out, and a moment later a meter-high snake shimmered into existence, no longer invisible.

The metal door moved with a slow creaking sound as Harry pushed on it with his invisible hand, opened it just a crack, and peered through.

He saw a straight corridor that terminated in solid stone. There was no light there but what crept in from Harry's Patronus. That was bright enough for him to see the outer bars of the eight cells set into the corridor, but he couldn't see the insides; more importantly, though, he didn't see anyone in the corridor itself.

"I ssee nothing," hissed Harry.

The snake darted on ahead, swiftly twisting across the floor.

A moment later—

"Sshe iss alone," hissed the snake.

Stay, Harry thought to his Patronus, which took up a position just to one side of the door, as though guarding it; and then Harry pushed the door open further, and followed within.

The first cell Harry looked at contained a dessicated corpse, skin gone grey and mottled, flesh worn through in places to expose the bone beneath, no eyes—

Harry shut his eyes. He could still do that, he was still invisible, he wasn't betraying anything by shutting his eyes.

He'd known it already, he'd read it on page six of his Transfiguration book, that you stayed in Azkaban until your prison term was done. If you died before it was up they kept you there until they released your corpse. If your term was for life, they just left the body in the cell until the cell was needed, at which point they threw your body into the Dementors' pit. But it was still a shock to see, that corpse had been a *person* who'd just been left there—

The light in the room wavered.

Steady, thought Harry in his core. It wouldn't be good for Professor Quirrell if that Patronus went out from his thinking sad thoughts. This near to the Dementors the Defense Professor might just fall dead where he stood. *Steady, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, steady!*

With that thought, Harry opened his eyes again, there wasn't time to waste.

The second cell he looked at contained only a skeleton.

And behind the bars of the third cell he saw Bellatrix Black.

Something precious and irreplaceable inside Harry withered like dry grass.

You could tell the woman wasn't a skeleton, that her head wasn't a skull, because the texture of skin was still different from the texture of bone, no matter how white and pale she'd become, waiting in the dark alone. Either they weren't feeding her much, or what she ate, the shadows of Death drained from her; for her eyes seemed shrunken below their lids, her lips looked too shriveled to close over her teeth. The color seemed leached out of the black clothing she had worn into prison, like the Dementors had drained that too. They'd been meant to be daring, those clothes, and now they lay loosely over a skeleton, exposing shriveled skin.

I'm here to save her, I'm here to save her, I'm here to save her, Harry thought to himself, desperately, over and over with an effort like Occlumency, will-

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THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT II

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*

ing his Patronus not to go out, to stay and *protect Bellatrix from the Demen-*
tors—

In his heart, in his core, Harry held to all his pity and his compas-
sion, his will to save her from the darkness; the silver radiance coming
in through the open door brightened, even as he thought it.

And in another part of him, like he was just letting another part of his
mind carry out a habit without paying much attention to it...

A cold expression came over Harry's face, invisibly beneath the hood.
"Hello, my dear Bella," said a chill whisper. "Did you miss me?"

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART III

The corpse of a woman opened her eyes, and the dull sunken orbs gazed out at nothing.

“Mad,” Bellatrix muttered in a cracked voice, “It seems that little Bella is going mad...”

Professor Quirrell had instructed Harry, calmly and precisely, how he was to act in Bellatrix’s presence; how to form the pretense he would maintain in his mind.

You found it expedient, or perhaps just amusing, to make Bellatrix fall in love with you, to bind her to your service.

That love would have persisted through Azkaban, Professor Quirrell had said, because to Bellatrix it would not be a happy thought.

She loves you utterly, completely, with her whole being. You do not return her love, but consider her useful. She knows this.

She was the deadliest weapon you possessed, and you called her your dear Bella.

Harry remembered it from the night the Dark Lord killed his parents: the cold amusement, the contemptuous laughter, that high-pitched voice of deathly hate. It didn’t seem at all difficult to guess what the Dark Lord would say.

“I hope you are *not* mad, Bella dear,” said the chill whisper. “Mad is not useful.”

Bellatrix’s eyes flickered, tried to focus on empty air.

"My... Lord... I waited for you but you did not come... I looked for you but I could not find you... you are alive..." All her words came out in a low mutter, if there was emotion in it, Harry could not tell.

"*Sshow her your face,*" hissed the snake at Harry's feet.

Harry cast back the hood of the Cloak of Invisibility.

The part of him that Harry had placed in control of his facial expressions looked at Bella without the slightest trace of pity, only cool, calm interest. (While in his core, Harry thought, *I will save you, I will save you no matter what...*)

"The scar..." muttered Bellatrix. "That child..."

"So they all still think," said Harry's voice, and gave a thin little chuckle. "You looked for me in the wrong place, Bella dear."

(Harry had asked why Professor Quirrell couldn't be the one to play the part of the Dark Lord, and Professor Quirrell had pointed out that there was no plausible reason for *him* to be possessed by the shade of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.)

Bellatrix's eyes remained fixed on Harry, she said no word.

"*Ssay something in Parseltongue,*" hissed the snake.

Harry's face turned to the snake, to make it clear that he was addressing it, and hissed, "*One two three four five ssix sseven eight nine ten.*"

There was a pause.

"Those who do not fear the darkness..." murmured Bellatrix.

The snake hissed, "*Will be consumed by it.*"

"Will be consumed by it," whispered the chill voice. Harry didn't particularly want to think about how Professor Quirrell had gotten that password. His brain, which thought about it anyway, suggested that it had probably involved a Death Eater, a quiet isolated place, and some lead-pipe Legilimency.

"Your wand," murmured Bellatrix, "I took it from the Potters' house and hid it, my lord... under the tombstone to the right of your father's grave... will you kill me, now, if that was all you wished of me... I think I must have always wanted you to be the one to kill me... but I can't remember now, it must have been a happy thought..."

Harry's heart wrenched inside him, it was unbearable, and—and he couldn't cry, couldn't let his Patronus fade—

Harry's face showed a flicker of annoyance, and his voice was sharp as it said, "Enough foolishness. You're to come with me, Bella dear, unless you prefer the company of the Dementors."

Bellatrix's face twitched in brief puzzlement, the shrunken limbs did not stir.

"You'll need to float her out," Harry hissed to the snake. "*Sshe can no longer think of escaping.*"

"Yess," hissed the snake, "*but do not underesstimate her, sshe wass the deadliest of warriorss.*" The green head dipped in warning. "*One would be wisse to fear me, boy, even were I sstarved and nine-tenthss dead; be wary of her, allow no ssingle flaw in your pretensse.*"

The green snake smoothly glided out of the door.

And shortly after, a man with sallow skin and a fearful expression on his bearded face cringed into the room with his wand in hand.

"My Lord?" the servant said falteringly.

"Do as you were instructed," the Dark Lord whispered in that chill voice, sounding even more terrible coming from a child's body. "And do not let your Patronus falter. Remember, if I do not return there will be no reward for you, and it will be long before your family is allowed to die."

Having spoken those dreadful words, the Dark Lord pulled his invisibility cloak over his head, and disappeared.

The cringing servant opened the door to Bellatrix's cage, and pulled a tiny needle from his robes with which he poked the human skeleton. The single drop of red blood produced was soon absorbed into a small doll, which was laid upon the floor, and the servant began to chant in a whisper.

Soon another living skeleton lay upon the floor, motionless. Afterward the servant seemed to hesitate for a moment, until from the empty air hissed an impatient command. Then the servant pointed his wand at Bellatrix and spoke a word, and the living skeleton lying on the bed was naked, and the skeleton lying on the floor was clothed in her faded dress.

The servant tore a small strip of cloth from the dress, as it lay upon the seeming corpse; and from his own robes, the fearful man then produced an empty glass flask with small traces of golden fluid clinging to

its inside. This flask was concealed in a corner, the strip of skirt laid over it, the leached cloth nearly blending with the gray metal wall.

Another wave of the servant's wand floated the human skeleton lying on the bed into the air, and in almost the same motion clothed her in new black robes. An ordinary-looking bottle of chocolate milk was put into her hand, and a chill whisper ordered Bellatrix to grasp the bottle and begin drinking it, which she did, her face still looking only puzzled.

Then the servant turned Bellatrix invisible, and turned himself invisible, and they left. The door closed behind them all and clicked as it locked, plunging the corridor into darkness once more, unchanged but for a small flask concealed in the corner of one cell, and a fresh corpse lying upon its floor.

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Earlier, in the deserted shop, Professor Quirrell had told Harry that they were going to commit the perfect crime.

Harry had unthinkingly started to repeat back the standard proverb that there was no such thing as a perfect crime, before he actually thought about it for two-thirds of a second, remembered a wiser proverb, and shut his mouth in midsentence.

What do you think you know, and how do you think you know it?

If you *did* commit the perfect crime, nobody would ever find out—so how could anyone possibly *know* that there weren't perfect crimes?

And as soon as you looked at it that way, you realized that perfect crimes probably got committed *all the time*, and the coroner marked it down as death by natural causes, or the newspaper reported that the shop had never been very profitable and had finally gone out of business...

When Bellatrix Black's corpse was found dead in her cell the next morning, there within the prison of Azkaban from which (everyone knew) no one had ever escaped, nobody bothered doing an autopsy. Nobody thought twice about it. They just locked up the corridor and left, and the *Daily Prophet* reported it in the obituary column the next day...

...that was the perfect crime which Professor Quirrell had planned.

And it wasn't Professor Quirrell who screwed it up.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART IV

A faint green spark moved forward to set the pace, and behind it followed a brilliant silver figure, all other entities invisible. They had traversed five legs of corridor, turned right five times and gone up five flights of stairs; and when Bellatrix had finished her second bottle of chocolate milk, she had been given solid bars of chocolate to eat.

It was after her third bar of chocolate that strange noises began to come from Bellatrix's throat.

It took a moment for Harry to understand, to process the sounds, it didn't sound like anything he'd ever heard before; the rhythm of it was shattered, almost unrecognizable, it took him that long to realize that Bellatrix was crying.

Bellatrix Black was crying, the Dark Lord's most terrible weapon was crying, she was invisible but you could hear it, tiny pathetic sounds she was trying to suppress, even now.

"It's real?" said Bellatrix. Tonality had returned into her voice, no longer a dead mutter, it rose up at the end to form the question. "It's real?"

Yes, thought the part of Harry simulating the Dark Lord, *now be silent—*

He couldn't make those words pass his lips, he just couldn't.

"I knew—you would—come to me—someday," Bellatrix's voice quavered and fractured as she drew breath for quiet sobs, "I knew—you were alive—that you would come—to me—my Lord..." there was a long inhalation like a huge gasp, "and that even—when you came—you still wouldn't

love me—never—you would never love me back—that was why—they couldn't take—my love from me—even though I can't remember—can't remember so many other things—though I don't know what I forgot—but I remember how much I love you, Lord—”

There was a knife stabbing through Harry's heart, he'd never heard anything so terrible, he wanted to hunt down the Dark Lord and kill him just for this...

“Do you still—have use for me—my Lord?”

“No,” hissed Harry's voice, without him even thinking, it just seemed to be operating on automatic, “I entered Azkaban on a whim. Of course I have use for you! Don't ask foolish questions.”

“But—I'm weak,” said Bellatrix's voice, and a full sob escaped her, it sounded much too loud in the corridors of Azkaban, “I can't kill for you, my Lord, I'm sorry, they ate it all, ate me all up, I'm too weak to fight, what good am I to you now—”

Harry's brain cast about desperately for some way to reassure her, from the lips of a Dark Lord who would never speak a single word of caring.

“Ugly,” said Bellatrix. Her voice said that word like it was the final nail in her coffin, the last despair. “I'm ugly, they ate that too, I'm, I'm not pretty any more, you won't even, be able, to use me, as a reward, for your servants—even the Lestranges, won't want, to hurt me, any more—”

The brilliant silver figure stopped walking.

Because Harry had stopped walking.

The Dark Lord, he... The part of Harry's self that was soft and vulnerable was screaming in disbelieving horror, trying to reject reality, refuse the understanding, even as a colder and harder part completed the pattern: *She obeyed him in that as she obeyed him in all things.*

The green spark bobbed urgently, darted forward.

The silver humanoid stayed in place.

Bellatrix was sobbing harder.

“I'm, I'm not, I can't be, useful, any more...”

Giant hands were squeezing Harry's chest, wringing him like a washcloth, trying to crush his heart.

"Please," whispered Bellatrix, "just kill me..." Her voice seemed to calm, once she said that. "Please Lord, kill me, I've no reason to live if I'm no use to you... I only want it to stop... please hurt me one last time, my Lord, hurt me until I stop... I love you..."

It was the saddest thing Harry had ever heard.

The bright silver shape of Harry's Patronus flickered—

Wavered—

Brightened—

The fury that was rising in Harry, his rage against the Dark Lord who had done this, the rage against the Dementors, against Azkaban, against the world that allowed such horror, it all seemed to be pouring straight through his arm and into his wand without there being any way of blocking it, he tried willing it to stop and nothing happened.

"My Lord!" whispered the disguised voice of Professor Quirrell. "My spell is going out of control! Help me, my Lord!"

Brighter the Patronus, brighter and brighter, it was waxing faster than on the day that Harry had destroyed a Dementor.

"My Lord!" the silhouette said in a terrified whisper. "Help me! Everyone will feel it, my Lord!"

Everyone will feel it, thought Harry. His imagination could picture it clearly, the prisoners in their cells stirring as the cold and darkness fell away, replaced by healing light.

Every exposed surface now burned like a white sun in the reflections, the silhouette of Bellatrix's skeleton and the sallow man now clearly visible in the blaze, the Disillusionment spells unable to keep pace with the unearthly brilliance; only the Cloak of Invisibility out of the Deathly Hallows withstood it.

"My Lord! *You must stop it!*"

But Harry could no longer will it to stop, he no longer wanted it to stop. He could sense it, more and more of the sparks of life in Azkaban being sheltered by his Patronus, *as it unfolded like spreading wings of sunlight, the air turned to absolute silver as he thought it, Harry knew what he had to do.*

"Please, my Lord!"

The words went unheard.

They were far from him, the Dementors in their pit, but Harry knew that they could be destroyed even at this distance if the light blazed bright enough, he knew that Death itself could not face him if he stopped holding back, so he unsealed all the gates inside him and sank the wells of his spell into all the deepest parts of his spirit, all his mind and all his will, and gave over absolutely everything to the spell—

And in the interior of the Sun, an only slightly dimmer shadow moved forward, reaching out an entreating hand.

WRONG
DON'T

The sudden sense of doom clashed with Harry's steel determination, dread and uncertainty striving against the bright purpose, nothing else might have reached him but that. The silhouette took another step forward and another, the sense of doom rising to a point of terrible catastrophe; and in the drench of cold water, Harry saw it, he realized the consequences of what he was doing, the danger and the trap.

If you had been watching from outside you would have seen the interior of the Sun brightening and dimming...

Brightening and dimming...

...and finally fading, fading, fading into ordinary moonlight that seemed like pitch darkness by contrast.

Within the darkness of that moonlight stood a sallow man with his hand outstretched in entreaty, and the skeleton of a woman, lying upon the floor, a puzzled look upon her face.

And Harry, still invisible, fallen to his knees. The greater danger had passed, and now Harry was just trying not to collapse, to keep the spell going at the lower level. He'd drained something, hopefully not lost something—he should have known, should have remembered, that it wasn't mere magic that fueled the Patronus Charm—

"Thank you, my Lord," whispered the sallow man.

"Fool," said the hard voice of a boy pretending to be a Dark Lord. "Did I not warn you that the spell could prove fatal if you failed to control your emotions?"

Professor Quirrell's eyes did not widen, of course.

"Yes, my Lord, I understand," said the Dark Lord's servant in a faltering voice, and turned to Bellatrix—

She was already pushing herself off the floor, slowly, like an old, old Muggle woman. "How funny," Bellatrix whispered, "you were almost killed by a Patronus Charm..." A giggle that sounded like it was blowing dust out of her giggle pipes. "I could punish you, maybe, if my Lord froze you in place and I had knives... maybe I can be useful after all? Oh, I feel a little better now, how strange..."

"Be silent, dear Bella," Harry said in a chill voice, "until I give you leave to speak."

There was no reply, which was obedience.

The servant levitated the human skeleton, and made her invisible once more, followed shortly by his own disappearance with the sound of another cracking egg.

They passed on through the corridors of Azkaban.

And Harry knew that as they passed, the prisoners were stirring in their cells as the fear lifted for one precious moment, maybe even feeling a small touch of healing as his light passed them by, and then collapsing down again as the cold and darkness pressed back in.

Harry was trying very hard not to think about it.

Otherwise his Patronus would wax until it burned away every Dementor in Azkaban, blazing bright enough to destroy them even at this distance...

Otherwise his Patronus would wax until it burned away every Dementor in Azkaban, taking all of Harry's life as fuel.

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In the Auror's quarters at the top of Azkaban, one Auror trio was snoring in the barracks, one Auror trio was resting in the breakroom, and one Auror trio was on duty in the command room, keeping their watch. The command room was simple but large, with three chairs at back where three Aurors sat, their wands always in hand to sustain their three Patronuses,

as the bright white forms paced in front of the open window, sheltering them all from the Dementors' fear.

The three of them usually stuck to the back, and played poker, and didn't look out the window. You could have seen some sky there, sure, and there was even an hour or two every day where you could've seen some sun, but that window also looked down on the central pit of hell.

Just in case a Dementor wanted to float up and talk to you.

There was no way that Auror Li would have agreed to serve duty here, triple pay or no triple pay, if he hadn't had a family to support. (His real name was Xiaoguang, and everyone called him Mike instead; he'd named his children Su and Kao, which hopefully would serve them better.) His only consolation, besides the money, was that at least his mates played an excellent game of Dragon Poker. Though it would be hard *not* to, at this point.

It was their 5,366th game and Li had what would probably be his best hand of the 5300s. It was a Saturday in February and there were three players, which let him shift the suit of any one hole card except a two, three, or seven; and that was enough to let him build a Corps-a-Corps with Unicorns, Dragons, and sevens...

Across the table from him, Gerard McCusker looked up from the table cards toward the direction of the window, staring.

The sinking feeling came over Li's stomach with surprising speed.

If his seven of hearts got hit by a Dementor Modifier and turned into a six, he was going straight down to two pair and McCusker might beat that—

"Mike," said McCusker, "what's with your Patronus?"

Li turned his head and looked.

His soft silver badger had turned away from its watch over the pit and was staring downward at something only it could see.

A moment later, Bahry's moonlit duck and McCusker's bright anteater followed suit, staring in the same downward direction.

They all exchanged glances, and then sighed.

"I'll tell them," said Bahry. Protocol called for sending the three Aurors who were off-duty but not sleeping to investigate anything anomalous. "Maybe relieve one of them and take the C spiral, if you two don't mind."

Li exchanged a glance with McCusker, and they both nodded. It wasn't too hard to break into Azkaban, if you were wealthy enough to hire a powerful wizard, and well-intentioned enough to recruit someone who could cast the Patronus Charm. People with friends in Azkaban would do that, break in just to give someone a half-day's worth of Patronus time, a chance at some real dreams instead of nightmares. Leave them a supply of chocolate to conceal in their cell, to increase the chance they lived through their sentence. And the Aurors on guard... well, even if you got caught, you could probably convince the Aurors to overlook it, in exchange for the right bribe.

For Li, the right bribe tended to be in the range of two Knuts and a silver Sickle. He hated this place.

But Bahry One-Hand had a wife and the wife had healer's bills, and if you could afford to hire someone who could break into Azkaban, then you could afford to grease Bahry's remaining palm pretty hard, if he was the one who caught you.

By unspoken agreement, none of them giving anything away by being the first to propose it, the three of them finished out their poker hand first. Li won, since no Dementors had actually shown up. And by then the Patronuses had stopped staring and gone back to their normal patrol, so it was probably nothing, but procedure was procedure.

After Li raked in the pot, Bahry gave them all formal nods, and stood up from the table. The older man's long white locks brushed against his fancy red robes, his robes brushed the metal floor of the command room, as Bahry went through the separating door that led to the formerly off-duty Aurors.

Li had been Sorted into Hufflepuff, and he sometimes felt a little queasy about this kind of business. But Bahry had shown them all the pictures, and you had to let a man do what he could for his poor sick wife, especially when he only had seven months left before his retirement.

The faint green spark floated through the metal corridors, and the silver humanoid, seeming a little dimmer now, followed after it. Sometimes the bright figure would flare, especially when they passed one of the huge metal doors, but it always died back down again.

Mere eyes could not have seen the invisible others: the eleven-year-old Boy-Who-Lived, and the living skeleton that was Bellatrix Black, and the Polyjuiced Defense Professor of Hogwarts, all traveling together through Azkaban. If that was the beginning of a joke, Harry didn't know the punchline.

They'd gone up another four flights of stairs before the rough voice of the Defense Professor said, simply and without emphasis, "Auror coming."

It took too long, a whole second maybe, for Harry to understand, for the jolt of adrenaline to pump into his blood, and for him to remember what Professor Quirrell had already discussed with him and told him to do in this case, and then Harry spun on his heel and flew back the way they'd come.

Harry reached the flight of stairs, and frantically laid himself down on the third step from the top, the cold metal feeling hard even through his cloak and robes. Trying to move his head up, to peer over the lip of the stairs, showed that he couldn't see Professor Quirrell; and that meant that Harry was out of the line of any stray fire.

His shining Patronus followed after him, and lay down beside him on the step just beneath him; for it too must not be seen.

There was a faint sound as of wind or whooshing, and then the sound of Bellatrix's invisible body coming to rest on a stair further below, she had no place in this except—

"Stay still," said the cold high whisper, "stay silent."

There was stillness, and silence.

Harry pressed his wand against the side of the metal step just above him. If he was anyone else he would have needed to take a Knut out of his pocket... or rip off a bit of cloth from his robe... or bite off one of his nails... or find a speck of rock large enough that he could see it and solid enough to stay in one place and orientation while it touched his wand. But with Harry's almighty power of partial Transfiguration, this was not

necessary; he could skip that particular step of the operation and use any material near to hand.

Thirty seconds later Harry was the proud new owner of a curved mirror, and...

"*Wingardium Leviosa*," Harry whispered as quietly as he could.

...was levitating it just above the steps, and watching, in that curved surface, almost the whole corridor where Professor Quirrell invisibly waited.

Harry heard it in the distance, then, the sound of footsteps.

And saw the form (a little hard to see in the mirror) of a person in red robes, coming down the stairs, entering the seemingly empty corridor; accompanied by a small Patronus animal that Harry couldn't quite make out.

The Auror was protected by a blue shimmer, it was hard to see the details but Harry could see that much, the Auror had shields already raised and strengthened.

Crap, thought Harry. According to the Defense Professor, the essential art of dueling consisted of trying to put up defenses that would block whatever someone was likely to throw at you, while trying in turn to attack in ways that were likely to go past their current set of defenses. And by far the easiest way to win any sort of real fight—Professor Quirrell had said this over and over—was to shoot the enemy before they raised a shield in the first place, either from behind or from close enough range that they couldn't dodge or counter in time.

Though Professor Quirrell might still be able to get in a shot from behind, if—

But the Auror halted after taking three steps into the corridor.

"Nice Disillusionment," said a hard male voice that Harry didn't recognize. "Now show yourself, or you'll be in *real* trouble."

The form of the sallow, bearded man became visible then.

"And you with the Patronus," said the hard voice. "Come out too. Now."

"Wouldn't be smart," said the gravelly voice of the sallow man. It was no longer the terrified voice of the Dark Lord's servant; it had suddenly become the professional intimidation of a competent criminal. "You don't

want to see who's behind me. Trust me, you don't. Five hundred Galleons, cold cash up front, if you turn around and walk away. Big trouble for your career if you don't."

There was a long pause.

"Look, whoever you are," said the hard voice. "You seem confused about how this works. I don't care if that's Lucius Malfoy behind you or Albus bloody Dumbledore. You *all* come out, I scan the whole lot of you, and *then* we talk about how much this is going to cost you—"

"Two thousand Galleons, final offer," said the gravelly voice, taking on a warning undertone. "That's ten times the going rate and more than you make in a year. And believe me, if you see something you shouldn't, you're going to regret not taking that—"

"Shut it!" said the hard voice. "You've got exactly five seconds to drop that wand before I drop you. Five, four—"

What are you doing, Professor Quirrell? Harry thought frantically. *Attack first! Cast a shield at least!*

"—three, two, one! *Stupefy!*"

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*

Bahry stared, a chill running down his spine.

The man's wand had moved so fast that it was like it had Apparated into place, and Bahry's stunner was currently sparkling tamely at the end of it, not blocked, not countered, not deflected, *caught* like a fly in honey.

"My offer has gone back down to five hundred Galleons," said the man in a colder, more formal voice. He smiled dryly, and the smile looked wrong on that bearded face. "And you shall need to accept a Memory Charm."

Bahry had already swapped the harmonics on his shields so that his own stunner couldn't pass back through, already tilted his wand back into a defensive position, already raised his hardened artificial hand into position to block anything blockable, and was already thinking wordless spells to put more layers on his shields—

The man wasn't looking at Bahry. Instead he was poking curiously at Bahry's stunner where it still wavered on the end of his wand, drawing out red sparks and flicking them away with his fingers, slowly disassembling the hex like a child's rod puzzle.

The man hadn't raised any shields of his own.

"Tell me," the man said in a disinterested voice that didn't seem to quite fit the rough throat—Polyjuice, Bahry would have called it, if he'd thought that anyone could possibly do magic that delicate from inside someone else's body—"what did you do in the last war? Put yourself in harm's way, or stay out of trouble?"

"Harm's way," said Bahry. His voice kept the iron calm of an Auror with nearly a hundred full years on the force, seven months short of mandatory retirement, Mad-Eye Moody couldn't have said it with any more hardness.

"Fight any Death Eaters?"

Now a grim smile graced Bahry's own face. "Two at once." Two of You-Know-Who's own warrior-assassins, personally trained by their dark master. Two Death Eaters at once against Bahry alone. It had been the toughest fight of Bahry's life, but he'd stood his ground, and walked away with only the loss of his left hand.

"Did you kill them?" The man sounded idly curious, and he continued to draw threads of fire out of the much-diminished stunbolt still captive on the end of his wand, his fingers now weaving small patterns of Bahry's own magic before flicking to disperse them.

Sweat broke out on Bahry's skin beneath his robes. His metal hand flashed downward, ripped the mirror from his belt—"Bahry to Mike, I need backup!"

There was a pause, and silence.

"Bahry to Mike!"

The mirror lay dull and lifeless in his hand. Slowly, Bahry put it back on his belt.

"It's been quite a while since I had a serious fight with a serious opponent," the man said, still not looking up at Bahry. "Try not to disappoint me too much. You can attack whenever you're ready. Or you can walk away with five hundred Galleons."

There was a long silence.

Then the air screamed like metal cutting glass as Bahry slashed his wand downward.

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Harry could hardly see it, could hardly make out anything amid the lights and flashes, his mirror's curve was perfect (they'd practiced that tactic before in the Chaos Legion) but the scene was still too small, and Harry had the feeling he wouldn't be able to understand even if he was watching from a meter away, it was all happening too *fast*, red blasts deflecting from blue shields, green bars of light clashing together, shadowy forms appearing and vanishing, he couldn't even tell who was casting what, except that the Auror was shouting incantation after incantation and frantically dodging while Professor Quirrell's Polyjuiced form stood in one place and flicked his wand, mostly silently, but now and then pronouncing words in unrecognizable languages that would white out the whole mirror and show half the Auror's shielding torn away as he staggered back.

Harry had seen exhibition duels between the strongest seventh-year students, and this was so far above it that Harry's mind felt numbed, looking at how far he had left to go. There wasn't a single seventh-year student who could have lasted half a minute against the Auror, all three seventh-year armies put together might not be able to scratch the Defense Professor...

The Auror had fallen to the ground, one knee and one hand supporting himself as the other hand gestured frantically and his mouth shouted desperate words, the few incantations that Harry recognized were all shield spells, as a flock of shadows spun around the Auror like a whirlwind of razors.

And Harry saw Professor Quirrell's Polyjuiced form deliberately point his wand at where the Auror kneeled and fought the last moments of his battle.

"Surrender," said the gravelly voice.

The Auror spat something unspeakable.

"In that case," said the voice, "*Avada—*"

Time seemed to move very slowly, like there was time to hear the individual syllables, *Ke*, and *Da*, and *Vra*, time to watch the Auror starting to throw himself desperately aside; and even though it was all happening so slowly, somehow there wasn't time to *do* anything, no time for Harry to open his lips and scream *NO*, no time to move, maybe even not any time to think.

Only time for one desperate wish that an innocent man should not die—

And a blazing silver figure stood before the Auror.

Stood there just a fraction of a second before the green light struck home.

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Bahry was twisting frantically aside, not knowing if he was going to make it—

His eyes were focused on his opponent and his onrushing death, so Bahry only briefly saw the outline of the brilliant silhouette, the Patronus brighter than any he'd ever seen, saw it just barely long enough to recognize the impossible shape, before the green and the silver light collided and both lights vanished, *both* lights vanished, *the Killing Curse had been blocked*, and then Bahry's ears were pierced as he saw his terrible opponent screaming, screaming, screaming, clutching at his head and screaming, starting to fall as Bahry was already falling—

Bahry hit the ground, falling from his own frantic lunge, and his dislocated left shoulder and broken rib screamed in protest. Bahry ignored the pain, managed to scramble back to his knees, brought up his wand to stun his opponent, he didn't understand what was happening but he knew that this was his only chance.

"*Stupefy!*"

The red bolt struck out toward the man's falling body, and was torn apart in midair and dissipated—and not by any shield. Bahry could *see* it, the wavering in the air that surrounded his fallen and screaming opponent.

Bahry could feel it like a deadly pressure on his skin, the flux of magic building and building and building toward some terrible breaking point. His instincts screamed at him to run before the explosion came, this was no Charm, no Curse, this was wizardry run wild, but before Bahry could even finish getting to his feet—

The man threw his wand away from himself (he threw away his wand!) and a second later, his form blurred and vanished entirely.

A green snake lay motionless on the ground, unmoving even before Bahry's next stunner spell, fired in sheer reflex, hit it without resistance.

As the dreadful flux and pressure began to dissipate, as the wild wizardry died back down, Bahry's dazed mind noticed that the scream was continuing. Only it sounded different, like the scream of a young boy, coming from the stairs leading down to the next lower level.

That scream choked off too, and then there was silence except for Bahry's frantic panting.

His thoughts were slow, confused, disarrayed. His opponent had been *insanely* powerful, that hadn't been a duel, it had been like his first year as a trainee Auror trying to fight Madam Tarma. The Death-Eaters hadn't been a tenth that good, Mad-Eye Moody wasn't that good... and who, what, how in the name of Merlin's balls had anyone blocked a *Killing Curse*?

Bahry managed to summon the energy to press his wand against his rib, mutter the healing spell, and then press it again to his shoulder. It took more out of him than it should have, took far too much out of him, his magic was within a bare breath of utter exhaustion; he didn't have anything left for his minor cuts and bruises or even to reinforce the scraps left of his shielding. It was all he could do not to let his Patronus go out.

Bahry breathed deeply, heavily, steadied his breath as much as he could before he spoke.

"You," Bahry said. "Whoever you are. Come out."

There was silence, and it occurred to Bahry that whoever it was might be unconscious. He didn't understand what had just happened, but he'd heard the scream...

Well, there was one way to test that.

"Come out," said Bahry, making his voice harder, "or I start using area-effect curses." He probably couldn't have managed one if he'd tried.

"Wait," said a boy's voice, a *young* boy's voice, high and thin and wavering, like someone was holding back exhaustion or tears. The voice now seemed to be coming from closer to hand. "Please wait. I'm—coming out—"

"Drop the invisibility," growled Bahry. He was too tired to bother with anti-Disillusionment Charms.

A moment later, a young boy's face emerged from within an unfolding invisibility cloak, and Bahry saw the black hair, the green eyes, the glasses, and the angry red lightning-bolt scar.

If he'd had twenty fewer years of experience under his belt he might have blinked. Instead he just spat something that he probably shouldn't ought to say in front of the Boy-Who-Lived.

"He, he," the boy's wavering voice said, his young face looked frightened and exhausted and tears were still trickling down his cheeks, "he kidnapped me, to make me cast my Patronus... he said he'd kill me if I didn't... only I couldn't let him just kill you..."

Bahry's mind was still dazed, but things were slowly starting to click into place.

Harry Potter, the only wizard ever to survive a Killing Curse. Bahry might have been able to dodge the green death, he'd certainly been trying, but if the matter came up before the Wizengamot, they'd rule it was a life debt to a Noble House.

"I see," Bahry said in a much gentler growl. He started to walk toward the boy. "Son, I'm sorry for what you've been through, but I need you to drop the cloak and drop your wand."

The rest of Harry Potter emerged from invisibility, showing the sweat-soaked blue-trimmed Hogwarts robes, and his right hand clutching an eleven-inch holly wand so hard his knuckles were white.

"Your wand," Bahry repeated.

"Sorry," whispered the eleven-year-old boy, "here," and he held out the wand toward Bahry.

Bahry barely stopped himself from snarling at the traumatized boy who'd just saved his life. Instead he overrode the impulse with a sigh,

and just stretched out a hand to take the wand. "Look, son, you're *really* not supposed to point a wand at—"

The wand's end twisted lightly beneath Bahry's hand just as the boy whispered, "*Somnium*."

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Harry stared at the Auror's crumpled body, there was no sense of triumph, just a crushing sense of despair.

(Even then it might not have been too late.)

Harry turned to look at where the green snake lay motionless.

"Teacher?" hissed Harry. "Friend? *Please, are you alive?*" An awful fear was taking hold in Harry's heart; in that moment he had entirely forgotten that he'd just seen the Defense Professor try to kill a police officer.

Harry pointed his wand at the snake, and his lips even began to shape the word *Innervate*, before his brain caught up with him and screamed at him.

He didn't dare use magic on Professor Quirrell.

Harry had felt it, the burning, tearing pain in his head, like his brain was about to split in half. He'd felt it, his magic and Professor Quirrell's magic, matched and anti-harmonized in a fulfillment of doom. That was the mysterious terrible thing that would happen if Harry and Professor Quirrell ever got too close to each other, or if they ever cast magic on each other, or if *their spells ever touched*, their magic would resonate out of control—

Harry stared at the snake, he couldn't tell if it was breathing.

(The last seconds ticked away.)

He turned to stare at the Auror, who had seen the Boy-Who-Lived, who knew.

The full magnitude of the disaster crushed in on Harry like a thousand hundred-ton weights, he'd managed to stun the Auror but now there was nothing left to do, no way to recover, the mission had failed, everything had failed, *he* had failed.

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THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT IV

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Shocked, dismayed, despairing, he *didn't think of it*, didn't see the obvious, didn't remember where the hopeless feelings were coming from, didn't realize that he still needed to recast the True Patronus Charm.

(And then it was already too late.)

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Auror Li and Auror McCusker had rearranged their chairs around the table, and so they both saw it at the same time, the naked, skeletally thin horror rising up to hover outside the window, the headache already hitting them from seeing it.

They both heard the voice, like a long-dead corpse had spoken words and those words themselves had aged and died.

The Dementor's speech hurt their ears as it said, "Bellatrix Black is out of her cell."

There was a split second of horrified silence, and then Li tore out of his chair, heading for the communicator to call in reinforcements from the Ministry, even as McCusker grabbed his mirror and started frantically trying to raise the three Aurors who'd gone on patrol.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART V

In a scarred and ruined corridor, lit by dim gas lights, a boy slowly crept forward, one hand stretched out, toward the unmoving snake that was the body of his teacher.

Harry was only a meter away from the snake's body when he first felt it, tickling at the edge of his perception.

Ever so weakly, a sense of doom...

Professor Quirrell *was* alive, then.

The thought engendered no feeling of joy, only a sort of empty despair.

Harry would still be caught soon, and no matter how he tried to explain, it still wouldn't look good. No one would trust him again, they would think he was the next Dark Lord, they wouldn't help him when it came time to fight Lord Voldemort, Hermione would give up on him, probably even Dumbledore would look for another hero...

...maybe they'd just send him home to his parents.

He had failed.

Harry looked at the crumpled body of the police officer he'd stunned, the already-drying blood from the minor cuts and slashes, the burned places on the intricately embroidered red robes.

He'd been stupid. He *shouldn't* have stunned the police officer, should have just *stayed* with his original story about being kidnapped by Professor Quirrell...

It might not be too late, whispered a voice inside him. *You might still be able to fix your mistake. The Auror saw you, he remembers that you stunned him...*

but if he were dead, if Professor Quirrell were dead, if Bellatrix were dead, there would be no one to contradict your story.

Slowly, Harry's hand started to rise, pointing his wand at the police officer and—

Harry's hand halted.

He had a distant sense he was behaving uncharacteristically of himself, somehow. Like there was something he'd forgotten, something important, but he was having trouble remembering what it was, exactly.

Oh. That was right. He was someone who believed in the value of human life.

A sense of puzzlement accompanied the thought, he couldn't quite remember *why* other people's lives had seemed valuable...

All right, said the logical part of him, why has my mind changed between then and now?

Because he was in Azkaban...

And he'd forgotten to recast the Patronus Charm...

Doing anything at all, somehow, seemed like a tremendous effort, like the thought of action itself was a weight too heavy to lift; but it did seem like a good idea to recast the Patronus Charm, for he was still able to be afraid of Dementors. And though he couldn't remember what it was like to be happy, he knew that this wasn't it.

Harry's hand rose to hold his wand level before him, his fingers took the starting positions.

And then Harry paused.

He couldn't... quite remember... what he'd used as his happy thought.

That was odd, it had been something very important, he really ought to be able to remember it... something to do with death? But that wasn't happy...

His body was shivering, Azkaban hadn't seemed so cold before, and it seemed to be getting colder even as he thought. It was too late for him, he'd already sunk too far, he'd never be able to cast the Patronus Charm now—

That may be the Dementation talking rather than an accurate estimate, observed the logical part of himself, habits that had been encoded into sheer

reflex, requiring no energy to activate. *Think of the Dementors' fear as a cognitive bias, and try to overcome it the way you would overcome any other cognitive bias. Your hopeless feelings may not indicate that the situation is actually hopeless. It may only indicate that you are in the presence of Dementors. All negative emotions and pessimistic estimates must now be considered suspect, fallacious until proven valid.*

(If you'd been watching the boy as he thought, you would have seen a distant, abstract, puzzled frown move across his face, below the glasses and the lightning-bolt scar. His hand stayed in the starting position for the Patronus Charm, and did not move.)

The presence of Dementors interferes with the part of you that processes happiness. If you cannot retrieve your happy thought by mnemonic association on the key of happiness, perhaps you can get at the memory some other way instead. When was the last time you talked to someone about the Patronus Charm?

Harry couldn't seem to remember that either.

A crushing wave of despair swept over him, and was dismissed by the logical part of himself as untrustworthy, external, not-Harry, the dull weight still pressed him down but his mind went on thinking, it didn't take much effort to think...

When was the last time you talked to someone about Dementors?

Professor Quirrell had said that he was already able to feel the presence of Dementors, and Harry had said to Professor Quirrell... he'd told Professor Quirrell...

...to hold to the memory of the stars, of falling bodilessly through space, like an Occlumency barrier across his entire mind.

His second Defense class of the year, on Friday, that was when Professor Quirrell had shown him the stars, and again on Christmas.

It didn't take much effort to remember them, the searing points of white against perfect blackness.

Harry remembered the great cloudy wash of the Milky Way.

Harry remembered the peace.

Some of the coldness at the fringes of his limbs seemed to retreat.

There were words he had spoken out loud on the day he'd first cast the Patronus Charm, his mind could remember the sounds and the speech even as the feelings seemed distant...

...I thought of my absolute rejection of death as the natural order.

You cast the True Patronus Charm by thinking about the value of human life.

...But there are other lives that are still alive to be fought for. Your life, and my life, and Hermione Granger's life, all the lives of Earth, and all the lives beyond, to be defended and protected.

Then the idea of killing everyone... that hadn't been his true self, that had been the Dementation talking...

Despair was the Dementors' influence.

Where there's life, there's hope. The Auror is still alive. Professor Quirrell is still alive. Bellatrix is still alive. I'm still alive. No one's actually died yet...

Harry could picture the Earth, now, in the midst of the starfield, the blue-white orb.

...and I won't let them!

"Expecto Patronum!"

The words came out a little halting, and when the human shape burst back into existence it was dim at first, moonlight instead of sunlight, white instead of silver.

But it strengthened, slowly, as Harry breathed in deliberate rhythm, recovering. Letting the light drive back the darkness from his mind. Remembering the things that he had almost forgotten, and channeling them back into the Patronus Charm.

Even when the light blazed full and silver once more, illuminating the corridor more brightly than the gas lamps, banishing fully the cold, Harry's limbs still shook. That had been too close.

Harry took a deep breath. All right. It was time to reconsider the situation now that his thoughts were no longer being artificially darkened by Dementors.

Harry reviewed the situation.

...still looked pretty hopeless, actually.

It wasn't the crushing despair of before, but Harry still felt wobbly, to put it mildly. He didn't dare go dark and it was his dark side that had the ability to take this level of problem in stride. It was his dark side that would have laughed scornfully at the very concept of giving up just because he'd lost Professor Quirrell and was marooned in the depths of Azk-

aban and had been seen by a police officer. The ordinary Harry was not able to take that sort of thing in stride.

But there wasn't any option except to keep moving forward anyway. You couldn't get any *more* pointless than giving up before you'd actually lost.

Harry looked around.

Dim gas lights lit a corridor of grey metal, whose sides and floor and ceiling were slashed in places, gouged and melted, telling anyone who cared to look that there had been battle here.

Professor Quirrell could have repaired it easily enough, if he'd...

The sense of betrayal struck Harry with full force, then.

Why... why did he... why...

Because he's evil, said Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, quietly and sadly. *We told you so.*

No! thought Harry desperately. *No, it doesn't make sense, we were going to commit the perfect crime, the Auror could have been Obliviated, the corridor repaired, it wasn't too late but it would have BEEN too late if he'd died!*

But Professor Quirrell was never really planning to commit the perfect crime, said the grim voice of Slytherin. *He wanted the crime to be noticed. He wanted everyone to know that someone had killed an Auror and broken Bellatrix Black out of Azkaban. He would have prepared some kind of evidence, some proof he could reveal of your involvement, to use as blackmail against you; and you would have been bound to him forever.*

Harry's Patronus almost went out, then.

No... Harry thought.

Yes, said the other three parts of him sadly.

No. It still doesn't make sense. Professor Quirrell had to know I would turn against him the instant I saw him kill an Auror. That I might very well go ahead and confess to Dumbledore, hoping to plead the true fact that I was tricked. And... in terms of blackmail, does his killing an Auror against my will, really add all that much to breaking Bellatrix out of Azkaban with my willing help? It would have been more cunning to keep the evidence of my involvement with the basic crime, but still pretend to be my ally for as long as he could, saving the blackmail to use only if it became necessary...

Rationalization, said Slytherin. *So why did Professor Quirrell do it, then?*

And Harry thought with a tinge of desperation—knowing, even as he thought it, that he was motivated in part by a desire to reject reality, and that wasn't how the technique was meant to be wielded—*I notice that I am confused.*

There was internal silence. None of the parts of himself seemed to have anything to add to that.

And Harry continued to take stock of the moderately hopeless-looking situation.

Did Harry need to re-evaluate the probability that Bellatrix was evil?

...not in any mission-relevant sense. It was a *given* that Bellatrix was currently evil. Whether she was an innocent who'd been made that way by torture and Legilimency and unspeakable rituals, or whether she'd chosen it of her own will, didn't have much bearing on the current situation. The key fact was that while Bellatrix thought Harry was the Dark Lord, she would obey him.

That was one resource, then. But Bellatrix was starved and nine-tenths dead...

'Oh, I feel a little better now, how strange...'

Bellatrix had said that, in her shattered voice, after Harry's Patronus had blazed out of control.

Harry thought, and he couldn't have quite said *why* he thought this, it might have just been his own mind making things up, but... it seemed likely that what the Dementors had taken from you long ago was lost forever. But what the Dementors had taken from you *recently*, the True Patronus Charm might give back. Like the difference between emptying a cup, and the unused cup fading away. Bellatrix, then, might have got back what she'd lost in just the last week or so. Not any happy memories, those would have been eaten years ago. But whatever strength and magic had been drained from her in just the last week, she might have regained. Like the equivalent of getting a week of rest, a week to build up her magic again...

Harry looked at Professor Quirrell's snake form.

...maybe enough for an *Innervate*.

If awakening Professor Quirrell *was*, in fact, a smart thing to do.

Some of the despair came back to Harry, then. He couldn't trust Professor Quirrell, couldn't trust that reviving him would be wise, not after what had just happened.

Steady, Harry thought to himself, and looked at the crumpled form of the Auror.

Bellatrix might *also* be able to manage a Memory Charm.

That could be step one, anyway. It wasn't exactly getting everyone safely out of Azkaban, and the Aurors *would* know afterward that something strange had happened, they might suspect Bellatrix's body and perform an autopsy. But it was a step.

...and *would* it be all that hard to get out of Azkaban? If they could get to the top of Azkaban quickly enough, before the Auror was supposed to report back in, before anyone noticed him missing, then they could just fly out through the hole Professor Quirrell had made, and get far enough away from Azkaban to activate the portkey Harry already had in his possession. (Both Professor Quirrell and Harry had portkeys, and both were powerful enough to transport two humans, plus or minus a snake. As with their doubly-concealed departure from Mary's Room, Professor Quirrell had put enough safety margin in his plans to impress even Harry.)

Bellatrix could carry Professor Quirrell's snake form, which Harry dared not touch or levitate.

Harry turned and strode quickly toward where Bellatrix was waiting on the stairs. He could feel his spirits reviving a little. It *was* starting to look like a good plan, and there was no time to waste in going about it.

What to do with Professor Quirrell, or for that matter Bellatrix, after the portkey took them to where they were supposed to hand Bellatrix over to the psychiatric healer... well, Harry could work that out along the way. Harry would probably have to bamboozle the healer into doing something—which was going to take one hell of a bamboozling, and Harry wasn't even sure what he *wanted* done—but he and Bellatrix had to get moving *now*.

The main problem Harry saw, as he quickly ran the whole process forward in his imagination, would come when they reached the roof. Professor Quirrell had been supposed to sneak around invisibly and Confund

the monitors that would notice visitors in the aerial surroundings of Azkaban, causing them to see a repeating loop of scenery for a few minutes. Professor Quirrell had said that he couldn't Disillusion Harry's Patronus; and if they switched off the Patronus, the Dementors would notice Bellatrix was missing, and alert the Aurors...

Harry's train of thought stumbled.

There were times when 'Aw, crap' just didn't seem to cover it.

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Li's hands were sure despite the adrenaline, as he unlocked the bars on the Vanishing Cabinet that linked Azkaban to a well-guarded room in the interior of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. (A one-way Vanishing Cabinet, of course. The wards permitted a few fast ways *into* Azkaban, all of them highly restricted, and *no* fast ways out.)

Li stepped well back, pointed his wand at the Cabinet, spoke the incantation "*Harmonia Nectere Passus*", and not a second later—

The door of the Cabinet burst open with a bang, and into the room strode a heavy-set, square-jawed witch with greyed hair cropped close around her head. She wore no rank signs as she wore no jewelry or other ornamentation, it was only an ordinary Auror's robes that she deemed fit to grace herself: Director Amelia Bones, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and said to be the only witch in the DMLE who could take Mad-Eye Moody in a fair fight (not that either of those two were the sort to fight fairly). Li had heard rumors that Amelia could Apparate within the bounds of the DMLE, and this was the sort of thing that gave rise to rumors like that, he'd called in the alarm not fifty seconds ago.

"Get into the air, now!" Amelia barked over her shoulder at the female Auror trio following behind her with police broomsticks, they must have all been crushed in there, waiting for Li to activate the Cabinet. "I want more aerial coverage on this place! And make sure you keep up your anti-Disillusionment Charms!" Then her head turned toward him. "Report, Auror Li! Do we know how they got in yet?"

Another Auror trio holding broomsticks materialized in the Vanishing Cabinet and strode out after them even as Li began talking.

They were followed by a trio of Hit Wizards in full battle gear.

Then another trio of Hit Wizards.

Then another broomstick team.

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The emaciated form that was Bellatrix Black was resting motionless on the stairs when Harry got there, eyes closed, and when Harry asked in a cold, high whisper whether she was awake, he got no response.

A brief twitch of panic was countered by the thought that Professor Quirrell had knocked her out to prevent her from hearing the Dark Lord's cringing servant suddenly turn into a hardened criminal and then an expert battlemage. Which was good, because she wouldn't have heard Harry's voice saying 'Expecto Patronum'.

Harry drew back the hood of the Cloak, pointed his wand at Bellatrix, and whispered as gently as he could, "*Innervate*."

From the way Bellatrix's body jerked a little, Harry didn't think he'd managed to get it quite gentle enough.

The sunken dark eyes opened.

"Bella dear," Harry said in his cold, high voice, "I am afraid we've run into a bit of a problem. Have you recovered enough to do small magics?"

There was a pause, and then Bellatrix's pale head nodded.

"Very good," Harry said dryly. "I won't ask you to walk unaided, Bella dear, but I am afraid you must walk." He pointed his wand at her. "*Wingardium Leviosa*."

Harry kept the flow of force down to something he could sustain for a while, and it was still probably lifting two-thirds of her current body weight. She was... thin.

Slowly, as though for the first time in years, Bellatrix Black pushed herself to her feet.

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Amelia strode into the duty room, Auror Li and his silver badger following behind her. She'd spun her Time-Turner the moment she'd heard the alarm, and then spent a tense hour preparing her forces for entry. You couldn't *loop* time within Azkaban itself, Azkaban's future couldn't interact with its past, so she hadn't been able to arrive before the DMLE had gotten the message, but she should have arrived in time...

Her eyes went straight to the corpse, uncloaked and looking very dead, floating beyond the viewing window.

"Where is Bellatrix Black?" Amelia demanded, showing no fear before the creature of fear.

Even her own blood froze for an instant, as the corpse parted its lips, and gurgled, "*Do not know.*"

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Harry watched, now fully invisible once more, as Bellatrix slowly leaned down, took Professor Quirrell's wand (which Harry dared not touch), and slowly straightened again.

Then Bellatrix pointed the wand at the snake, and said, her voice precise though it was still a whisper, "*Innervate.*"

The snake did not stir.

"Shall I try again, my Lord?" she whispered.

"No," Harry said. He swallowed the sick feeling. Harry had decided to say the hell with it and try to revive Professor Quirrell after he'd realized that the Dementors had probably alerted the Aurors by now. His high, cold voice went on, unperturbed, "Do you think you are able to perform a Memory Charm, dear Bella?"

Bellatrix paused, and then said, hesitantly, "I think so, my Lord."

"Eliminate that Auror's last half-hour of memory," Harry commanded. He'd thought a bit about whether he wanted to provide any justification for that, what he would say if Bellatrix asked why they weren't just killing him, in which case Harry would explain that they were pretending to be a different power group and then tell her to shut up—

But Bellatrix simply pointed her wand at the Auror, stood silently for a time, and finally whispered, "*Obliviate.*"

She swayed, then, but did not fall.

"Very good, my dear Bella," Harry said, and chuckled thinly. "And I will ask you to carry that snake."

Again, the woman said nothing, demanded no explanations, didn't ask why Harry or the apparently-invisible Patronus caster couldn't do it. She only staggered to where the long snake lay, slowly bent over, picked it up, draped it over her shoulder.

(A tiny little part of Harry observed that it was very *relaxing* to have a minion that would just follow orders so unquestioningly, and even got as far as thinking that he could totally get used to having a minion like Bellatrix, before that mind-fraction was screamed into silence by his mortally offended remainder.)

"Follow," the boy commanded his minion, and began to walk.

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It was starting to get crowded in the duty room, almost too crowded to breathe, though there was still space around Amelia herself; if needing to breathe meant that you had to crowd Director Bones, it was better not to breathe.

Amelia looked at where Ora was fiddling with Auror McCusker's mirror. "Specialist Weinbach," she barked, causing the young witch to start. "Any response from One-Hand's mirror?"

"None," Ora said nervously, "it's... I mean it has to be jammed, not dead, carefully jammed because it didn't set off the alarms, but the line is so blank the mirror might as well be broken..."

Amelia didn't let her expression change, though the part of her that was already mourning One-Hand got a little sadder and a lot more angry. Seven months, he'd had seven months left until his retirement after a full century of service. She remembered him as an eager young Auror, so very long ago, and his whole career he'd served the DMLE with perfect loyalty, at least when it came to anything really important...

Someone would *burn* for this.

The Dementor still hovered outside the window, casting its useless shadow of dread over their operations; all the creature could do was gurgle its lack of knowledge or fail to reply at all, when asked questions like ‘Did Bellatrix Black escape?’ and ‘Why can’t you find her?’ and ‘How is she being hidden?’ Amelia was starting to worry that the criminals were already gone, when—

“We found a hole in the roof over C spiral!” someone shouted from the doorway. “Still open, ward circumventions still active!”

Amelia’s lips peeled back in a smile like a wolf opening its jaws to eat. Bellatrix Black was still in Azkaban.

And in Azkaban, Bellatrix Black would remain forever.

She took a stride toward the window, ignoring the Dementor now, and looked up at the sky above, to check with her own eyes the patrolling broomsticks. She couldn’t see the whole sky from here, but she saw ten brooms go past on a patrol pattern and that already ought to be enough to catch anyone, though she fully meant to put every broom she could in the air. Her Aurors were equipped with the fastest racing broom currently on the market, the Nimbus 2000; no unsuccessful chases for *her* people.

Amelia turned back from the window, and frowned. The room was getting ridiculously crowded, and two thirds of these people didn’t *need* to be here, they just *wanted* to be close to the center of the action. If there was one thing Amelia couldn’t tolerate, it was people who did what they wanted instead of what was needed.

“All right, you lot!” Amelia bellowed at them. “Stop hanging around here and start securing the top level of each spiral! That’s right,” she said to the looks of surprise, “all three! They could tunnel through a floor or a ceiling to go between them, in case you hadn’t worked that out! We’re going down level by level until we catch them! I’ll take C spiral, Scrimgeour, you’re on B...” She paused, then, remembering that Mad-Eye had retired last year, who could she... “Shacklebolt, you’re on the A spiral, take with the strongest other fighters! Check every set of cells you pass, look under blankets, do the full set of detection Charms in every corridor! Nobody leaves Azkaban until the criminals are caught, nobody! And...” People looked at Amelia in surprise as her voice trailed off.

The criminals had invented some way to prevent the Dementors from finding Bellatrix Black.

That ought to have been *impossible*.

It chilled her blood, contemplating that. It was like...

Amelia took a deep breath, and spoke once more, in a voice of steel command. "And when you catch them, make bloody sure they're the real criminals and not our own people forced to take Polyjuice. Anyone behaves oddly, check them for the Imperius Curse. Keep each other in sight at all times. Don't assume an Auror uniform is friendly if you don't recognize the face." She turned to the communications specialist. "Tell the broomsticks. If one of the brooms peels off for no reason, *half* of them are to hunt it down while the *rest* keep patrolling. And change the harmonics on everything changeable, they may have stolen our keys." Then back to the rest of the room. "No Auror is above suspicion unless they have no family left to threaten."

She saw it, the cold looks that came over the older faces, saw some of the younger Aurors flinch, and knew that they understood.

But she said it out loud, just to be sure.

"We're fighting the old Wizarding War today, everyone. Just because You-Know-Who is dead doesn't mean the Death Eaters have forgotten his tricks. Now *go!*"

*
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Harry walked in silence through the gas-lit grey corridor, invisible beside Bellatrix and the silver shape following them, trying to think of a better plan.

At first, when he'd realized that the Aurors probably knew already, and that moreover, Professor Quirrell wasn't waking up...

His thoughts *had* frozen up there, for a second.

And then stayed frozen, even as he'd gotten himself and Bellatrix heading downward, to buy as much time as possible; the Aurors, Harry figured, would start at the top and move down level by level. The Aurors could afford to move slowly and securely; they knew their prey had no way out.

Harry hadn't been able to think of any way out.

Until Harry had said to himself, *well, if it was just a war game, what would General Chaos do?*

From which an answer had followed instantly.

And then Harry had thought, *but if it's that easy, why hasn't anyone broken out of Azkaban before?*

And after he'd realized the possible problem: *Fine, what would General Chaos do about that?*

Whereupon General Chaos had come up with an amendment to his first plan.

It was...

It was the most insanely *Gryffindor* thing Harry had ever...

So now he was trying to think of a *better* plan, and not having much luck.

Picky picky picky, said Gryffindor. *Who was complaining about not having any plan one minute earlier? You should be glad we came up with anything at all, Mister Now-We're-Doomed.*

"My Lord," Bellatrix whispered haltingly, as she navigated the next flight of stairs downward, "am I going back to my cell, my Lord?"

Harry's brain was distracted, so it took him that long to process the words, and then another moment to process the horror, while Bellatrix continued speaking.

"I would... please, my Lord, I would very much rather die," her voice said. And then, in a smaller voice, a whisper that was barely there, "but I will go back if you ask it of me, my Lord..."

"We are not going back to your cell," hissed Harry's voice, on automatic. Nothing of what he felt was allowed to reach his face.

Um... said Hufflepuff. *Did you seriously just think, 'You ought to work for me, I would appreciate you?'*

A stone would respond to that kind of loyalty, Harry thought. *Even if I'm only getting it by mistake, I can't help but—*

She's the Dark Lord's loyal killer and torturer, and the supposed reason she's loyal is because an innocent girl was broken into pieces and used as raw material to make her, said Hufflepuff. *Did you forget?*

If someone shows me that much loyalty, even by mistake, there's a part of me that can't help but feel something. The Dark Lord must have been... evil doesn't seem like a strong enough word, he must have been empty... to not appreciate her loyalty, artificial or not.

The better parts of Harry didn't have much to say to that.

And that was when Harry heard it.

It was faint, and it grew louder with every step they took forward.

A woman's voice, distant, indistinct.

His ears, automatically, strained to make out the words.

"...please don't..."

"...didn't mean..."

"...don't die..."

Then his brain knew *who* he was hearing, and in almost the same moment, figured out *what* he was hearing.

Because Professor Quirrell wasn't there to keep the silence any more, and Azkaban was not, in fact, silent.

Faint the woman's voice, repeating:

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

It got louder with every step Harry took, he could hear the emotion in the words now, the horror, the remorse, the desperation of...

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

...the woman's worst memory, rehearsing over and over again...

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

...the murder that had sent her to Azkaban...

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

...where she was sentenced by the Dementors to watch whoever she'd killed, die and die and die in an infinite repeating loop. Though she must have been put in Azkaban recently, from the amount of life left in her voice.

The thought came to Harry, then, that Professor Quirrell had passed those doors, heard those sounds, and given not the slightest sign of disturbance; and Harry would have called it a positive proof of evil, if Harry's own lips hadn't remained silent in the presence of Bellatrix, his

breathing regular, while something inside him screamed and screamed and screamed.

The Patronus brightened, not out of control, but it brightened, with every step Harry took forward.

It brightened further as Harry and Bellatrix descended the stairs, she stumbled and Harry offered her his left arm thrust outside the Cloak, braving the sense of doom from being that close to the snake draped around her neck. There was a surprised look on her face, but she accepted it, and said nothing.

It helped Harry, being able to help Bellatrix, but it wasn't enough.

Not when he saw the huge metal door in the center of that level's corridor.

Not when they came closer, and the woman's voice fell silent, because there was a Patronus near her now, and she wasn't reliving her worst memory any more.

Good, said a voice inside him. That was step one.

Harry's steps carried him inevitably forward toward the metal door.

And...

Now unlock the door—

...Harry kept walking...

What do you think you're doing? Go back and get her out of there!

...kept walking...

Save her! What are you doing? She's hurting YOU HAVE TO SAVE HER!

The portkey Harry was carrying could transport two humans, only two, plus or minus a snake. If they'd had Professor Quirrell's portkey too... but they *didn't*, Professor Quirrell's human form was carrying that, there was no way to get it... Harry could only save one person today, and there was only one person on the lowest level of Azkaban, in the most desperate need...

"DON'T GO!" The voice came in a scream from behind the metal door. "No, no, no, don't go, don't take it away, don't don't don't—"

There was a light in the corridor and it grew brighter.

"Please," sobbed the woman's voice, "please, I can't remember my children's names any more—"

"Sit down, Bella," Harry's voice said, somehow he kept his voice in a cold whisper, "I must deal with this," the Hover Charm diminishing and switching off even as Bella obediently sat down, her skeletal form dark against the brightening air.

I'll die, thought Harry.

The air went on brightening.

After all, it wasn't a *certainty* that Harry would die.

It was just a probability of death, and weren't some things worth a probability of dying?

The air went on brightening, the greater Patronus was beginning to form around him, the brilliant human shape was becoming indistinct within the burning air, as Harry's life went to feed the fire.

If I wipe out the Dementors, then even if I live, they'll know it was me, that I was the one who did this... I'll lose my support, lose the war...

Yeah? said the inner voice that was urging him on. *After you destroy all the Dementors in Azkaban? I'd think that'd tend to prove your credentials as a Light Lord, actually, so SAVE HER SAVE HER YOU HAVE TO SAVE HER—*

The humanoid shape could no longer be seen as a separate entity.

The corridor couldn't be seen.

Harry's own body was invisible within the Cloak.

There was only a bodiless viewpoint within an infinite expanse of silver light.

Harry could feel the life leaving him, fueling the spell; far away, he could feel the shadows of Death begin to fray.

I meant to accomplish more with my life than this... I was going to fight the Dark Lord, I was going to merge the wizarding and Muggle worlds...

Lofty goals seemed very distant, very abstract, compared to one woman begging him for help, it wasn't *certain* that Harry would ever do anything more important than this one thing, this one thing that he could do now and here.

And with what might have been his last breath, Harry thought:

There are other Dementors, probably other Azkabans... if I'm going to do this, I should do it when I'm closer to the central pit, it will take less of my life that way, which increases the probability that I'll survive to destroy other Dementors... even

assuming this is the optimal thing to do, if there's a right time and place to do this, it isn't now and here, IT ISN'T NOW AND HERE!

What? said the other part of him indignantly, as it searched for a counterargument that didn't exist—

Slowly the light died back down, as Harry concentrated on that one indisputable fact, the one obvious truth that they weren't in the optimal place, the time *couldn't* be *now*...

Slowly the light died back down.

Part of Harry's life flowed back into him.

Part had been lost as radiation.

But Harry had enough left to stay on his feet, and keep the silver human shape bright; and when his wand arm raised and his voice whispered "Wingardium Leviosa", the magic flowed obediently out of him and helped Bellatrix to her feet. (For it wasn't his magic he had expended, it had never been his magic that fueled the Patronus Charm.)

I swear, Harry thought, breathing as regularly as he could in Bellatrix's presence, while tears streamed down his invisible cheeks, *I swear upon my life and my magic and my art as a rationalist, I swear by everything I hold sacred and all my happy memories, I give my oath that someday I will end this place, please, please may I be forgiven...*

And the two of them walked on, as a murderess's voice screamed and begged someone to come back and save her.

There should have been more time, there should have been a ceremony, for Harry's sacrifice of that piece of himself, but Bellatrix was beside him and so Harry just had to keep on walking without a pause, saying nothing, breathing evenly.

So Harry walked on, leaving a piece of himself behind. It would dwell in this place and time forever, he knew. Even after Harry came back someday with a company of other True Patronus casters and they destroyed all the Dementors here. Even if he melted the triangular building and burned the island low enough that the sea would wash over it, leaving no trace that such a place as this had ever once existed. Even then he wouldn't get it back.

The flock of luminous creatures stopped staring downward, and began patrolling the metal corridor as if nothing had happened.

"Just like last time?" Director Bones snapped in the direction of Auror Li, and the young Auror replied, "Yes, ma'am."

The Director fired off another query to see if the Dementors could now find their target, and looked unsurprised to hear a negative reply a few seconds later.

Emmeline Vance was feeling torn between her loyalties.

Emmeline wasn't a member of the Order of the Phoenix any more, they had disbanded after the end of the last war. And during the war, she'd known, they'd all known, that Director Crouch had quietly approved of their off-the-books battle.

Director Bones wasn't Crouch.

But they were hunting Bellatrix Black now, who had been a Death Eater, and who was certainly being rescued by Death Eaters. Their Patronuses were behaving oddly—all the bright creatures stopping and staring off downward, before they'd gone back to following their masters. And the Dementors couldn't find their target.

It seemed to her that this would be an extremely good time to consult Albus Dumbledore.

Should she just *suggest* to Director Bones that they contact Dumbledore? But if Director Bones hadn't contacted him already...

Emmeline wavered for a while, probably too long, and then finally decided. *The hell with it*, she thought. *We're all on the same side, we need to stick together whether Director Bones likes it or not.*

At a thought, her silver sparrow fluttered onto her shoulder.

"Drop behind us to guard our rear," Emmeline murmured softly, almost without moving her lips, "wait until no one is looking directly at you, then go to Albus Dumbledore. If he is not already by himself, wait until he is. And tell him this: Bellatrix Black is breaking out of Azkaban, and the Dementors cannot find her."

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART VI: CONSTRAINED OPTIMIZATION

Silent, it was thankfully silent, the metal door on the next level down. Either there wasn't someone behind there, or they were hurting quietly, maybe they were screaming but their voice had given out already, or they were just muttering quietly to themselves in the dark...

I'm not sure I can do this, Harry thought, and he couldn't blame the despairing thought on the Dementors either. It would be better to be lower, safer to be lower, his plan would take time to implement and the Aurors were probably already working their way down. But if Harry had to pass any more of those metal doors while staying silent and keeping his breathing perfectly regular, he might go mad; if he had to leave a piece of himself behind at each one, soon there wouldn't be anything left of him—

A luminous moonlit cat leaped into existence and landed in front of Harry's Patronus. Harry almost screamed, which wouldn't have helped his image with Bellatrix.

"Harry!" said the voice of Professor McGonagall, sounding as alarmed as Harry had ever heard from her. "Where are you? Are you all right? This is my Patronus, answer me!"

With a convulsive effort, Harry cleared his mind, repurposed his throat, forced calm, swapped in a different personality like an Occlumency barrier. It took a few seconds and he hoped like hell that

Professor McGonagall didn't notice a problem with that thanks to the communications delay, just as he hoped like hell that Patronuses didn't report on their surroundings.

A young boy's innocent voice said, "I'm in Mary's Place, Professor, in Diagon Alley. Going to the restroom actually. What's wrong?"

The cat leaped away, and Bellatrix began to chuckle softly, dusty appreciative laughter, but she cut herself off abruptly at a hiss from Harry.

A moment later the cat returned, and said in Professor McGonagall's voice, "I'm coming to pick you up right now. Don't go *anywhere*, if you're not around the Defense Professor don't go back to him, don't say anything to anyone, I'll be there as quickly as I can!"

And the bright cat blurred forward and vanished.

Harry glanced down at his watch, noting down the time, so that after he got everyone out of here, and Professor Quirrell anchored the Time-Turner again, he could go back and be in the restroom of Mary's Place at the appropriate time...

You know, said the problem-solving part of his brain, *there's a limit to how many constraints you can add to a problem before it really is impossible, you know that?*

It shouldn't have mattered, and it didn't really, it didn't compare to the suffering of a single prisoner in Azkaban, and yet Harry still found himself feeling very aware that if his plan didn't end with him being picked up from Mary's Place just like he'd never left, and the Defense Professor looking completely innocent of any and all wrongdoing, Professor McGonagall was going to *kill him*.

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As their team prepared to eat another bite of territory out of C spiral, shielding and scanning before dispelling the previous shield to their rear, Amelia was tapping her fingers on her hip and wondering if she ought to consult the obvious expert. If only he wasn't so—

Amelia heard the familiar crack of fire and knew what she would see as she turned.

A third of her Aurors were spinning around and leveling their wands on the old wizard in half-moon glasses and a long silver beard who had appeared directly within their midst, a bright red-golden phoenix on his shoulder.

“Hold your fire!” Polyjuice made it easy to forge the face, but faking the phoenix travel would have been rather more difficult—the wards permitted it as one of the fast ways into Azkaban, though there were no fast ways out.

The old witch and the old wizard stared at each other for a long moment.

(Amelia wondered, in the back of her mind, which of her Aurors had sent the word, there were several former members of the Order of the Phoenix with her; she tried to remember, in the back of her mind, if she’d seen Emmeline’s sparrow or Andy’s cat missing from the flock of bright creatures; but she knew that it was futile. It might not even be any of her people, for the old meddler often knew things he had no way at all of knowing.)

Albus Dumbledore inclined his head to Amelia in a courteous gesture. “I hope I am not unwelcome here,” the wizard said calmly. “We are all on the same side, are we not?”

“That depends,” Amelia said in a hard voice. “Are you here to help us catch criminals, or to protect them from the consequences of their actions?” *Are you going to try to stop the killer of my brother from getting her well-deserved Kiss, old meddler?* From what Amelia heard, Dumbledore had gotten smarter toward the end of the war, mostly due to Mad-Eye’s non-stop nagging; but had relapsed into his foolish mercies the instant Voldemort’s body was found.

A dozen small points of white and silver, reflections of the shining animals, gleamed off the old wizard’s half-moon glasses as he spoke. “Even less than you would I see Bellatrix Black freed,” the old wizard said. “She *must* not leave this prison alive, Amelia.”

Before Amelia could speak again, even to express her surprised gratification, the old wizard gestured with his long black wand and a blazing silver phoenix sprang into existence, brighter perhaps than all their other Patronuses put together. It was the first time she’d seen that spell cast

wordlessly. "Order all your Aurors to cancel their Patronus Charms for ten seconds," said the old wizard. "What darkness cannot find, the light may."

Amelia snapped off the order to the communications officer, who would notify all Aurors through their mirrors, commanding Dumbledore's will to be done.

That took a few moments, and it became a period of awful silence, none of the Aurors daring to speak, while Amelia tried to weigh her own thoughts. *She must not leave this prison alive...* Albus Dumbledore wouldn't turn into Bartemius Crouch without a strong reason. If he'd meant to tell her *why*, he already would have; but it certainly wasn't a positive sign.

Still, it was good to know they'd be able to work together on this one.

"Now," said a chorus of mirrors, and all the Patronus Charms winked out except that blazing silver phoenix.

"Is there another Patronus still present?" the old wizard said clearly to the bright creature.

The bright creature dipped its head in a nod.

"Can you find it?"

The silver head nodded again.

"Will you remember it, should it depart and come again?"

A final nod from the blazing phoenix.

"It is done," Dumbledore said.

"Over," said all the mirrors a moment later, and Amelia raised her wand and began recasting her own Patronus. (Though it took some extra concentration, with that wolfish smile already on her face, to think of the first time Susan had kissed her cheek, instead of dwelling on the looming fate of Bellatrix Black. That other Kiss was a happy thought indeed, but not quite the right kind for the Patronus Charm.)

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They hadn't even gotten to the end of that corridor before Harry's Patronus raised its hand, politely, as though in a classroom.

Harry thought quickly. The question was how to—no, that was also obvious.

“It seems,” Harry said in a coldly amused voice, “that someone has instructed this Patronus to speak its message only to me.” He chuckled. “Well then. Pardon me, dear Bella. *Quietus.*”

At once the silver humanoid said in Harry’s own voice, “There is another Patronus which seeks this Patronus.”

“*What?*” said Harry. And then, without pausing to think about what was happening, “Can you block it? Stop it from finding you?”

The silver humanoid shook its head.

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No sooner did Amelia and the other Aurors finish recasting their Patronus Charms, when—

The blazing silver phoenix flew off, and the true red-golden phoenix followed it, and the old wizard calmly strode after both of them with his long wand gripped low.

The shields around their territory parted around the old wizard like water, and closed behind him with hardly a ripple.

“*Albus!*” shouted Amelia. “What do you think you’re doing?”

But she already knew.

“Do not follow me,” the old wizard’s voice said sternly. “I can protect myself, I cannot protect others.”

The curse Amelia shouted after him made even her own Aurors flinch.

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This isn’t fair, isn’t fair, isn’t fair! There’s a limit to how many constraints you can add to a problem before it really is impossible!

Harry blocked off the useless thoughts, ignored the fatigue he was feeling, and forced his mind to confront the new requirements, he had to think *fast*, use the adrenaline on following the chains of logic quickly and without hesitation, instead of wasting it on despair.

For the mission to succeed,

(1) Harry would have to dispel his Patronus.

(2) Bellatrix needed to be hidden from the Dementors after the Patronus was dispelled.

(3) Harry needed to resist the Dementors' drain after his Patronus was dispelled.

...

If I solve this one, said Harry's brain, I want a cookie afterward, and if you make the problem any more difficult than this, I mean the slightest bit more difficult, I am climbing out of your skull and heading for Tahiti.

Harry and his brain considered the problem.

Azkaban had stood invincible for centuries, relying upon the impossibility of evading the Dementors' gaze. So if Harry found *another* way to hide Bellatrix from the Dementors, it would rely on either his scientific knowledge or his realization that the Dementors were Death.

Harry's brain suggested that an obvious way to stop the Dementors from seeing Bellatrix was to make her stop existing, i.e., kill her.

Harry congratulated his brain on thinking outside the box and told it to continue searching.

Kill her and then bring her back, came the next suggestion. Use Frigideiro to cool Bellatrix down to the point where her brain activity stops, then warm her up afterward using Thermos, just like people who fall into very cold water can be successfully revived half-an-hour later without noticeable brain damage.

Harry considered this. Bellatrix might not survive in her debilitated state. *And* it might not stop Death from seeing her. *And* he'd have trouble carrying a cold unconscious Bellatrix very far. *And* Harry couldn't remember the research on which exact body temperature was supposed to be nonfatal but temporarily-brain-halting.

It was another good outside-the-box idea, but Harry told his brain to keep thinking of...

...ways to hide from Death...

A frown moved over Harry's face. He'd heard something about that, somewhere.

One of the requisites for becoming a powerful wizard is an excellent memory, Professor Quirrell had said. The key to a puzzle is often something you read

twenty years ago in an old scroll, or a peculiar ring you saw on the finger of a man you met only once...

Harry focused as hard as he could, but he couldn't remember, it was on the tip of his tongue but he couldn't remember; so he told his subconscious to go on trying to recollect it, and refocused his attention on the other half of the problem.

How can I protect myself from the Dementors without a Patronus Charm?

The Headmaster had been repeatedly exposed to a Dementor from a few steps away, over and over throughout a whole day, and had come out of it looking merely tired. How had the Headmaster done that? Could Harry do it too?

It could just be some random genetic thing, in which case Harry was screwed. But assuming the problem *was* solvable...

Then the obvious answer was that Dumbledore wasn't afraid of death.

Dumbledore *really* wasn't afraid of death. Dumbledore honestly, truly believed that death was the next great adventure. Believed it in his core, not just as convenient words used to suppress cognitive dissonance, not just pretending to be wise. Dumbledore had decided that death was the natural and normative order, and whatever tiny lingering fear was still in him, it had taken a long time and repeated exposures for the Dementor to drain him through that small flaw.

That avenue was closed to Harry.

And then Harry thought of the flip side, the obvious inverse question:

Why am I so much more vulnerable than average? Other students didn't fall over when they faced the Dementor.

Harry meant to destroy Death, to end it if he could. He meant to live forever, if he could; he had hope of it, the thought of Death brought him no sense of despair or inevitability. He was not blindly attached to his own life; indeed it had taken an effort *not* to burn away all his life on the need to protect others from Death. Why did the shadows of Death have such power over Harry? He would not have thought himself so afraid.

Was it Harry, all along, who'd been rationalizing? Who was secretly so afraid of death that it was twisting his own thoughts, as Harry had accused Dumbledore?

Harry considered this, preventing himself from flinching away. It felt uncomfortable, but...

But...

But uncomfortable thoughts weren't always *true*, and this one didn't sound exactly right. Like there was a grain of truth, but it wasn't hiding *where* the hypothesis said it was—

And that was when Harry realized.

Oh.

Oh, I understand now.

The one who is afraid, is...

Harry asked his dark side what it thought of death.

And Harry's Patronus wavered, dimmed, almost went out upon the instant, for that desperate, sobbing, screaming terror, an unutterable fear that would do anything not to die, throw everything aside not to die, that couldn't think straight or feel straight in the presence of that absolute horror, that couldn't look into the abyss of nonexistence any more than it could have stared straight into the Sun, a blind terrified thing that only wanted to find a dark corner and hide and not have to think about it any more—

The silver figure had darkened to moonlight, was flickering like a failing candle—

It's all right, thought Harry, it's all right.

Visualizing himself cradling his dark side like a frightened child in his arms.

It's right and proper to be horrified, because death is horrible. You don't have to hide your horror, you don't have to feel ashamed of it, you can wear it as a badge of honor, openly in the Sun.

It was strange, to feel himself split in two like this, the track of his thoughts that gave the comfort, the track of his thoughts that followed his dark side's incomprehension at the alienness of the ordinary Harry's thoughts; of all the things that his dark side associated with its own fear of death, the one thing it had never expected or imagined that it might find, was acceptance and praise and help...

You don't have to fight alone, Harry said silently to his dark side. The rest of me will back you up on this. I won't let myself die, and I won't let my friends die

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THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT VI:
CONSTRAINED OPTIMIZATION

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either. Not you/I, not Hermione, not Mum or Dad, not Neville or Draco or anyone, this is the will to protect... Visualizing wings of sunlight, like the wings of the Patronus he had spread, to give shelter to that frightened child.

The Patronus brightened again, the world spun around Harry or it was his own mind that was spinning?

Take my hand, Harry thought and visualized, *come with me, and we will do this thing together...*

There was a lurch in Harry's mind, like his brain had taken one step to the left, or the universe had taken one step to the right.

And in a brightly lit corridor in Azkaban, the dim gas lights far outshone by the steady and unwavering light of a human-shaped Patronus, an invisible boy stood with a strange small smile on his face, shaking only slightly.

Harry knew, somehow, that he'd just done something significant, something that went beyond just strengthening his resistance to Dementors.

And more than that, he'd *remembered*. Thinking of Death as an anthropomorphic figure had done the trick, ironically enough. Now Harry could remember it, what was reputed to hide someone from the gaze of Death himself...

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In a corridor of Azkaban, a wizard's striding legs came to an abrupt halt; for the bright silver thing that was his guide, had halted in midair, fluttering its wings in distress. The brilliant white phoenix craned its head, looking backward and forward as though confused; and then it turned to its master and shook its head in apology.

Without another word, the old wizard turned and strode back the way he came.

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Harry stood straight and upright, feeling the fear wash over him and around him. Some tiny part of him might have been eroded a little by

the waves of emptiness that broke continually upon his unmoving stone, but his limbs were not cold, and his magic was with him. In time those waves might corrode him and consume him, sneaking through whatever tiny part of him still cowered before Death instead of using its fear to energize itself for battle. But that doom would take time, with the shadows of Death far away and uncaring of him. The flaw, the crack, the fault-line that was in him had been repaired, and the stars blazed brightly in his mind, vast and unafraid, and brilliant in the midst of cold and darkness.

To anyone else's eyes, it would have seemed that the boy stood alone in the dimly lit metal corridor, wearing that strange smile.

For Bellatrix Black and the snake draped around her shoulders were concealed by the Cloak of Invisibility, one of the three Deathly Hallows and reputed to hide its wearer from the gaze of Death himself. The riddle whose answer had been lost, and which Harry had found anew.

And Harry knew, now, that the concealment of the Cloak was more than the mere transparency of Disillusionment, that the Cloak kept you *hidden* and not just invisible, as unseeable as were Thestrals to the unknowing. And Harry also knew that it was Thestral blood which painted the symbol of the Deathly Hallows on the inside of the Cloak, binding into the Cloak that portion of Death's power, enabling the Cloak to confront the Dementors on their own level and block them. It had felt like guessing, and yet a certain guess, the knowledge coming to him in the instant of solving the riddle.

Bellatrix was still transparent within the Cloak, but to Harry she was no longer hidden, he knew that she was there, as obvious to him as a Thestral. For Harry had only loaned his Cloak, not given it; and he had comprehended and mastered the Deathly Hallow that had been passed down through the Potter line.

Harry gazed directly at the invisible woman, and said, "Can the Dementors reach you, Bella?"

"No," said the woman in a soft, wondering voice. Then, "But my Lord... you..."

"If you say anything foolish, it will annoy me," Harry said coldly. "Or are you under the impression that I would sacrifice myself for you?"

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THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT VI:
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"No, my Lord," the Dark Lord's servant replied, sounding puzzled, and perhaps awed.

"Follow," spoke Harry's cold whisper.

And they continued their journey downward, as the Dark Lord reached into his pouch, and took a cookie, and ate it. If Bellatrix had asked, Harry would have claimed it was for the chocolate, but she didn't ask.

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The old wizard strode back into the midst of the Aurors, the silver and the red-golden phoenixes now following behind.

"You—" Amelia began to bellow.

"They have dismissed their Patronus," said Dumbledore. The old wizard didn't seem to raise his voice but his calm words somehow overrode her own. "I cannot find them now."

Amelia gritted her teeth, and put a number of scathing remarks on hold, and turned to the communications officer. "Tell the duty room to ask the Dementors *again* if they can sense Bellatrix Black."

The communications specialist spoke to her mirror for a moment, and a few seconds later, looked up, surprised. "No—"

Amelia was already cursing violently in her mind.

"—but they can see someone else on the lower levels who isn't a prisoner."

"Fine!" snapped Amelia. "Tell the Dementor that a dozen of its kind are authorized to enter Azkaban and seize whoever that is and anyone in their company! And if they see Bellatrix Black, they're to Kiss her immediately!"

Amelia turned and glared toward Dumbledore, then, daring him to argue; but the old wizard only looked at her a bit sadly, and held his peace.

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Auror McCusker finished speaking to the corpse that drifted outside the window, conveying the Director's orders.

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CHAPTER 56

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The corpse gave him a deathly smile that almost unstrung his limbs, and then floated downward.

Soon after, a dozen Dementors arose from where they had drifted in the central pit of Azkaban, and headed outward, toward the walls of the vast metal structure that towered above them.

Entering through holes set into the base of Azkaban, the darkest of all creatures began their march of horror.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART VII: CONSTRAINED COGNITION

HARRY had *hoped* that he'd just achieved fusion with his mysterious dark side and would be enabled to draw on all of its benefits with none of its drawbacks, call up the crystal clarity and indomitable will on demand, without needing to go cold or angry.

Once again, he'd overestimated how much progress he'd made. *Something* had happened, but Harry still had a mysterious dark side, it was still separate from him, and his ordinary self was still domitable. And despite the repair work he'd done on his dark side's fear of death, he didn't dare go dark while unshielded in Azkaban, that was tempting fate way too much.

Which was unfortunate, because a bit of nondomitability would have *sure come in handy about now*.

What made it harder was that he couldn't slump against a wall, couldn't break into tears, couldn't even heave a sigh. His dear Bella was watching him and that wasn't the sort of thing her Dark Lord would do.

"My Lord—" Bellatrix said. Her low voice was strained. "The Dementors—they are coming—I can feel them, my Lord—"

"Thank you, Bella," said a dry voice, "I already know that."

Harry couldn't sense the holes in the world the same way as when he'd been wearing the Deathly Hallow, but he could feel the empty pull increasing in intensity. At first he'd mistaken it for the result of descending a stairwell, until he and Bellatrix had finished descending and the pull had gone on increasing. Then decreased, as the Dementors moved away

along the spiral, then increased as they went up another flight of stairs... There were Dementors within Azkaban itself now, and they were coming for him. Of course they were. Harry might be resistant now, but he was not *hidden*.

New requirement, Harry told his brain. Find a way of defeating Dementors that doesn't invoke my Patronus Charm. Alternatively, find yet another way of hiding someone from Dementors, besides the Cloak of Invisibility—

I quit, said his brain. Find yourself another piece of computing substrate to solve your ridiculously overconstrained problems.

I mean it, thought Harry.

So do I, said his brain. Put up your Patronus Charm and wait for the Aurors to find you. Be sensible. It's over.

Give up...

The sucking emptiness seemed to pull harder, as he thought it; and Harry realized what was happening, concentrated more intensely on the stars, turned his mind away from the despair—

You know, observed the logical side of him, if you're not allowed to think any negative thoughts because that will open your mind to the Dementors, that's a cognitive bias too, how would you know if it actually was time to give up?

A desperate sobbing scream rose up from below, words mixed in like “no” and “away”. The prisoners knew, the prisoners could feel it.

The Dementors were coming.

“My Lord, you—you should not risk yourself for me—take back your Cloak—”

“Be silent, fool,” hissed an angry voice. “When I decide to sacrifice you I will tell you so.”

She's got a valid point, said Slytherin. You shouldn't risk yourself for her, there's no way her life is as valuable as yours.

For an instant Harry considered sacrificing Bellatrix to save himself—

And in that moment, some of the dim orange gas-light seemed to flee the corridor, a touch of cold crept over Harry's fingertips. And he knew, then, that to think of leaving Bellatrix to the shadows of Death, would make him vulnerable once more. Even in the moment of making the decision, he might become unable to cast the Patronus Charm, for he would have given up the thought that had saved him before.

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THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT VII:
CONSTRAINED COGNITION

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It occurred to Harry that he could still take the Cloak from Bellatrix afterward, even if he couldn't cast the Patronus Charm; and then he had to wrench his thoughts away from that option, focus firmly on his decision *not* to do it, or he might have just fallen over where he stood. For the whirlpool of emptiness swirling around him was now deadly strong; there were screams coming from *above*, and the screams below had stopped.

This is ridiculous, said his logical side. *Rational agents shouldn't have to put up with this sort of censored reasoning process, all the theorems assume that how you think doesn't affect reality apart from your actual actions, which is why you're free to choose an optimal algorithm without worrying about how your thoughts interact with Dementors—*

...

That is a really dumb idea, said Gryffindor. *Even I think it's a dumb idea and I'm your Gryffindor side. You're not seriously going to just stand there and—*

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"We have a fix!" shouted Ora, holding up her magic mirror as though in triumph. "The Dementor outside the inner wall pointed to level seven, C spiral, that's where they are!"

Her Aurors were looking at her expectantly.

"No," Amelia said in a level voice. "That's where *one* of them is. The Dementors still can't find Bellatrix Black. We are not running down there and letting her through in the confusion, and we are not dividing our forces to be ambushed. So long as we move with caution, we can't lose. Tell Scrimgeour and Shackbolt to keep going down level by level, same as before—"

The old wizard was already striding forward. Amelia didn't even bother cursing him, this time, as once again their carefully constructed shields parted like water and rippled gently in his wake.

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Harry waited at the beginning of the corridor, just next to the stairs leading upward. Bellatrix and the snake were behind him, concealed by the Deathly Hallow that Harry had mastered; he knew, though he could not see, that the emaciated sorceress was sitting upon the stairs, slumped back, since Harry had withdrawn his Hover Charm to free up his mind and magic.

Harry's eyes were fixed on the far end of the corridor, next to the stairs that led downward. Not in his mind now, but in true reality, the light in the corridor had dimmed, the temperature had fallen. The fear thundered over him and around him like a sea whipped by hurricane winds, and the sucking emptiness had become a howling draw toward some approaching black hole.

Up the stairs at the far end, floating smoothly through the dying air, came the voids, the absences, the wounds in the world.

And Harry expected them to stop.

With all the will and focus he could muster, Harry *expected them to stop*.

Anticipated their stopping.

Believed they would stop.

...that was the idea, anyway...

Harry shut down the dangerous stray thought, and *expected the Dementors to halt*. They had no intelligence of their own, they were just wounds in the world, their form and structure was borrowed from others' expectations. People had been able to negotiate with them, offer them victims in exchange for cooperation, only because they *believed Dementors would bargain*. So if Harry believed hard enough that the voids would turn and go, they would turn and go.

But the wounds in the world kept coming, the swirling fear seemed like a solid thing now, the emptiness tearing at matter as well as mind, substance as well as spirit, you could see the metal beginning to tarnish as the holes in the world passed.

A small sound came from behind him, from Bellatrix, but she said no word, for she had been instructed to remain silent.

Don't think of them as creatures, think of them as psychosensitive objects, they can be controlled if I can control myself—

The problem was that he *couldn't* control himself so easily, couldn't make himself believe blue was green by an act of will. Couldn't suppress all those thoughts about how irrational it was to *make* yourself believe something. How *impossible* it was to trick yourself into believing something if you *knew* that was what you were doing. All the training Harry had given himself against self-deception was refusing to switch off *no matter how harmful it was in this unique special case*—

The shadows of Death crossed the halfway point of the corridor, and Harry held up his hand, fingers spread, and said in a voice of firm and confident command, “Stop.”

The shadows of Death stopped.

Behind Harry, Bellatrix gave a strangled gasp, like it was being torn out of her.

Harry gestured to her, the signal he had set up in advance which meant, *repeat what you heard the Dementors say*.

“They say,” Bellatrix said, her voice was shaking, “they said, ‘Bellatrix Black was promised us. Tell us where she hides, and you will be spared.’”

“Bellatrix?” Harry said, making his voice sound amused. “She escaped a while ago.”

A moment later, Harry realized that he should have said that Bellatrix was among the Aurors in the top level, that would have caused more confusion—

No, it was wrong to think of the Dementors as trickable, they were merely *things*, they were controlled only by *expectations*—

“They say,” Bellatrix said in a cracked voice, “they say they know you’re lying.”

The voids began to move forward again.

Her anticipations are more solidly believed than mine; she is controlling them, unwittingly—

“Don’t resist,” Harry said, pointing his wand behind him.

“I, I love you, farewell, my Lord—”

“*Somnium.*”

It had helped, strangely enough, hearing those particular awful words, understanding Bellatrix’s mistake; it reminded Harry why he was fighting.

"Stop," Harry said again. Bellatrix was asleep; now only his own will, his own expectations rather, should control those spheres of annihilation—

But they kept on gliding forward, and Harry couldn't stop himself from worrying that the previous experience had damaged his confidence, which meant that he *wouldn't* be able to stop them, and as he noticed himself thinking that, he doubted even more—he needed more time to prepare, really ought to practice controlling just one Dementor in a cage first—

There was only a quarter of corridor now between Harry and the shadows of death, the empty winds were so strong that Harry could feel the erosion beginning in the cracks of himself.

And the thought came to Harry that maybe he was wrong, maybe Dementors *did* have their own desires and planning capability. Or maybe they were controlled by how *everyone* thought they worked, not just whoever was closest to them. And in either case—

Harry drew up his wand into the starting position for the Patronus Charm, and spoke.

"One of your number went to Hogwarts and did not return. It no longer exists; that Death is dead."

The Dementors halted, a dozen wounds in the world stood motionless, while the emptiness screamed around them like a deadly wind to nowhere.

"Turn and go and do not speak of this to anyone, little shadows, or I will destroy you as well."

Harry's fingers slid into the starting position for the Patronus Charm, and readied himself to cast it; in his mind, the Earth shone among the stars, the day side bright and blue with reflected sunlight, the night side glimmering with the light of human cities. Harry wasn't bluffing, wasn't trying to do anything tricky with his thoughts. The shadows of Death would move forward and be annihilated, or they would depart, he was equally ready for either...

And the voids retreated back as smoothly as they came, the winds of nothingness lessening with each meter they traversed, as they slid back down the stairs, and departed.

** THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT VII: **
* CONSTRAINED COGNITION *

Whether they truly had their own pseudo-intelligence, or whether Harry had finally succeeded in *expecting* them to go... that, Harry didn't know.

But they were gone.

Harry took a moment to sit down beside the unconscious Bellatrix on the stairs, and slumped down as she was slumped, closing his eyes for a moment, only a moment, he sure as hell wasn't planning to sleep in Azkaban, but he needed to take that moment. The Aurors would still be going down the stairs slowly, Harry hoped, so it wouldn't hurt to take just five minutes to rest. Harry was careful to keep his thoughts positive, cheerful, *my, I'll just have some nice regenerative rest here, and then I'll feel better*, rather than, say, *my, I'll just collapse in emotional and physical exhaustion*, because the Dementors hadn't yet retreated very far.

And by the way, Harry said to his brain, *you're fired*.

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"I found him!" cried the old wizard's voice.

Who? thought Amelia, as she turned to see Dumbledore's return, carrying in his arms—

—the one sight, the one person, she would never have expected to behold—

—a man in torn red robes, looking scorched like he'd fought a small war, blood dried on many cuts. His eyes were open, and he was chewing on a bar of chocolate, held in his one living hand.

Bahry One-Hand was *alive*.

A glad cry went up, her Aurors lowering their wands, some of them already starting to rush forward.

"*Stay on guard!*" bellowed Amelia. "Check them both for Polyjuice—scan Bahry for small Animagi or traps—"

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"*Innervate. Wingardium Leviosa.*"

There was a pause. Harry sensed, though he could not quite see, that the invisible woman was pushing herself to her feet, and turning her head to look around. "I'm... alive...?"

Harry was sorely tempted to say no, just to see what she made of that. Instead he hissed, "Don't ask stupid questions."

"What happened?" whispered Bellatrix.

And the Dark Lord gave a wild, high-pitched laugh, and said, "I scared the Dementors away, my dear Bella."

There was a pause. Harry wished he could see Bellatrix's face; had he said the wrong thing?

After a time, in a quavering voice, "Could it be, my Lord, that in your new form, you have begun to care for me—"

"No," Harry said coldly, and turned from her (though he kept his wand on her), and began walking. "And take care that you do not offend me again, or I will abandon you here, use or no use. Now follow, or be left behind; I have work to do."

Harry strode forward, not listening to the gasping sounds that came from behind him; he knew Bellatrix was following.

...because the last thing that woman needed, the very last thing she needed to start thinking before the psychiatric healer began trying to de-program her, was to believe that her Dark Lord could ever love her back.

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The old wizard smoothed his silver beard contemplatively, looking at where Auror Bahry was being carried out of the room by two strong Aurors.

"Do you understand this, Amelia?"

"No," she said simply. She suspected some trap they hadn't yet been able to fathom, which was why Auror Bahry was going to be kept outside the main party and guarded.

"Perhaps," the old wizard said at length, "whichever of their number can cast the Patronus Charm, is more than a simple hostage. Someone who was tricked into this, mayhap? For whatever reason, they left your

Auror alive; let us not be the first to wield deadly curses, when we find them—”

“I see,” said the old witch in sudden realization, “*that* was their plan. It costs them nothing to Oblivate him and leave him alive, and makes *us* hesitate—” Amelia nodded decisively, and said to her people, “We carry on as before.”

The old wizard sighed. “Any news from the Dementors?”

“If I tell you,” Amelia snapped, “will you run off again?”

“It costs you nothing, Amelia,” the old wizard said quietly, “and may save one of your own people the fight.”

Costs me nothing except my chance at vengeance—

But that was nothing compared to the other, the annoying old wizard was often right in the end, it was part of what made him so annoying.

“The Dementors have ceased to answer questions about the other person they said they saw,” Amelia told him, “and they will not say why, nor where.”

Dumbledore turned to the blazing silver phoenix on his shoulder, whose light illuminated the whole corridor, and received a silent headshake in reply. “I cannot detect them either,” said Dumbledore. Then he shrugged. “I suppose I shall just walk the whole spiral from top to bottom and see if anything turns up, shall I?”

Amelia would have ordered him not to do it, if she thought that would have made the tiniest difference.

“Albus,” said Amelia as the old wizard turned to depart, “even you can be ambushed.”

“Nonsense, my dear,” the old wizard said cheerfully as he strode off yet again, waving as though in admonition his fifteen-inch wand of unidentifiable dark-grey wood, “I’m invincible.”

There was a pause.

“He didn’t just really say that—” whispered the newest Auror present, a still-prim young lady by the name of Noelle Curry, to the senior member of her trio, Auror Brooks. “Did he?”

“He can get away with it,” Isabel whispered back to her, “he’s *Dumbledore*, not even Fate takes him seriously anymore.”)

“And that,” Amelia said heavily, for the benefit of the younger Aurors, “is why we never call him in on anything unless we absolutely must.”

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Harry lay very still on the hard bench that served as the bed of this cell, a blanket pulled over him, staying as absolutely motionless as he could while he waited for the fear to return. There was a Patronus approaching, and a powerful one. Bellatrix was hidden by a Deathly Hallow, no easy Charm would penetrate that; but Harry did not know what other arts the Aurors might employ to detect his own self, and dared not reveal his ignorance by asking her. So Harry lay on a hard bed, in a cell with a locked door, and the mighty metal door locked behind him, in absolute darkness, with a thin blanket pulled over him, hoping that whoever it was wouldn't look in, or wouldn't look too closely if they did—

That wasn't a point Harry could affect, really, that part of his fate lay entirely in the hands of the Hidden Variables. Most of his mind was concentrating on the ongoing Transfiguration he was performing.

Listening in the silence, Harry heard the quick footsteps approach; they paused outside his door, and then—

—continued onward.

Soon the fear returned.

Harry didn't allow himself to notice his own relief, any more than he allowed himself to notice the fear. He was holding in his mind the form of a Muggle device rather larger than a car battery, and slowly applying that Form to the substance of an ice cube (which Harry had frozen using *Frigideiro* on water from a bottle in his pouch). You weren't supposed to Transfigure things to be burned, but between the original substance being water, and the Bubble-Head Charm to protect their air supply, Harry hoped that this wouldn't make him or anyone else sick.

Now it was just a question of whether there would be enough time before the Aurors did a detailed check on this cell block, for Harry to finish this Transfiguration, and the partial Transfiguration he would do after that—

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When the old wizard strode back empty-handed, even Amelia began to feel a twinge of worry. She and the other two Auror teams had worked a third of the way down the three spirals, in synchrony so as not to allow any gap in their coverage that could be jumped by cutting through a ceiling, and they'd yet to find any sign.

"Might I ask you to report?" Amelia said, keeping the edge out of her voice.

"First a simple walk from top to bottom," said the old wizard. He was frowning, wrinkling his face even more than usual. "I examined Bellatrix's cell, and found a death doll left in her place. This escape was meant to go unremarked, I think. There is something hidden in the corner beneath a scrap of cloth; I left that undisturbed for your Aurors to examine. On the return trip, I opened each door and looked within the cells. I saw nothing Disillusioned, only the prisoners—"

They were interrupted by a scream from the red-golden phoenix, and all her Aurors flinched from it. Condemnation was in it, and an urgent demand that almost started Amelia running from the corridor on the spot.

"—in rather distressing condition," Dumbledore said quietly. For a moment the blue eyes were very cold beneath the half-moon glasses. "Will any of you speak to me of the consequences of their actions?"

"I did not—" Amelia began.

"I know," said the old wizard. "My apologies, Amelia." He sighed. "Some of the more recent prisoners had scraps of their magic left, when I looked upon them, but I sensed no uneaten power; the strongest had only as much magic left as a first-year child. I heard Fawkes scream in distress many times, but never challenge. It seems you shall have to continue your search; they can hide well enough to escape my mere glance."

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When Harry finished his first Transfiguration, he sat up, pulled back the blanket that had covered him, cast a quick *Lumos*, glanced at his watch,

and was shocked to see that nearly an hour and thirty minutes had passed. How much of that time had gone by since someone had opened the door and then closed it again—Harry hadn't been looking in that direction, of course—that, Harry couldn't guess.

"My Lord...?" whispered Bellatrix's voice, soft and very tentative.

"You may speak now," Harry said. He'd told her to remain silent while he worked.

"That was Dumbledore who looked upon us."

Pause.

"Interesting," Harry said neutrally. He was glad he had not noticed this at the time. That sounded like a *rather close shave*.

Harry said a word to his pouch, and began drawing forth the magical device that he would mate to the product of his hour's labor. Then, when that was drawn forth, another word brought forth a tube of industrial-strength glue; before using it, Harry cast the Bubble-Head Charm on himself and Bellatrix, and had Bellatrix cast the same Charm on the snake, so that the glue fumes in the enclosed cell would not harm them.

When the glue had begun to set, binding technology to magic, Harry laid it down upon the bed, and sat down on the floor, resting his magic and will for a moment before essaying the next Transfiguration.

"My Lord..." Bellatrix said hesitantly.

"Yes?" said the dry voice.

"What is that device you made?"

Harry thought rapidly. It seemed like a good chance to check his plans with her, under the guise of leading questions.

"Consider, my dear Bella," said Harry smoothly. "How difficult is it for a powerful wizard to cut the walls of Azkaban?"

There was a pause, and then Bellatrix's voice came, slow and puzzled, "Not difficult at all, my Lord...?"

"Indeed," said the dry, high voice of Bella's master. "Suppose one were to do this, and fly through the hole on a broomstick, and soar up and away. Rescuing a prisoner from Azkaban would seem easy then, would it not?"

"But my Lord..." said Bella. "The Aurors would—they have their own broomsticks, my Lord, fast ones—"

Harry listened, it was as he had thought. The Dark Lord replied, again in tones of smoothly Socratic inquiry, and Bellatrix asked a further question, which Harry had not expected, but Harry's own counterquestion showed that it should not matter in the end. And in response to Bellatrix's last question, the Dark Lord only smiled, and said that it was time for him to resume his work.

And then Harry got up from the floor of the cell, went to the far end of the cells, and touched his wand to the hard surface of the wall—the wall of Azkaban, the solid metal that separated them from direct exposure to the Dementors' pit.

And Harry began a partial Transfiguration.

This spell would go faster, Harry hoped. He'd spent hours and hours practicing the unique magic, which had made it routine, not much more difficult for him than ordinary Transfiguration. The shape he was changing had not all that much total volume, the Transfigured shape might be tall and wide and long, but it was very thin. Half a millimeter, Harry had thought, would be enough, considering the perfect smoothness...

On the long bench that served as a prison bed, where Harry had set down the Transfigured technological device and the mated magic item for the glue to dry, tiny letters in golden script gleamed on the Muggle artifact. Harry hadn't really *planned* for them to be there, but they'd kept running through the back of his mind, and so seemed to have become part of the Transfigured form.

There were many different things Harry could have said before using this particular triumph of technological ingenuity. Any number of things that would be, in one sense or another, appropriate. Or at least things that Harry *could* have said, *would* have said, if Bellatrix had not been there.

But there was only one thing to say, that Harry would only get the chance to say just this once, and probably never get a better chance to say ever again. (Or *think*, anyway, if he couldn't say it.) He hadn't seen the actual movie, but he'd seen a preview, and for some reason the phrase had stuck in his mind.

The tiny golden letters upon the Muggle device said,
All right, you primitive screwheads! Listen up!

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART VIII: CONSTRAINED COGNITION

In darkness absolute, a boy stood holding his wand to the solid metal wall of Azkaban, essaying a magic that only three other people in the world would have believed possible, and that none save he alone could wield.

Of course a powerful wizard could've cut through the wall in seconds, with a gesture and a word.

For an average adult it might have been a matter of a few minutes' work, and afterward they would have been winded.

But to accomplish the same end as a first-year Hogwarts student, you had to be *efficient*.

Luckily—well, not *luckily*, luck had nothing to do with it—*conscientiously*, Harry had practiced Transfiguration for an extra hour every day, to the point where he was ahead of even Hermione in that one class; he'd practiced partial Transfiguration to the point where his thoughts had begun taking the true universe for granted, so that it required only slightly more effort to keep its timeless quantum nature in mind, even as he kept a firm mental separation between the concept of Form and the concept of substance.

And the *problem* with that art having become so routine...
...was that Harry could think about other things while he was doing it.

Somehow his thoughts had managed to not go there, to not confront the obvious, until he was faced with the prospect of *really actually doing it in just a few minutes*.

What Harry was about to do...

...was dangerous.

Really dangerous.

Someone-might-actually-genuinely-get-killed dangerous.

Facing down twelve Dementors without a Patronus Charm had been *scary*, but merely scary. Harry could have cast the Patronus Charm, *would* have cast it as soon as he thought he was in danger of not being able to do so, as soon as he felt his resistance beginning to fail. And even if that hadn't worked... even so, unless the Dementors had been instructed to Kiss anyone they found, failure shouldn't have been *fatal*.

This was different.

The Transfigured Muggle device could explode and kill them.

The interface between the technology and the magic could fail in any number of ways and kill them.

The Aurors could get in a lucky shot.

It was just, well...

Seriously dangerous.

Harry had caught his mind trying to argue itself into believing that it was safe.

And sure, the whole thing *could* work, but...

But even leaving out that rationalists weren't ever allowed to argue themselves into things, Harry knew he couldn't possibly have argued himself into estimating less than a 20% probability of dying.

Lose, said Hufflepuff.

Lose, said the voice of Professor Quirrell in his mind.

Lose, said his mental model of Hermione and Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick and Neville Longbottom and, well, basically everyone Harry knew except for Fred and George, who would have gone for it in a hot second.

He should just go find Dumbledore and turn himself in. He should, he really really should, it was the only *sane* thing to do at this point.

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And if it'd been only Harry on the mission, only his own life that'd been at stake, he would have; he surely would have.

The part that was almost causing him to lose his concentration on the partial Transfiguration he was performing, the part that was threatening to open him to the Dementors...

...was Professor Quirrell, still unconscious, still a snake.

If Professor Quirrell went to Azkaban for his part in the escape, he would die. He probably wouldn't last even a week. He was that sensitive.

It was that simple.

If Harry *lost* here...

He lost Professor Quirrell.

Even though he's probably evil, said the Hufflepuff part of him quietly.
Even so?

It wasn't a decision that Harry had made in any conscious way. He just couldn't do it. Losing was for House points, not *people*.

If you think your own life is valuable enough that you're not willing to take on an eighty percent probability of dying in order to protect all the prisoners in Azkaban, his Slytherin side observed, there's no way you can justify taking a twenty percent risk to your life to save Bellatrix and Professor Quirrell. The math doesn't add up, you can't be assigning consistent utilities over outcomes here.

The logical side of him noted that Slytherin had just won the argument.

Harry kept the Form in his mind, kept on casting the spell. He could always just abort the mission when he was *done* with the Transfiguration, he didn't want to lose the effort he'd already invested.

And then Harry thought of something else that suddenly made it very hard to keep the magic going, very hard to keep up his resistance to the Dementors.

What if the portkey doesn't take us where Professor Quirrell said it did?

It was obvious in retrospect the moment he thought about it.

Even if the planned escape went completely right, even if the Muggle device worked and *didn't* explode and *didn't* interact badly with the mated magic item, even if the Aurors didn't get in a lucky shot, even if Harry made it far enough away from Azkaban to use the portkey...

...there might not be a psychiatric healer at the end of it.

That was something Harry had believed when he'd trusted Professor Quirrell, and he'd forgotten to re-evaluate it after Professor Quirrell was no longer to be trusted.

You can't do this, said Hufflepuff. *At this point we're talking mere stupidity.*

Cold seemed to spread through the room, but Harry kept the Transfiguration going, even as his resistance against the Dementors faltered.

I can't lose Professor Quirrell.

He tried to kill a police officer, said Hufflepuff. *You already lost him, in that moment. Bellatrix is probably just what everyone thinks she is. Just take your Cloak back, go find Dumbledore and tell him you were tricked.*

No, thought Harry desperately, *not without talking to Professor Quirrell, there might be an explanation, I don't know, maybe he was standing far enough away from my Patronus that the Dementors got to him... I don't understand, it doesn't make sense on any hypothesis, why he would do that... I can't just...*

Harry turned his mind away from that chain of thought before it completely broke his resistance to the fear, because he couldn't think of feeding Professor Quirrell to Dementors while staying resolved against Death, it was a cognitive impossibility.

Your reasoning is artificially impaired, observed the logical part of him calmly, *find a way to unimpair it.*

All right, let's just generate alternatives, Harry thought. *Not choose, not weigh, certainly not commit... just think about what else I might be able to do besides the original plan.*

And Harry went on cutting the hole in the wall. He was using partial Transfiguration on a thin cylindrical shell of metal, two meters in diameter and half a millimeter thick, running all the way through the wall. He was Transfiguring that half-millimeter thickness of metal into motor oil. Motor oil was a liquid and you weren't to Transfigure liquids because they might evaporate, but he and Bellatrix and the snake all had Bubble-Head Charms. And Harry would cast Finite on the oil immediately after, dispelling his own Transfiguration...

...as soon as the separated and lubricated hunk of metal slid out of the wall and onto the floor of their cell, he'd slanted it so gravity would pull it in, once the Transfiguration was done.

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If Harry and Bellatrix *didn't* exit on his broomstick through the resulting hole in the wall...

Harry's brain suggested that he could try to Transfigure a surface cover over the hole in the wall, leaving a space for Bellatrix and Professor Quirrell to hide in, wearing the Cloak, while Harry turned himself in. And Professor Quirrell would eventually wake up, and he and Bellatrix could try to figure out how to exit Azkaban on their own.

It was, first of all, a dumb idea, and second, there would still be a huge hunk of metal on the floor of the cell, which would give it away.

And then Harry's brain saw the obvious.

Let Bellatrix and Professor Quirrell use the escape route you invented. You stay behind, and turn yourself in.

Bellatrix and Professor Quirrell were the ones whose lives were at stake.

They were gaining, not losing, from taking the risk.

And there was no reason, no sane reason at all, for Harry to go with them.

A calm came over Harry as he thought it, the cold and darkness that had been wavering around the fringes of his mind retreated. Yes, that was it, that was the creative outside-the-box route, that was the hidden third alternative. The falseness of the dilemma was obvious in retrospect. If Harry turned himself in, he *didn't* have to turn in Bellatrix and Professor Quirrell. If Bellatrix and Professor Quirrell took a dangerous escape route, Harry *didn't* need to go with them.

Harry didn't even need to face the embarrassment of admitting he'd been tricked, if he ordered Bellatrix to remove the memory. Everyone would just assume he'd been kidnapped, including Harry himself. Admittedly, there was no plausible reason why the Dark Lord would ever ask Bellatrix to do that; but Harry could simply smile and tell Bellatrix she wasn't allowed to know, and that would be that...

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Her Auror team had gotten around three-quarters of the way down Azkaban, as had the other two teams on the other two spirals. Amelia was feeling tenser already, though she was betting on the criminals hiding on the second-to-lowest floor, part of her wished Dumbledore had thought to check that specific floor more carefully and part of her was glad he hadn't.

And then there was a distant sound, like a tiny 'tink' noise coming from far away. Like a very loud sound coming from the second-to-lowest floor, say.

Amelia looked at Dumbledore before she realized, before she managed to stop herself.

The old wizard shrugged, gave her a small smile, said, "Since you asked it, Amelia," and went off yet again.

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"*Finite Incantatem*," Harry said to the oil coating the giant chunk of metal on the floor. He hardly heard himself speak, his ears were still ringing from the gigantic thud of the solid metal sliding out of the wall and falling. (He should have put up a Quieting Charm, in retrospect, though that wouldn't have stopped the noise from spreading through the solid metal floor.) And then Harry said it again, "*Finite Incantatem*" to the oil coating the two-meter hole in the wall, spreading the effect wide; it was his own magic Harry was canceling, which made the spell almost effortless. Harry was feeling a bit tired now, but that was the last use of magic he would need. He hadn't even *needed* to do it, really, but Harry didn't want to leave Transfigured liquid lying around, and he didn't want to betray the secret of partial Transfiguration either.

It seemed very... *inviting*, that two-meter hole leading to freedom.

The light from outside coming in... wasn't exactly the Sun shining on his face, but it was brighter than anything of Azkaban's interior.

Harry was tempted to just go with, just hop on the broomstick with Bellatrix and the snake. Chances were that they *would* get out safely. And if they *did* get out safely, and Harry came with, then he and Professor

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Quirrell could go back in time and look perfectly innocent, everything could go back to normal.

If Harry stayed behind and turned himself in... then even if everyone assumed Harry had been a hostage, assumed Harry had lied to Professor McGonagall's Patronus at wandpoint... even if Harry himself got off lightly, well...

It wasn't likely that the Defense Professor would go on teaching at Hogwarts.

Professor Quirrell would have reached the predestined end of his career, in February of the school year.

And yes, Professor McGonagall would kill Harry, and yes, it would be slow and painful.

But staying behind was the sensible, safe, *sane* thing to do, and Harry was feeling more relaxed than regretful.

Harry turned to Bellatrix; he opened his mouth to instruct her a final time—

And there was a hiss, a weak hiss, a hiss that sounded slow and confused, and the hiss said,

"What wass... that noise?"

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Through the corridor the old wizard strode. He came to a metal door and opened it, already knowing from memory that the cells within were empty.

Seven mighty and discerning incantations the wizard spoke then, before he moved on; it would be little enough exertion in total, with so few cells left to check.

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"Teacher," Harry hissed. So many emotions bubbling up in him, all at once. He knew, though he could not see, that the green snake around Bellatrix's shoulders, was slowly lifting its head to look around. *"Are you... all right, teacher?"*

"Teacher?" came the weak, confused hiss. *"Where iss thiss?"*

"Prisson," Harry hissed, "the prisson with life-eaterss, we were to resscue a woman, you and I. You tried to sslay the protector man, I blocked your killing cursse, there was a ressonance between uss... you fell unconssciouss, I had to defeat the protector man myssself... my guardian Charm wass disspelled, the life-eaterss could tell the protectorss that the woman had esscaped. There iss ssomeone here who can ssense my guardian Charm, probably the sschoolmasster... so had to disspell my guardian Charm, find different way to hide you and the woman from life-eaterss without guardian Charm, learn to protect myssself without guardian Charm, sscafe off life-eaterss without guardian Charm, then devisse new esscape plan for you and the woman, and finally, cut hole in thick metal wall of prisson even though I am only firsst-year sstudent. No time to explain, you musst go now. If we never meet again, teacher, then I was glad to know you for a time, even though you are probably evil. It iss good to have the chance to ssay thiss much: Goodbye."

And Harry took the broomstick and presented it to Bellatrix, saying simply, "Get on."

He had decided to keep the memories. For one thing, they were important. For another, he and the Defense Professor had started planning this a week ago, and Harry wasn't about to obliterate the whole last week, or explain to Bellatrix exactly what needed to be Obliviated. Harry could probably fool Veritaserum, and if Dumbledore insisted that Harry drop his Occlumency shields for a deeper examination... well, Harry had acted heroically throughout.

"Sstop!" said the snake. Its voice was stronger now. *"Sstop, sstop, sstop! What do you mean, goodbye?"*

"Esscape plan iss rissky," said Harry. *"My life iss not at sstake, only yourss and herss. Sso I am sstaying, turning myssself in—"*

"No!" said the snake. The hiss was forceful. *"Musst not! Not permitted!"*

Bellatrix mounted the broomstick; Harry could sense (but never see) her head turning to look at him, she said no word. Awaiting him, perhaps, or merely awaiting his orders.

"No longer trusst you," Harry said simply. *"Not ssince you tried to sslay the protector man."*

And the snake hissed, *"I did not sseek to sslay the protector man! Are you fool, boy? Sslaying him would not make ssense, evil or no!"*

The Earth ceased to turn on its axis, paused in its orbit around the Sun.

The snake's hiss was now more furious than anything Harry had ever heard from the human Professor Quirrell. *"Sslay him? Had I ssought to sslay him he would have been dead within ssecondss, fool boy, he wass no match for me! I ssought to ssudue, to dominate, force him to drop sshieldss upon hiss mind, needed to read him, to know who awaited hiss reply, learn detailss for memory spell—"*

"You casst killing curse!"

"Knew he would dodge!"

"Wass hiss life worth sso little? What if he did not dodge?"

"Would have pushed him out of the way with own magic, fool boy!"

Again the pause in the planet's spin. Harry hadn't thought of that.

"Witlesss dunce of a plotter," hissed the snake, so angrily that the hisses seemed to overlap and slither over each other's tails, *"clever imbecile, cunning idiot, fool of an untrained Sslytherin, your missplaced misstrust hass ruined—"*

"Thiss iss not a fair time to argue," Harry observed mildly. The surge of relief trying to flood through him was canceled by the increased tension. *"Ssince I cannot get angry at you properly, without opening myssself to life-eaterss. Musst russh, someone may have heard noisse—"*

"Explain esscape plan," the snake said imperiously. *"Sswiftly!"*

Harry explained. Parseltongue didn't have words for the Muggle technology, but Harry described the function and Professor Quirrell seemed to understand.

There were a few short hisses, the snakish equivalent of a bark of surprised laughter, and then, snapped commands. *"Tell woman to look away, casst spell of ssilence, sset guardian Charm outside door. Will transsform myssself, make few sswift improvementss to your invention, give woman emergency potion sso sshe can sshield uss, transsform back before you disspell Charm. Plan will be ssafer, then."*

"And am I to believe," Harry hissed, *"that healer for woman truly awaitss uss?"*

"Usse ssensse, boy! Ssupposse I am evil. To end usse of you here iss obvioussly not what I planned. Misssion iss target of opportunity, invented after ssaw your guardian Charm, whole affair meant to be unnoticed, hid when left eating-place. Obvioussly you will ssee persson pretending to be healer on arrival! Go back to eating-place afterward, original plan carriess on undissturbed!"

Harry stared at the invisible snake.

On the one hand, saying it like that made Harry feel rather dumb.

And on the other hand, it wasn't exactly reassuring.

"Sso," Harry hissed, "*what iss your plan for me, precissely?*"

"*You ssaid no time,*" came the snake's hiss, "*but plan iss for you to rule country, obvioussly, even your young noble friend hass undersstood that by now, assk him on return if you wissh. Will ssay no more now, iss time to fly, not sspeak.*"

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The old wizard reached out toward another metal door, from behind which came a endless dead mutter, "I'm not serious, I'm not serious, I'm not serious..." The red-golden phoenix on his shoulder was already screaming urgently, and the old wizard was already wincing, when—

Another cry pierced the corridor, phoenix-like but not the true phoenix's call.

The wizard's head turned, looked at the blazing silver creature on his other shoulder, even as ephemeral and substanceless talons launched the spell-entity into the air.

The false phoenix flew down the corridor.

The old wizard raced off after, legs churning like a spry young man of sixty.

The true phoenix screamed once, twice, and a third time, hovering before the metal door; and then, when it became clear that its master would not return for all its calling, flew reluctantly after.

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Professor Quirrell had assumed his true form, this time—Polyjuice only lasted for an hour without redosing—and though the Defense Professor was pale, leaning against the metal bars of the nearest cell, his magic was strong enough to seize his wand without a word, even as Bellatrix doffed the Cloak and placed it obediently in Harry's waiting hand. The sense of doom was building once more, though not in full force, as the

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Defense Professor's power returned, the fringes of its vast force clashing with Harry's slight childish aura.

Harry said aloud the description of his Muggle device, naming it to the observing wizard, and then a Finite from Harry turned all his hard work back into an ice cube. Professor Quirrell could not cast spells on something Harry had Transfigured, for that would be an interaction, however slight, between their magics, but—

Three seconds after, Professor Quirrell was holding his own Transfigured version of the Muggle device. A single barked word and a sweep of his wand, and the residue of glue was gone from the magical item; three more incantations later, the magical and technological were fused together as though into a single thing, and Charms of Unbreakability and flawless function had been cast upon the Muggle device.

(Harry felt a lot better about doing this under adult supervision.)

A potion was thrown to Bellatrix, and Professor Quirrell and Harry both commanded, "Drink," as though speaking in the same voice. The emaciated woman had already been lifting it to her lips, without waiting; for it was evident to anyone that this snake Animagus was a servant of the Dark Lord, and a powerful and trusted one.

Harry finished pulling the hood of the Cloak of Invisibility over his head.

A brief and terrible magic lashed out from the Defense Professor's wand, scouring the hole in the wall, scarring the huge chunk of metal that lay in the room's midst; as Harry had requested, saying that the method he'd used might identify him.

"Left-hand glove," Harry said to his pouch, and drew it forth, and put it on.

A gesture from the Defense Professor made a harness appear upon Bellatrix's shoulders, and another, smaller cloth device upon her hand, and something like handcuffs on her wrists, even as the woman finished drinking the potion.

A strange, unhealthy color seemed to come over Bellatrix's pale face, she straightened, her sunken eyes seemed brighter and far more dangerous...

...small wisps of steam were coming out of her ears...

(Harry decided not to think about that part.)

...and Bellatrix Black laughed, then, sudden mad laughter that rang much too loudly amid the small prison cells of Azkaban.

(Very soon, the Defense Professor had said, Bellatrix would fall unconscious and stay that way for quite awhile, the price of the potion she had taken; but for just a few moments she would regain perhaps a twentieth part of the power she had once wielded.)

The Defense Professor threw his wand toward Bellatrix, and an instant later blurred into a green snake.

An instant after *that* the Dementors' fear returned to the room.

Bellatrix flinched only slightly, caught the wand, and gestured without a word; the snake flew up and was inserted into the harness on her back.

Harry said "Up!" to the broomstick.

Bellatrix attached the wand to the holster on her hand.

Harry leaped onto the two-person broomstick in the lead position.

Bellatrix followed behind him, she took the cufflike devices on her wrists and chained her hands to the grips of the broomstick, even as Harry's right hand shoved his wand into his pouch.

And the three shot forward through the hole in the wall—

—emerging into the open air, directly above the Dementors' pit, in the interior of the vast triangular prism that was Azkaban, the blue sky now clearly visible above them, shining down its daylight.

Harry angled the broomstick and began accelerating, upward and toward the center of the triangular space. His left hand, gloved to prevent direct contact between his skin and something which Professor Quirrell had Transfigured, held the switch of the control on the Muggle device.

Far above them, distant shouts rang out.

All right, you primitive screwheads!

Aurors on fast racing broomsticks angled out of the sky, diving straight down toward them, faint sparks of light already blazing downward as the first shots were fired.

Listen up!

"Protego Maximus!" shouted Bellatrix in a mighty, cracked voice, followed by a cackling laugh as a shimmering blue field surrounded them.

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You see this?

From the decaying pit in the center of Azkaban, over a hundred Dementors rose into the air, appearing to some as a great mass of corpses, a flying graveyard; appearing to another as a conglomerate of absences that seemed to form one vast rip in the world as they slid upward.

This...

The voice of an ancient and powerful wizard bellowed a terrible incantation, and a great blast of white-golden fire shot out of the hole in Azkaban's wall, shapeless for only a moment before it began to form wings.

Is...

And the Aurors activated the Anti-Anti-Gravity Jinx that had been built into the wards of Azkaban, disabling all flying spells whose enchantment had not been cast with the recently changed passphrase.

The lift on Harry's broom switched off.

Gravity, on the other hand, stayed on.

Their broom's upward rise slowed, started to decelerate, began the process of turning into a fall.

My...

But the enchantments that kept the broom pointed in a direction and allowed steering, the enchantments that kept the riders attached and somewhat protected them from acceleration, *those* enchantments were still functioning.

BROOMSTICK!

Harry hit the ignition switch on the General Technics made, model *Berserker PFRC*, N-class, ammonium perchlorate composite propellant, solid-fuel rocket that had been mated to his Nimbus x200 two-person broomstick.

And there was noise.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART IX: CURIOSITY

Broomsticks had been invented during what a Muggle would have called the Dark Ages, supposedly by a legendary witch named Celestria Relevo, allegedly the great-great-granddaughter of Merlin.

Celestria Relevo, or whichever person or group had really invented those enchantments, hadn't known a darned thing about Newtonian mechanics.

Broomsticks, therefore, worked by Aristotelian physics.

They went where you pointed them.

If you wanted to move straight forward, you pointed them straight forward; you didn't worry about keeping some of the thrust going downward to cancel out the effect of gravity.

If you turned a broomstick, all of its new velocity was in the new direction of pointing, it didn't go sideways based on its old momentum.

Broomsticks had maximum speeds, not maximum accelerations. Not because of anything to do with air resistance, but because a broomstick had some maximum Aristotelian impetus its enchantments could exert.

Harry had never explicitly *noticed* that before, despite being dextrous enough to get the best grades in flying class. Broomsticks worked so much like the human mind *instinctively expected them to work* that his brain had managed to *entirely overlook their physical absurdity*. Harry, on his first Thursday of broomstick lessons, had been distracted by more interesting-seeming phenomena, words written on paper and a glowing red ball. So

his brain had simply suspended its disbelief, marked the reality of broomsticks as accepted, and proceeded to have its fun, without ever once *thinking of the question* whose answer would have been obvious. For it is a sad fact that we only ever *think* about a tiny fraction of all the phenomena we encounter...

That is the story of how Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres was almost killed by his own lack of curiosity.

Because rockets did *not* work by Aristotelian physics.

Rockets did *not* work like a human mind instinctively thought a flying thing should work.

A rocket-assisted broomstick, therefore, did *not* move like the magical broomsticks upon which Harry was such a very good flyer.

None of this actually went through Harry's mind at the time.

For one thing, the loudest noise he'd ever heard in his life was preventing him from hearing himself think.

For another thing, accelerating upward at four gravities meant that he had around two and a half seconds, total, to go from the bottom to the top of Azkaban.

And even if they were two and a half of the *longest* seconds in the history of Time, that wasn't enough room to do much thinking.

There was time only to see the lights of the Aurors' curses arrowing down at him, slightly angle the broomstick to avoid them, realize that the broomstick was simply continuing on with mostly the same momentum instead of going in the direction he pointed it, and activate the wordless concepts

crap

and

Newton

whereupon Harry angled the broomstick much harder and then they started to very quickly approach the wall so he angled it back the other way and there were more lights coming down and the Dementors were sliding smoothly up toward them along with some kind of giant winged creature of white-golden flame so Harry wrenched the broomstick back toward the sky but now he was still sliding toward another wall so he tilted the broom slightly and he stopped approaching but he was too close so he

tilted it again and then the distant Aurors on their broomsticks weren't very distant at all and he was going to crash into that woman so he spun his broomstick straight away from her and then in another instant he realized his rocket was an extremely powerful flamethrower and in a fraction of a second it would be pointing directly at the Auror so he spun the broomstick sideways as he kept going up and he couldn't remember if it was pointing at any Aurors now but at least it wasn't pointing at *her*

Harry missed another Auror by about a meter, zipping past him on a sideways-pointed flamethrower moving upward at, Harry would later guess, around 300 kilometers per hour.

If there were any screams of roasted Aurors he didn't hear them, but this was not evidence one way or another, because all that Harry was hearing at the moment was an extremely loud noise.

A couple of *calmer if not quieter* seconds later, there didn't seem to be any Aurors around, or any Dementors, or any giant winged flame creatures, and the vast and terrible edifice of Azkaban looked surprisingly tiny from this height.

Harry got the broomstick pointed toward the Sun, faintly visible through the clouds, it wasn't high in the sky at this time of day and month of winter, and the broomstick accelerated for another two seconds in that direction and picked up an amazing amount of speed very quickly before the solid-fuel rocket burned itself out.

After that, once Harry could hear himself think again, when there was only the howling wind from their ridiculous speed, and Harry's enchantment-assisted fingers gripping the broomstick were merely resisting the decelerating drag of moving way faster than terminal velocity, *that* was when Harry actually thought all that stuff about Newtonian mechanics and Aristotelian physics and broomsticks and rocketry and the importance of curiosity and how he was never going to do anything this Gryffindor ever again or at least not until after he learned the Dark Lord's secret of immortality and *why* had he listened to Professor Quirinus "I assure you, boy, I would not attempt thisss if I did not anticipate my own survival" Quirrell instead of Professor Michael "Son, if you try anything to do with rockets on your own, I mean *anything whatsoever* without a trained professional watching, you will die and that will make Mum sad"

Verres-Evans.

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“WHAT?” shrieked Amelia at the mirror.

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The wind had died down to a bearable level as the air resistance slowed them, giving Harry plenty of opportunity to listen to the buzzing, ringing sound that seemed to fill his whole brain.

Professor Quirrell had been supposed to cast a Quieting Charm on the rocket exhaust... apparently there were limits to what Quieting Charms could do... in retrospect, Harry should have Transfigured a pair of earplugs, not just trusted to the Quieting Charm, though that probably wouldn't have been enough either...

Well, magical healing probably had something to treat permanent hearing damage.

No, really, magical healing probably had something to treat that. He'd seen students go to Madam Pomfrey with injuries that sounded a lot worse...

Is there some way of transplanting an imaginary personality to someone else's head? asked Hufflepuff. *I don't want to live in yours anymore.*

Harry shoved it all into the back of his mind, there really wasn't anything he could do about it right now. Was there anything he *should* be worrying about—

Then Harry glanced behind him, remembering for the first time to check whether Bellatrix or Professor Quirrell had been blown off the broomstick.

But the green snake was still in its harness, and the emaciated woman was still clinging to the broomstick, her face still charged with unhealthy color and her eyes still bright and dangerous. Her shoulders were shaking like she was laughing hysterically, and her lips were moving as though to shout, but no sound was coming out—

Oh, right.

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* THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT IX: *
* CURIOSITY *

Harry took off the hood of his cloak, tapped his ears to let her know he couldn't hear.

Whereupon Bellatrix grasped her wand, pointed it at Harry, and suddenly the ringing in his ears diminished, he could hear her.

A moment later he regretted it; the imprecations she was screaming at Azkaban, Dementors, Aurors, Dumbledore, Lucius, Bartemy Couch, something called the Order of the Phoenix, and all who stood in the way of her Dark Lord, et cetera, were not suitable for younger and more sensitive listeners; and her laughter was hurting his newly healed ears.

"Enough, Bella," Harry finally said, and her voice stopped on the instant.

There was a pause. Harry pulled the Cloak back over his head, just on general principles; and realized in the same instant that they might have telescopes down there or something, in retrospect pulling down his hood for even a moment had been an incredibly dumb move, he hoped the whole mission didn't end up failing because of that one error...

We're not really cut out for this, are we? observed Slytherin.

Hey, Hufflepuff objected in sheer reflex, *we can't expect to do anything perfectly the first time, we probably just need more practice* FORGET I SAID THAT.

Harry looked back again, saw Bellatrix looking around with a puzzled, wondering look on her face. Her head kept turning, turning.

And finally Bellatrix said, her voice now lower, "My Lord, where are we?"

What do you mean? was what Harry wanted to say, but the Dark Lord would never admit to not understanding anything, so Harry replied, dryly, "We are on a broomstick."

Does she think she's dead, that this is Heaven?

Bellatrix's hands were still chained to the broomstick, so it was only a finger that came up and pointed when she said, "What is *that*?"

Harry followed the direction of her finger and saw... nothing in particular, actually...

Then Harry realized. After they'd gone up high enough, there hadn't been any clouds to obscure it any more.

"That is the Sun, dear Bella."

It came out remarkably controlled, the Dark Lord sounding perfectly calm and maybe a little impatient with her, even as the tears started down Harry's cheeks.

In the endless cold, in the pitch blackness, the Sun would surely have been...

A happy memory...

Bellatrix's head kept turning.

"And the fluffy things?" she said.

"Clouds."

There was a pause, and then Bellatrix said, "But what *are* they?"

Harry didn't answer her, there was no way his voice could have been steady, would have been steady, it was all he could do to keep his breathing perfectly regular while he cried.

After a while, Bellatrix breathed, so softly Harry almost didn't hear, "Pretty..."

Her face slowly relaxed, the color leaving its paleness almost as quickly as it had arrived.

Her skeletal body slumped down against the broomstick.

The borrowed wand dangled lifelessly from the strap attached to her unmoving hand.

YOU HAVE GOT TO BE KIDDING—

Harry's mind remembered then, the Pepper-Up potion came at a cost; Bellatrix would *ssleep for a conssiderable time*, Professor Quirrell had said.

And in the same instant another part of Harry became utterly convinced, looking back at the chalk-white emaciated woman, seeming dead in the bright sunlight than anything Harry had ever seen alive, that she *was* dead, that she had just uttered her last word, that Professor Quirrell had misjudged the dosage—

—or deliberately sacrificed Bellatrix to guard their own escape—

Is she breathing?

Harry couldn't see if she was breathing.

There was no way, on the broomstick, to reach back and take her pulse.

Harry looked ahead to make sure they weren't about to run into any flying rocks, kept on steering the broomstick toward the Sun, the invisi-

ble boy and the possibly dead woman riding off into the afternoon, while his fingers gripped the wood so hard they turned white.

He couldn't reach back and perform artificial respiration.

He couldn't use anything from his healer's kit.

Trust Professor Quirrell to have not endangered her?

Strange, it was strange, that even genuinely believing that Professor Quirrell hadn't meant to kill the Auror (for it *would* have been stupid), thinking of the Defense Professor's reassurances no longer felt reassuring.

Then it occurred to Harry that he had yet to check—

Harry looked back, and hissed, "*Teacher?*"

The snake did not stir within its harness, and said no word.

...maybe the snake, not being an actual rider, hadn't been protected from the acceleration. Or maybe coming that close to the Dementors without a shield, even for a moment in Animagus form, had knocked out the Defense Professor.

That wasn't good.

It was to have been Professor Quirrell who told Harry when it was safe to use the portkey.

Harry steered the broomstick with whitened fingers, and thought, he thought very hard for a small unmeasured length of time, during which Bellatrix might or might not have been breathing, during which Professor Quirrell himself might have already been not-breathing for a while.

And Harry decided that while it was possible to recover from the error of wasting the portkey in his possession, it was not possible to recover from the error of letting a brain go too long without oxygen.

So Harry took the next portkey in the sequence from his pouch, as he slowed his broomstick to a halt in the bright blue air (Harry didn't know, when he thought about it, whether a portkey's ability to adjust for the Earth's rotation also included the ability to match velocity in general with its new surroundings), touched the portkey to the broomstick, and...

Harry paused, still holding the twig, the mate of the twig he had snapped what seemed like two weeks ago. He was feeling a sudden reluctance; his brain seemed to have learned the rule, by some purely

neural process of operant conditioning, that Snapping Twigs Is A Bad Idea.

But that wasn't actually logical, so Harry snapped the twig anyway.

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There was a thunderous boom from behind the nearby metal door, causing Amelia to drop the mirror she was holding and spin around with her wand in hand, and then that door burst open to reveal Albus Dumbledore, standing there in front of a great smoking hole in the prison wall.

"Amelia," said the old wizard. There was no trace of any of his customary levity, his eyes were hard as sapphires beneath his half-moon glasses. "I must leave Azkaban and I must do so *now*. Is there any faster way than a broomstick to get beyond the wards?"

"No—"

"Then I require your fastest broomstick, at once!"

The place where Amelia *wanted* to be was with the Auror who had been injured by that Fiendfyre or whatever it had been.

What she *needed* to do was find out what Dumbledore knew.

"You!" the old witch barked at the team around her. "Keep clearing the corridors until you're at bottom, they may not all have escaped yet!" And then, to the old wizard, "Two broomsticks. You can brief me once we're in the air."

There was a match of stares, but not a long one.

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A sickeningly hard yank caught at Harry's abdomen, considerably harder than the yank that had transported him to Azkaban, and this time the distance traversed was great enough that he could hear an instant of silence, watch the unseeable space between spaces, in the crack between one place and another.

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THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT IX: CURIOSITY

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The Sun, which had shone on the two only briefly, was swiftly occluded by a raincloud as they shot away from Azkaban, in the direction of the wind and faster than the wind.

“Who’s behind it?” shouted Amelia to the broomstick flying a pace away from her.

“One of two people,” Dumbledore said back, “I know not, at this instant, who. If the first, then we are in trouble. If the second, we are all in far greater trouble.”

Amelia didn’t spare any breath for sighs. “When will you know?”

The old wizard’s voice was grim, quiet and yet somehow rising above the wind. “Three things they need for perfection, if it is that one: The flesh of the Dark Lord’s most faithful servant, the blood of the Dark Lord’s greatest foe, and access to a certain grave. I had thought Harry Potter safe, with their attempt on Azkaban all but failed—though I still set guards upon him—but now I am fearful indeed. They have access to Time, someone with a Time-Turner is sending messages for them; and I suspect the kidnap attempt on Harry Potter has already taken place some hours ago. Which is why we have not heard about it, being in Azkaban where Time cannot knot itself. That past came after our own future, you see.”

“And if it is the other?” shouted Amelia. What she had heard already was worrying enough; that sounded like the darkest of Dark rituals, and centering on the dead Dark Lord himself.

The old wizard, his face now even grimmer, said nothing, only shook his head.

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When the portkey’s yank had subsided, the Sun was only just peeking over the horizon, looking more like dawn than sunset, as their broom hovered low above a brief expanse of dark-orange rock and sand, arranged into lumpy hills like someone had kneaded the land’s dough a few times and then forgotten to roll it flat. In the near distance, waves rolled past in an endless vista of water, though the ground over which the broomstick hovered was above sea level by meters at the least.

Harry blinked at the dawn colors, and then realized the portkey had been international.

“Oy!” came a brisk, female shout from behind him, and Harry spun the broomstick to look. A middle-aged lady was holding up one hand to her mouth in a deliberate calling gesture, and bustling forward. Her kindly features, narrow eyes, and umber skin marked a race unfamiliar to Harry; she was clad in brilliant purple robes of a style Harry had never seen before; and when her lips opened again she spoke with an accent that Harry couldn’t place, for he was not widely traveled. “Where were you? You’re two hours late! I almost gave up on the lot of you... hello?”

There was a brief pause. Harry’s thoughts seemed to be moving oddly, too slow, everything felt distant, like there was a thick pane of glass between himself and the world, and another thick pane of glass between himself and his feelings, so that he could see, but not touch. It had come over him upon seeing the dawn’s light and the kindly witch, and thinking that it all seemed like a proper end to the adventure.

Then the witch was rushing forward and drawing her wand; a muttered word severed the cuffs that bound the emaciated woman to the broomstick, and Bellatrix was being floated down onto the sandy rock with her skeletal arms and pale legs dangling like lifeless things. “Oh, Merlin,” whispered the witch, “Merlin, Merlin, Merlin...”

She appears concerned, thought an abstract, distant thing between two panes of glass. *Is that what a real healer would say, or is it what someone told to put on a performance would say?*

As though it wasn’t Harry who spoke, but some other part of himself behind yet another pane of glass, a whisper came from his lips. “The green snake on her back is an Animagus.” Not high the whisper, not cold, only quiet. “He is unconscious.”

The witch’s head twitched up, to look at where that voice had seemed to speak out of empty air, and then looked back down at Bellatrix. “You’re not Mister Jaffe.”

“That would be the Animagus,” whispered Harry’s lips. *Oh*, thought the Harry behind glass, listening to the sound of his own lips, *that makes sense; Professor Quirrell must have used a different name.*

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“Can you wake him up now?” whispered Harry’s lips. *Is that a good idea?* thought Harry, but his lips definitely seemed to think so.

Again the sharp headshake. "If an Innervate didn't work on him—" began the witch.

"I did not attempt one," whispered Harry's lips.

"What? Why—oh, never mind. *Innervate.*"

There was a pause, and then a snake slowly crawled out of its harness. Slowly the green head came up, looked around.

A blur later, Professor Quirrell was standing, and a moment later had sagged to his knees.

“Lie down,” said the witch without looking up from Bellatrix. “That you in there, Jeremy?”

“Yes,” said the Defense Professor rather hoarsely, as he carefully laid himself down on a relatively flat patch of sandy orange rock. He was not so pale as Bellatrix, but his face was bloodless in the dim dawn light. “Salutations, Miss Camblebunker.”

"I told you," said the witch, sharpness in her voice and a slight smile on her face, "call me Crystal, this isn't Britain and we'll have none of your formality here. *And* it's Doctor now, not Miss."

“My apologies, Doctor Camblebunker.” This was followed by a dry chuckle.

The witch's smile grew a little wider, her voice that much sharper. "Who's your friend?"

“You don’t need to know.” The Defense Professor’s eyes were closed, where he lay on the ground.

"How wrong did it go?"

Very dryly indeed: "You can read about it tomorrow in any newspaper with an international section."

The witch's wand was tapping here, there, poking and prodding all over Bellatrix's body. "I missed you, Jeremy."

“Truly?” said the Defense Professor, sounding slightly surprised.

“Not even a tiny little bit. If I didn’t owe you—”

The Defense Professor started to laugh, and then it turned into more of a coughing fit.

What do you think? said Slytherin to the Inner Critic, while Harry listened from behind the glass walls. *Performance, or reality?*

Can't tell, said Harry's Inner Critic. *I'm not in top critical form right now.*

Can anyone think of a good probe to gather more information? said Ravenclaw.

Again that whisper from the empty air above the broomstick: "What is the chance of undoing all that was done to her?"

"Oh, let's see. Legilimency and unknown Dark rituals, ten years for that to set in place, followed by ten years of Dementor exposure? Undo *that*? You're out of your skull, Mister Whoever-You-Are. The question is whether there's anything *left*, and I'd call that maybe one chance in three—" The witch suddenly cut herself off. Her voice, when it spoke again, was quieter. "If you were her friend, before... then no, you're never getting her back. Best understand that now."

I'm voting that this is a performance, said the Inner Critic. *She wouldn't just blurt all that out in response to one question unless she was looking for an opportunity.*

Noted, but I'm putting a low weight of confidence on that, said Ravenclaw. *It's very hard not to let your suspicions control your perceptions when you're trying to weigh evidence that subtle.*

"What potion did you give her?" the witch said after opening Bellatrix's mouth and peering inside, her wand flashing multiple colors of illumination.

The man lying on the ground calmly said, "Pepper-Up—"

"Were you out of your mind?"

Again the coughing laugh.

"She'll sleep for a week if she's lucky," the witch said, and clucked her tongue. "I'll owl you when she opens her eyes, I suppose, so you can come back and talk her into that Unbreakable Vow. Have you got anything to stop her from killing me on the spot, if she manages to even move for another month?"

The Defense Professor, eyes still closed, took a sheet of paper from his robes; a moment later, words began to appear on it, accompanied by tiny

wisps of smoke. When the smoke had stopped rising, the paper floated over toward the woman.

The woman looked over the paper with raised eyebrows, gave a sardonic snort. "This had better work, Jeremy, or my last will and testament says that my whole estate goes into putting a bounty on your head. Speaking of which—"

The Defense Professor reached again into his robes and tossed the witch a bag that made a clinking sound. The witch caught it, weighed it, made a pleased sound.

Then she stood up, and the pale skeletal woman floated off the ground beside her. "I'm heading back," said the witch. "I can't start my work here."

"Wait," said the Defense Professor, and with a gesture retrieved his wand from Bellatrix's hand and harness. Then his hand pointed the wand at Bellatrix, and moved in a small circular gesture, accompanied by a quiet, "*Obliviate.*"

"*That's it,*" snapped the witch, "I'm taking her out of here before anyone does her any more damage—" One arm came around to hug the bony form of Bellatrix Black to her side, and they both disappeared with the loud POP! of Apparition.

And there was silence in that lumpy place, but for the gentle rush of the passing waves, and a little breath of wind.

I think the performance is finished, said the Inner Critic. *I give it two and a half out of five stars. She's probably not a very experienced actor.*

I wonder if a real healer would seem more fake than an actor told to play one? mused Ravenclaw.

Like watching a television show, that was how it felt, like watching a television show whose characters you didn't particularly empathize with, that was all that could be seen and felt from behind the glass walls.

Somehow, Harry managed to move his lips himself, send his own voice out into the still dawn air, and then was surprised to hear his own question. "How many different people are you, anyway?"

The pale man lying on the ground didn't laugh, but from the broomstick Harry's eyes saw the sides of Professor Quirrell's lips curling up, the

edge of that familiar sardonic smile. "I cannot say that I bothered keeping count. How many are you?"

It shouldn't have shaken the inner Harry so much, hearing that response, and yet he felt—he felt—unstable, like his own center had been subtracted—

Oh.

"Excuse me," said Harry's voice. It now sounded as distant and detached as the fading Harry felt. "I'm going to faint in a few seconds, I think."

"Use the fourth portkey I gave you, the one I said was our fallback refuge," said the man lying on the ground, calmly but swiftly. "It will be safer there. And continue wearing your cloak."

Harry's free hand retrieved another twig from his pouch and snapped it.

There was another portkey yank, internationally long, and then he was somewhere black.

"*Lumos*," said Harry's lips, some part of him looking out for the safety of the whole.

He was inside what looked like a Muggle warehouse, a deserted one.

Harry's legs climbed off the broomstick, lay on the floor. His eyes closed, and some tidy fraction of self willed his light to fail, before the darkness took him.

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"Where will you go?" yelled Amelia. They were almost at the edge of the wards.

"Backward in time to protect Harry Potter," said the old wizard, and before Amelia could even open her lips to ask if he wanted help, she felt the boundary of the wards as they crossed them.

There was a pop of Apparition, and the wizard and the phoenix vanished, leaving behind the borrowed broomstick.

CHAPTER SIXTY

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART X

“Wake.”

Harry’s eyes flew open as he came awake with a choking gasp, a jerking start of his prone body. He couldn’t remember any dreams, maybe his brain had been too exhausted to dream, it seemed like he’d only closed his eyes and then heard that word spoken a moment after.

“You must awaken,” said the voice of Quirinus Quirrell. “I gave you as much time as I could, but it would be wise to reserve at least one use of your Time-Turner. Soon we must go backward four hours to Mary’s Place, appearing in every way as though we have done nothing interesting this day. I wished to speak to you before then.”

Harry slowly sat up in the midst of darkness. His body ached, and not only in the places where it had laid on the hard concrete. Images tumbled over each other in his memory, everything his unconscious brain had been too tired to discharge into a proper nightmare.

Twelve terrible voids floating down a metal corridor, tarnishing the metal around them, light dimmed and temperature falling as the emptiness tried to suck all life out of the world—

Chalk-white skin, stretched just above the bone that had remained after fat and muscle faded—

A metal door—

A woman’s voice—

No, I didn’t mean it, please don’t die—

I can’t remember my children’s names any more—

Don't go, don't take it away, don't don't don't—

"What was that place?" Harry said hoarsely, in a voice pushed out of his throat like water forced through a too-thin pipe, in the darkness it sounded almost as shattered as Bellatrix Black's voice had been. "*What was that place? That wasn't a prison, that was HELL!*"

"Hell?" said the calm voice of the Defense Professor. "You mean the Christian punishment fantasy? I suppose there is a similarity."

"How—" Harry's voice was blocking, there was something huge lodged in his throat. "How—how could they—" *People* had built that place, someone had *made* Azkaban, they'd made it on *purpose*, they'd done it *deliberately*, that woman, she'd had children, children she wouldn't remember, some judge had *decided* for that to happen to her, someone had needed to *drag* her into that cell and lock its door while she screamed, someone fed her every day and walked away *without letting her out*—

"HOW COULD PEOPLE DO THAT?"

"Why shouldn't they?" said the Defense Professor. A pale blue light lit the warehouse, then, showing a high, cavernous concrete ceiling, and a dusty concrete floor; and Professor Quirrell sitting some distance away from Harry, leaning his back against a painted wall; the pale blue light turned the walls to glacier surfaces, the dust on the floor to speckled snow, and the man himself had become an ice sculpture, shrouded in darkness where his black robes lay over him. "What use are the prisoners of Azkaban to them?"

Harry's mouth opened in a croak. No words exited.

A faint smile twitched on the Defense Professor's lips. "You know, Mr. Potter, if He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had come to rule over magical Britain, and built such a place as Azkaban, he would have built it because he enjoyed seeing his enemies suffer. And if instead he began to find their suffering distasteful, why, he would order Azkaban torn down the next day. As for those who did make Azkaban, and those who do not tear it down, while preaching lofty sermons and imagining themselves *not* to be villains... well, Mr. Potter, I think if I had my choice of taking tea with them, or taking tea with You-Know-Who, I should find my sensibilities less offended by the Dark Lord."

"I don't understand," Harry said, his voice was shaking, he'd read about the classic experiment on the psychology of prisons, the ordinary college students who had turned sadistic as soon as they were assigned the role of prison guards; only now he realized that the experiment hadn't examined the right question, the one most important question, they hadn't looked at the key people, not the prison guards but *everyone else*, "I really don't understand, Professor Quirrell, how can people just stand by and let this happen, *why* is the country of magical Britain *doing this*—" Harry's voice stopped.

The Defense Professor's eyes appeared to be the same color as always, in the pale blue light, for that light was the same color as Quirinus Quirrell's irises, those never-thawing chips of ice. "Welcome, Mr. Potter, to your first encounter with the realities of politics. What do the wretched creatures in Azkaban have to offer any faction? Who would benefit from aiding them? A politician who openly sided with them would associate themselves with criminals, with weakness, with distasteful things that people would rather not think about. Alternatively, the politician could demonstrate their might and cruelty by calling for longer sentences; to make a display of strength requires a victim to crush beneath you, after all. And the populace applauds, for it is their instinct to back the winner." A coldly amused laugh. "You see, Mr. Potter, no one ever quite believes that *they* will go to Azkaban, so they see no harm in it for themselves. As for what they inflict on others... I suppose you were once told that people care about that sort of thing? It is a lie, Mr. Potter, people don't care in the slightest, and if you had not led a vastly sheltered childhood you would have noticed that long ago. Console yourself with this: those now prisoner in Azkaban voted for the same Ministers of Magic who pledged to move their cells closer to the Dementors. I admit, Mr. Potter, that I see little hope for democracy as an effective form of government, but I admire the poetry of how it makes its victims complicit in their own destruction."

Harry's recently cohered self was threatening to shatter into fragments again, the words falling like hammerstrikes on his consciousness, driving him back, step by step, over the precipice where lurked some vast abyss; and he was trying to find something to save himself, some clever

retort that would refute the words, but it did not come.

The Defense Professor watched Harry, the gaze reflecting more curiosity than command. "It is very simple, Mr. Potter, to understand how Azkaban was built, and how it continues to be. Men care for what they, themselves, expect to suffer or gain; and so long as they do not expect it to redound upon themselves, their cruelty and carelessness is without limit. All the other wizards of this country are no different within than he who sought to rule over them, You-Know-Who; they only lack his power and his... frankness."

The boy's hands were clenched into fists so tightly that the nails cut into his palm, if his fingers were white or his face was pale you couldn't have seen that, for the dim blue light cast all into ice or shadow. "You once offered to support me if my ambition were to be the next Dark Lord. Is that why, Professor?"

The Defense Professor inclined his head, a thin smile on his lips. "Learn all that I have to teach you, Mr. Potter, and you will rule this country in time. Then you may tear down the prison that democracy made, if you find that Azkaban still offends your sensibilities. Like it or not, Mr. Potter, you have seen this day that your own will conflicts with the will of this country's populace, and that you do not bow your head and submit to their decision when that occurs. So to them, whether or not they know it, and whether or not you acknowledge it, you are their next Dark Lord."

In the monochromatic light, unwavering, the boy and the Defense Professor both seemed like motionless ice sculptures, the irises of their eyes reduced to similar colors, looking very much the same in that light.

Harry stared directly into those pale eyes. All the long-suppressed questions, the ones he'd told himself he was putting on hold until the Ides of May. That had been a lie, Harry now knew, a self-deception, he had kept silent for fear of what he might hear. And now everything was coming forth from his lips, all at once. "On our first day of class, you tried to convince my classmates I was a killer."

"You are." Amusedly. "But if your question is why I *told* them that, Mr. Potter, the answer is that you will find ambiguity a great ally on your road to power. Give a sign of Slytherin on one day, and contradict it with

a sign of Gryffindor the next; and the Slytherins will be enabled to believe what they wish, while the Gryffindors argue themselves into supporting you as well. So long as there is uncertainty, people can believe whatever seems to be to their own advantage. And so long as you appear strong, so long as you appear to be winning, their instincts will tell them that their advantage lies with you. Walk always in the shadow, and light and darkness both will follow."

"And," said the boy, his voice level, "just what do *you* want out of all this?"

Professor Quirrell had leaned further back against the wall from where he sat, casting his face into shadow, his eyes changing from pale ice into dark pits like those of his snake form. "I wish for Britain to grow strong under a strong leader; that *is* my desire. As for my reasons why," Professor Quirrell smiled without mirth, "I think they shall stay my own."

"The sense of doom that I feel around you." The words were becoming harder and harder to say, as the subject danced closer and closer to something terrible and forbidden. "You always knew what it meant."

"I had several guesses," said Professor Quirrell, his expression unreadable. "And I will not yet say all I guessed. But this much I will tell you: it is *your* doom which flares when we come near, not mine."

For once Harry's brain managed to mark this as a questionable assertion and possible lie, instead of believing everything it heard. "Why do you sometimes turn into a zombie?"

"Personal reasons," said Professor Quirrell with no humor at all in his voice.

"What was your ulterior motive for rescuing Bellatrix?"

There was a brief silence, during which Harry tried hard to control his breathing, keep it steady.

Finally the Defense Professor shrugged, as though it were of no account. "I all but spelled it out for you, Mr. Potter. I told you everything you needed to deduce the answer, if you had been mature enough to consider that first obvious question. Bellatrix Black was the Dark Lord's most powerful servant, her loyalty the most assured; she was the single person most likely to be entrusted with some part of the lost lore of Slytherin that should have been yours."

Slowly the anger crept over Harry, slowly the wrath, something terrible beginning to boil his blood, in just a few moments he would say something that he really shouldn't say while the two of them were alone in a deserted warehouse—

"But she *was* innocent," said the Defense Professor. He was not smiling. "And the degree to which all her choices were taken away from her, so that she never had a chance to suffer for her *own* mistakes... it struck me as *excessive*, Mr. Potter. If she tells you nothing of use—" The Defense Professor gave another small shrug. "I shall not consider this day's work a waste."

"How altruistic of you," Harry said coldly. "So if all wizards are like You-Know-Who inside, are you an exception to that, then?"

The Defense Professor's eyes were still in shadow, dark pits that could not be met. "Call it a whim, Mr. Potter. It has sometimes amused me to play the part of a hero. Who knows but that You-Know-Who would say the same."

Harry opened his mouth a final time—

And found that he couldn't say it, he couldn't ask the last question, the last and most important question, he couldn't make the words come out. Even though a refusal like that was forbidden to a rationalist, for all that he'd ever recited the Litany of Tarski or the Litany of Gendlin or sworn that whatever could be destroyed by the truth should be, in that one moment, he could not bring himself to say his last question out loud. Even though he knew he was thinking wrongly, even though he knew he was supposed to be better than this, he still couldn't say it.

"Now it is my turn to inquire of you." Professor Quirrell's back straightened from where it had leaned back against the glacier wall of painted concrete. "I was wondering, Mr. Potter, if you had anything to say about nearly killing me and ruining our mutual endeavor. I am given to understand that an apology, in such cases, is considered a sign of respect. But you have not offered me one. Is it just that you have not yet gotten around to it, Mr. Potter?"

The tone was calm, the quiet edge so fine and sharp that it would slice all the way through you before you realized you were being murdered.

And Harry just looked at the Defense Professor with cool eyes that would never flinch from anything; not even death, now. He was no longer in Azkaban, no longer fearful of the part of himself that was fearless; and the solid gemstone that was Harry had rotated to meet the stress, turning smoothly from one facet to another, from light to darkness, warm to cold.

A calculated ploy on his part, to make me feel guilty, put me in a position where I must submit?

Genuine emotion on his part?

"I see," said Professor Quirrell. "I suppose that answers—"

"No," said the boy in a cool, collected voice, "you do not get to frame the conversation that easily, Professor. I went to considerable lengths to protect you and get you out of Azkaban safely, *after* I thought you had tried to kill a police officer. That included facing down twelve Dementors without a Patronus Charm. I wonder, if I had apologized when you demanded it, would you have said thank-you in turn? Or am I correct in thinking that it was my submission you demanded there, and not only my respect?"

There was a pause, and then Professor Quirrell's voice came in reply, openly icy with danger no longer veiled. "It seems you still cannot bring yourself to lose, Mr. Potter."

Darkness stared out of Harry's eyes without flinching, the Defense Professor himself reduced to a mortal thing within them. "Oh, and are *you* pondering now, whether *you* should pretend to lose to me, and pretend to humble yourself before my own anger, in order to preserve your own plans? Did the thought of a calculated false apology even *cross your mind*? Me neither, Professor Quirrell."

The Defense Professor laughed, low and humorless, emptier than the void between the stars, dangerous as any vacuum filled with hard radiation. "No, Mr. Potter, you have not learned your lesson, not at all."

"I thought of losing many times, in Azkaban," said the boy, his voice level. "That I ought to simply give up, and turn myself over to the Aurors. Losing would have been the sensible thing to do. I heard your voice saying it to me, in my mind; and I would have *done* it, if I had been there by myself. But I could not bring myself to lose *you*."

There was silence, then, for a time; as though even the Defense Professor could not quite think of what to say to that.

"I am curious," said Professor Quirrell at last. "What do you think that I should apologize for, precisely? I gave you explicit instructions in the event of a fight. You were to stay down, stay out of the way, cast no magic. You violated those instructions and brought down the mission."

"I made no decision," the boy said evenly, "there was no choice in it, only a wish that the Auror should not die, and my Patronus was there. For that wish to have never occurred, you should have warned me that you might bluff using a Killing Curse. By default, I assume that if you point your wand at someone and say Avada Kedavra, it is because you want them dead. Shouldn't that be the first rule of Unforgivable Curse Safety?"

"Rules are for duels," said the Defense Professor. Some of the coldness had returned to his voice. "And dueling is a sport, not a branch of Battle Magic. In a real fight, a curse which cannot be blocked and *must* be dodged is an indispensable tactic. I would have thought this obvious to you, but it seems I misjudged your intellect."

"It also seems to me imprudent," said the boy, continuing as though the other had not spoken, "to not *tell me* that my casting any spell on you might kill us both. What if you had suffered some mishap, and I had tried an Innervate, or a Hover Charm? That ignorance, which you permitted for purposes I cannot guess, played also some part in this catastrophe."

There was another silence. The Defense Professor's eyes had narrowed, and there was a faintly puzzled look on his face, as though he had encountered some completely unfamiliar situation; and still the man spoke no word.

"Well," said the boy. His eyes had not wavered from the Defense Professor's. "I certainly regret hurting you, Professor. But I do not think the situation calls for me to submit to you. I never really did understand the concept of apology, still less as it applies to a situation like this; if you have my regrets, but not my submission, does that count as saying sorry?"

Again that cold, cold laugh, darker than the void between the stars.

"I wouldn't know," said the Defense Professor, "I, too, never understood the concept of apology. That ploy would be futile between us, it

seems, with both of us knowing it for a lie. Let us speak no more of it, then. Debts will be settled between us in time."

There was silence for a time.

"By the way," said the boy. "Hermione Granger would never have built Azkaban, no matter who was going to be put in it. And she'd die before she hurt an innocent. Just mentioning that, since you said before that all wizards are like You-Know-Who inside, and that's just false as a point of simple fact. Would've realized it earlier if I hadn't been," the boy gave a brief grim smile, "stressed out."

The Defense Professor's eyes were half-lidded, his expression distant. "People's insides are not always like their outsides, Mr. Potter. Perhaps she simply wishes others to think of her as a good girl. She cannot use the Patronus Charm—"

"Hah," said the boy; his smile seemed realer now, warmer. "She's having trouble for exactly the same reason I did. There's enough light in her to destroy Dementors, I'm sure. She wouldn't be able to *stop* herself from destroying Dementors, even at the cost of her own life..." The boy trailed off, and then his voice resumed. "I might not be such a good person, maybe; but they do exist, and she's one of them."

Dryly. "She is young, and to make a show of kindness costs her little."

There was a pause at this. Then the boy said, "Professor, I have to ask, when you see something all dark and gloomy, doesn't it ever occur to you to try and *improve* it somehow? Like, yes, something goes terribly wrong in people's heads that makes them think it's great to torture criminals, but that doesn't mean they're truly evil inside; and maybe if you taught them the right things, showed them what they were doing wrong, you could change—"

Professor Quirrell laughed, then, and not with the emptiness of before. "Ah, Mr. Potter, sometimes I do forget how very young you are. Sooner you could change the color of the sky." Another chuckle, this one colder. "And the reason it is easy for you to forgive such fools and think well of them, Mr. Potter, is that you yourself have not been sorely hurt. You will think less fondly of commonplace idiots after the first time their folly costs you something dear. Such as a hundred Galleons from your own pocket, perhaps, rather than the agonizing deaths of a hundred

strangers.” The Defense Professor was smiling thinly. He took a pocket-watch out of his robes, looked at it. “Let us depart now, if there is nothing more to say between us.”

“You don’t have any questions about the impossible things I did to get us out of Azkaban?”

“No,” said the Defense Professor. “I believe I have solved most of them already. As for the rest, it is too rare that I find a person whom I cannot see through immediately, be they friend or foe. I shall unravel the puzzles about you for myself, in due time.”

The Defense Professor shoved himself up, pushing back on the wall with both hands and rising to his feet, smoothly if too slowly. The boy, less gracefully, did the same.

And the boy blurted out the last most terrible question which he had earlier been unable to ask; as though to say it aloud would make it real, and as though it were not, already, vastly obvious.

“Why am I not like the other children my own age?”

*
*

In a deserted side-road of Diagon Alley, where scraps of un-Vanished trash could be seen lodged into the edges of the brick street and the blank brick building-sides that surrounded it, along with scattered dirt and other signs of neglect, an ancient wizard and his phoenix Apparated into existence.

The wizard was already reaching within his robes for his hourglass when, in habit, his eyes jumped to a random spot between the road and the wall, to memorize it—

And the old wizard blinked in surprise; there was a scrap of parchment in that spot.

A frown crossed Albus Dumbledore’s face as he took a step forward and took the crumpled scrap, unfolding it.

On it was the single word “NO”, and nothing more.

Slowly the wizard let it flutter from his fingers. Absently he reached down to the pavement, and picked up the nearest scrap of parchment,

which looked remarkably similar to the one he had just taken; he touched it with his wand, and a moment later it was inscribed with the same word “NO”, in the same handwriting, which was his own.

The old wizard had planned to go back three hours to when Harry Potter first arrived in Diagon Alley. He had already watched, upon his instruments, the boy leaving Hogwarts, and that could not be undone (his one attempt to fool his own instruments, and so control Time without altering its appearance to himself, had ended in sufficient disaster to convince him to never again try such trickery). He had hoped to retrieve the boy at the first possible moment after his arrival, and take him to another safe location, if not Hogwarts (for his instruments had not shown the boy’s return). But now—

“A paradox if I retrieve him immediately after he arrives in Diagon Alley?” murmured the old wizard to himself. “Perhaps they did not set in motion their plan to rob Azkaban, until after they had confirmed his arrival here... or else... perhaps...”

*
*

Painted concrete, hard floor and distant ceilings, two figures facing off across from each other. One entity who wore the shape of a man in his late thirties and already balding, and another mind that wore the form of an eleven-year-old boy with a scar upon his forehead. Ice and shadow, pale blue light.

“I don’t know,” said the man.

The boy just looked at him. And then said, “Oh, really?”

“Truly,” said the man. “I know nothing, and of my guesses I will not speak. Yet I will say this much—”

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART XI: SECRECY AND OPENNESS

Through green flame they whirled, through the Floo network they spun, Minerva's heart racing with a pounding horror that she hadn't felt in ten years and three months, the corridors between space coughed and spit them out into the lobby of Gringotts (the safest Floo receiver in Diagon Alley, the connection most difficult to intercept, the fastest way out of Hogwarts without a phoenix). A goblin attendant turned toward them, his eyes widened, he began a slightly respectful bow—

Determination, Destination, Deliberation!

And the two of them were in the alley just in back of Mary's Place, wands already out and raised, spinning around back-to-back and the words of an Anti-Disillusionment Charm already rising to Severus's lips.

The alley was empty.

When she turned back to look at Severus, his wand was already cracking down on his own head with a sound like smashing an egg, as his lips chanted words of invisibility; he took on the colors of his surroundings, became a blur of his surroundings, the blur moved and matched what was behind him and then there was nothing there.

She lowered her wand and stepped forward to receive her own Disillusionment—

From behind her, the unmistakable sound of a burst of flame.

She spun and saw Albus there, his long wand already drawn and raised in his right hand. His eyes were grim beneath the half-circles of his glasses, and Fawkes upon his shoulder had spread his fire-colored wings in readiness for flight and fight.

"Albus!" she said. "I thought—" She'd just seen him depart for Azkaban, and she'd thought not even phoenixes could return from there so easily.

Then she realized.

"She escaped," said Albus. "Did your Patronus reach him?"

The pounding in her heart grew stronger, the horror in her veins solidified. "He said he was here, in the washroom—"

"Let us hope he spoke true," said Albus, the wand tapped her head with a sensation like water trickling over her, and a moment later the four of them (even Fawkes had been rendered invisible, though sometimes you saw a flicker of something like fire in his air) were racing to the front of the restaurant. They paused before the door while Albus whispered something, and a moment later one of the customers visible through the windows stood up with a vague look on his face and opened the door as though taking a quick look outside for some friend; and the three of them were through, racing past the unwitting customers (Severus was marking their faces, Minerva knew, and Albus would see any Disillusioned) toward the sign that pointed to the washroom—

An old wooden door marked with the sign of a toilet burst open with a slam, and four invisible rescuers stormed through it.

The small but clean wooden room was empty, fresh droplets of water showed in the sink but there was no sign of Harry, only a sheet of paper left on the closed lid of the toilet.

She couldn't breathe.

The sheet of paper rose up into the air as Albus took it, and a moment later was thrust in her own direction.

M: What did the hat tell me to tell you?

—H

"Ah," Minerva said aloud in surprise, her mind taking a moment to place the question, it wasn't the sort of thing you'd forget but she hadn't

been thinking in that *mode*, really—"I'm an impudent youngster and I should get off its lawn."

"*Eh?*" said the air in Albus's voice, as if even he could be shocked.

And then Harry Potter's head appeared, suspended next to the air beside the toilet, his face was cold and alert, the too-adult Harry she'd seen sometimes, eyes darting back and forth and around.

"What's going on—" the boy began.

Albus, now visible once more along with her and Fawkes, was moving forward in an instant, his left hand reached forward and plucked a hair from Harry's head (producing a startled yelp from the boy), Minerva accepted the hair in her own hand, and a moment later Albus swept up the mostly-invisible boy in his arms and there was a flash of red-golden fire.

And Harry Potter was safe.

Minerva took a few steps forward, leaned against the wall where Albus and Harry had been, trying to recover her poise.

She'd... lost some habits, in the ten years since the Order of the Phoenix had disbanded.

Beside her, Severus shimmered into visibility. His right hand was already drawing forth the flask from his robes, his left hand already stretching forth in demand. She gave him Harry's hair, and a moment later, it dropped into the flask of unfinished Polyjuice, which at once began fizzing and bubbling as it settled into the potency that would enable Severus to act his part as bait.

"That was unexpected," the Potions Master said slowly. "Why did our Headmaster not retrieve Mr. Potter *earlier*, I wonder, if he was going so far as to twist Time? There should have been nothing preventing him from doing so... indeed, your Patronus should have found Mr. Potter already safe..."

She hadn't thought of that, a different realization having jumped to the forefront of her mind. It wasn't nearly as horrifying as Bellatrix Black having escaped from Azkaban, but still—

"Harry has an *invisibility cloak?*" she said.

The Potions Master did not answer; he was shrinking.

Tick-snick, drip-blip, ding-ring-ting-

It still annoyed her, though it faded past attention after a while; and when and if she became Headmistress, she intended to Silence the whole lot. Which Head of Hogwarts, she wondered, had first been so inconsiderate as to create a device that made *noise*, to pass on to their successors?

She was sitting in the Headmaster's office with a quickly Transfigured desk of her own, doing some of the hundred little pieces of necessary paperwork that kept Hogwarts from grinding to a halt; she could lose herself in it easily, and it prevented her from thinking about other things. Albus had once remarked, sounding rather wry, that Hogwarts seemed to run even more smoothly when there was an outside crisis for her to avoid thinking about...

...ten years ago, that was the last time Albus had said that.

There was the chime that indicated an approaching visitor.

Minerva kept reading her current parchment.

The door slammed open, revealing Severus Snape, who took three steps inward and demanded without the slightest pause, "Any word from Mad-Eye?"

Albus was already rising from his chair, even as she tucked away her parchments and dispelled the desk. "Moody's Patronus is reporting to the me in Azkaban," Albus said. "His Eye saw nothing; and if the Eye of Vance does not see a thing, then that thing does not exist. Yourself?"

"No one has tried to forcibly take my blood," Severus said. He gave a quick grimace of a smile. "Except the Defense Professor."

"What?" said Minerva.

"He saw me for an impostor before I could even open my lips, and quite reasonably attacked me on the spot, demanding to know the whereabouts of Mr. Potter." Another grimace of a smile. "Shouting that I was Severus Snape did not seem to reassure him, for some reason. I do believe that man would kill me for a Sickle and give back five Knuts change. I had to stun our good Professor Quirrell, which was not easy, and then he reacted poorly to the hex. 'Harry Potter', naturally alarmed, ran out and told the owner, and the Defense Professor was taken to St. Mungos—"

“*St. Mungos?*”

“—which said he had probably been overworking himself for weeks before he collapsed, such was his state of exhaustion. Your precious Defense Professor is fine, Minerva, the stunner may have helped him by forcing him to take a few days off. Afterward I declined the offer of a Floo to Hogwarts, and went back to Diagon Alley and wandered; but no one seems to have wanted Mr. Potter’s blood today.”

“Our Defense Professor is in the best of hands, I am sure,” said Albus. “Greater matters command our attention, Minerva.”

It took considerable effort for her to wrench her attention back, but she sat back down, and Severus gestured up a chair for himself as well, and the three of them drew together to begin their council.

She felt like a Polyjuiced impostor, sitting with those two. War was not her art, nor plotting. She had to strain to keep one step ahead of the Weasley twins, and sometimes she failed at that. She was sitting here, ultimately, only because she had heard the prophecy...

“We are faced,” the Headmaster spoke first, “with a rather alarming mystery. I can think of only two wizards who might have engineered this escape.”

Minerva drew in her breath sharply. “There is a chance it is *not* You-Know-Who?”

“I’m afraid so,” said the Headmaster.

She glanced to her side and saw that Severus looked as puzzled as herself. *Afraid* the Dark Lord was not rising again? She would have given almost anything for that to be true.

“So,” Albus said heavily. “Our first suspect is Voldemort, risen again and seeking to resurrect himself. I have studied many books I wish I had not read, seeking his every possible avenue of return, and I have found only three. His strongest road to life is the Philosopher’s Stone, which Flamel assures me that not even Voldemort could create on his own; by that road he would rise greater and more terrible than ever before. I would not have thought Voldemort able to resist the temptation of the Stone, still less because such an obvious trap is a challenge to his wit. But his second avenue is nearly as strong: The flesh of his servant, willingly given; the blood of his foe, forcibly taken; and the bone of his ancestor,

unknowingly bequeathed. Voldemort is a perfectionist—"Albus glanced at Severus, who nodded agreement, "—and he would certainly seek the most powerful combination: the flesh of Bellatrix Black, the blood of Harry Potter, and the bone of his father. Voldemort's final avenue is to seduce a victim and drain the life from them over a long period; in which case Voldemort would be weak compared to his former power. His motive to spirit away Bellatrix is clear. And if he is keeping her in reserve, to use only in case he cannot attain the Stone, that would explain why no kidnap attempt was made on Harry this day."

Minerva glanced again at Severus, saw him listening attentively but without surprise.

"What is *not* clear," the Headmaster continued, "is *how* Voldemort could have engineered this escape. A death doll was left in Bellatrix's place, her escape was meant to be undetected; and even though that went wrong, the Dementors could not find her after their first warning. Azkaban has stood impenetrable for centuries, and I cannot imagine any means by which Voldemort could have accomplished this."

"That may mean little," Severus said, expressionless. "For the Dark Lord to do what we cannot imagine requires only that he has a better imagination."

Albus nodded grimly. "Unfortunately there is now another wizard who laughs at impossibilities. A wizard who, not long ago, developed a new and powerful Charm which could have blinded the Dementors to Bellatrix Black's escape. And he is implicated for other reasons, as well."

Minerva's heart was skipping beats, she didn't know *how*, or *why*, but a terrible apprehension was dawning on her as to *who*—

"Who would *that* be?" said Severus, sounding puzzled.

Albus leaned back and said the fatal words, even as she had feared them: "Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres."

"*Potter?*" demanded the Potions Master, as much shock in that usually-silken voice as she had ever heard from him. "Headmaster, is this one of your jokes? He is in his first year at Hogwarts! A temper tantrum and a few childish pranks with an invisibility cloak does not make him—"

"It is no joke," said Minerva, her voice barely above a whisper. "Harry is already making original discoveries in Transfiguration, Severus."

Though I did not know he was researching Charms as well.”

“Harry is no ordinary first-year,” the Headmaster said solemnly. “He is marked as the Dark Lord’s equal, and he has power the Dark Lord knows not.”

Severus was looking at her, and you would have needed to know him well to recognize that his glance was pleading. “Am I to take this seriously?”

Minerva simply nodded.

“Does anyone *else* know of this... new and powerful Charm?” Severus demanded.

The Headmaster glanced at her apologetically—

Somehow she knew, she knew before he even said it, and she wanted to scream at the top of her lungs.

—and said, “Quirinus Quirrell.”

“*Why*,” she said, in a voice that should have melted half the devices in the office, “*did Mr. Potter even TELL our Defense Professor about his brilliant new Charm for breaking out of prisons—*”

The Headmaster passed a weary wrinkled hand across his equally wrinkled forehead. “Quirinus just happened to be there, Minerva. Even I saw no harm in it at the time.” The Headmaster hesitated. “And Harry said his Charm was too dangerous to be explained to either of us; and when I asked him again, this day, he insisted he had still not explained it to Quirinus, nor had he ever dropped his Occlumency barriers in the Defense Professor’s presence—”

“Mr. Potter is an *Occlumens*? You gave him an invisibility cloak and he is immune to Veritaserum *and he is friends with the Weasley twins*? Albus, do you have any idea what you have unleashed upon this school?” Her voice was nearly shrieking, now. “By his seventh year there won’t be anything left of Hogwarts but a smoking hole in the ground!”

Albus leaned back in his great cushioned chair, and said, smiling, “Don’t forget the Time-Turner.”

She did scream then, but quietly.

Severus drawled, “Should I teach him to brew Polyjuice, Headmaster? I ask only for the sake of completeness, in case you are not satisfied with the magnitude of your pet disaster.”

"Perhaps next year," said Albus. "My dearest friends, the question before us is whether Harry Potter has spirited Bellatrix Black out of Azkaban, which is more than youthful high spirits even by my tolerant standards."

"Excuse me, Headmaster," Severus said with one of the dryer smiles she had ever seen him deliver to Albus, "but I will register my opinion that the answer is no. This is the Dark Lord's work, pure and simple."

"Then why," Albus said, and now there was no humor at all in his voice, "when I planned to retrieve Harry immediately after his arrival in Diagon Alley, did I find that this would result in paradox?"

Minerva sank further back into her chair, dropped her left elbow onto the hard uncushioned armrest, leaned her head into her hand, and shut her eyes in despair.

There was a narrowly circulated proverb to the effect that only one Auror in thirty was qualified to investigate cases involving Time-Turners; and that of those few, the half who weren't *already* insane, soon would be.

"So you suspect," Severus's voice was saying, "that Potter went from Diagon Alley to Azkaban, then looped back to Diagon Alley afterward to be picked up by us—"

"Precisely," said Albus's voice. "Though it is also possible that Voldemort or his servants watched to make sure Harry did arrive in Diagon Alley, before they began their attempt on Azkaban. And that they had someone with a Time-Turner who would send back the message of their success, to trigger the abduction. Indeed, it was my suspicion of this possibility that caused me to dispatch you and Minerva on your own mission, before I myself went to Azkaban. I thought then that their breakout would fail, but if retrieving Harry Potter meant observing the fact of their eventual failure, then I myself could not have gone to Azkaban after I had interacted with him, for Azkaban's future cannot touch its past. When, in Azkaban, I received no report from you or Minerva, nor from Flitwick whom I told to try contacting you, I knew that your interaction with Harry Potter had been an interaction with Azkaban's future, meaning that someone was sending messages through Time—"

Then Albus's voice stopped.

"But Headmaster," said Severus, "*you* came back from Azkaban's future and interacted with us..."

The Potions Master's voice trailed off.

"But Severus, if I had *received* reports from you and Minerva of Harry's safety, I would not, in the first place, have gone backward in time to—"

"Headmaster, I think we must draw diagrams for this."

"I agree, Severus."

There was the sound of parchment being spread on a table, and then quills scratching, and more arguing.

Minerva sat in her chair, head resting in her hand, eyes shut.

There was a story she'd once heard about a criminal who had possessed a Time-Turner which the Department of Mysteries had sealed to him, in a case of extremely bad judgment as to who needed one; and there had been an Auror assigned to track down this unknown time-criminal, who had also been given a Time-Turner; and the story ended with both of them in St. Mungo's ward for Total Unrecoverable Nutcases.

Minerva sat there with her eyes shut, trying not to listen, trying not to think about it, and trying not to go insane.

After awhile, when the argument seemed to have wound down, she said aloud, "Mr. Potter's Time-Turner is restricted to the hours of nine PM through midnight. Was the shell tampered with, Albus?"

"Not to my most discerning Charms," said Albus. "But the shells are new things; and to defeat the Unspeakables' precautions and leave no trace of the defeat... might *not* be impossible."

She opened her eyes, and saw Severus and the Headmaster staring intently at a parchment covered with tangled squiggles that would have no doubt driven her mad to comprehend.

"Have you come to any *conclusions*?" Minerva said. "And please don't tell me how you arrived at them."

Severus and the Headmaster looked at each other, then turned to look at her.

"We have concluded," the Headmaster said gravely, "that either Harry was involved or he was not; that either Voldemort has access to a Time-Turner or he does not; and that regardless of what could have happened within Azkaban, nobody would have visited the Little Hangleton grave-

yard during the period Moody has already watched over it within my own past."

"In short," Severus drawled, "we know nothing, dear Minerva; though it seems at least *likely* that another Time-Turner was involved, somehow. My own suspicion is that Potter has been bribed, tricked, or threatened into conveying messages backward in time, perhaps even regarding this very prison break. I shall not make the obvious suggestion as to who is pulling his strings. But I suggest that at nine o' clock tonight, we test whether Potter is able to travel the full six hours backward to three o' clock, to see if he has yet used his Time-Turner."

"That seems wise to do in any case," said Dumbledore. "See that done, Minerva, and tell Harry to stop in my office at his convenience, afterward."

"But you still suspect Harry of direct involvement in the prison break itself?" Minerva said.

"Possible but unlikely," said Severus, at the same time Albus said, "Yes."

Minerva pinched the bridge of her nose, took a deep breath, let it out. "Albus, Severus, what possible *reason* has Mr. Potter to do such a thing!"

"None that I can think of," said Albus, "but it remains that Harry's magics alone, of all the means known to me, might have—"

"Hold," said Severus. All expression vanished from his face. "A thought occurs to me, I must check—" The Potions Master seized a pinch of Floo powder, strode across the room toward the fireplace—Albus hastily waved his wand to light it—and then in a flare of green flame, and the words "Slytherin Head of House office", Severus was gone.

She and Albus looked at each other and both shrugged; and then Albus turned back to studying the parchment.

It was only a few minutes later that Severus spun back out of the Floo, brushing traces of ash from himself.

"Well," said the Potions Master. Again the expressionless face. "I am afraid that Mr. Potter does have a motive."

"Speak!" said Albus.

"I found Lesath Lestrange in the Slytherin common room, studying," Severus said. "He was not reluctant to meet my eyes. And it seems that

Mr. Lestrangle did not like to think of his parents in Azkaban, in the cold and the darkness, with the Dementors sucking away their life, hurting every second of every day, and he told Mr. Potter so in as many words, and begged him to get them out. Since, you see, Mr. Lestrangle had heard that the Boy-Who-Lived could do anything.”

She and Albus exchanged glances.

“Severus,” Minerva said, “*surely*... even *Harry*... has more common sense than *that*...”

Her voice trailed off.

“Mr. Potter thinks he is God,” Severus said without expression, “and Lesath Lestrangle fell to his knees before him in a heartfelt cry of prayer.”

Minerva stared at Severus, feeling sick to her stomach. She had studied Muggle religion—it was the most common reason for needing to Memory-Charm the parents of Muggleborns—and she knew enough to understand what Severus had just said.

“In any case,” said the Potions Master. “I looked within Mr. Lestrangle to see if he knew anything of his mother’s escape. He has heard nothing. But the instant he learns, he will conclude that the person responsible was Harry Potter.”

“I see...” Albus said slowly. “Thank you, Severus. That is good news.”

“*Good news?*” Minerva burst out.

Albus looked at her, his face as expressionless as Severus’s, now; and she remembered, with a shock, that Albus’s own—“It is the best reason I can possibly imagine for removing Bellatrix from Azkaban,” Albus said quietly. “And if it is *not* Harry, let us recall, then it is certainly Voldemort himself making his first moves. But let us not be hasty in judgment while there is much we do not yet know, but soon will.”

Albus once more stood up from behind his desk, strode to the fireplace still alight, cast in another pinch of green powder, and stuck his head into the flames. “Department of Magical Law Enforcement,” he said, “Director’s office.”

After a moment, the voice of Madam Bones came through clear and sharp, “What is it, Albus? I am somewhat busy.”

“Amelia,” said Albus, “I beg of you to share any discoveries you have made concerning this matter.”

There was a pause. “Oh,” said the cold voice of Madam Bones from the blazing fire, “and is that a two-way road then, Albus?”

“It may be,” the old wizard said calmly.

“If any Auror dies of your reticence, old meddler, I will hold you responsible in full measure.”

“I understand, Amelia,” Albus said, “but I have no wish to spark needless alarm and incredulity—”

“*Bellatrix Black* has escaped from *Azkaban*! What alarm or incredulity do you think I will call *needless*, in the face of that?”

“I may call on you to remember those words,” said the old wizard into the green flames. “For if I learn that my fears are not needless, I *will* tell you. Now, Amelia, I beg you, if you have learned anything whatsoever upon this matter, please share it.”

There was another pause, and then Madam Bones’s voice said, “I have information which I learned four hours into the future, Albus. Do you still want it?”

Albus paused—

(weighing, Minerva knew, the possibility that he might want to go back more than two hours from this instant; for you couldn’t send information further back in time than six hours, not through any chain of Time-Turners)

—and finally said, “Yes, please.”

“We had a lucky break,” said Madam Bones’s voice, “one of the Aurors who witnessed the escape was a Muggleborn, and she told us that the Flying-Fire spell, as we were calling it, might be no spell at all, but a Muggle artifact.”

Like a punch in the stomach, that was how it felt, and the sickness in Minerva’s belly redoubled. Anyone who’d watched a Chaos Legion battle knew whose hand that showed...

Madam Bones’s voice continued. “We brought in Arthur Weasley from Misuse of Muggle Artifacts—he knows more about Muggle artifacts than any wizard alive—and gave him the descriptions from the Aurors on the scene, and he cracked it. It was a Muggle artifact called a rocker, and they call it that because you’d have to be off your rocker to ride one. Just six years ago one of their rockers blew up, killed hundreds

of Muggles in a flash and almost set fire to the Moon. Weasley says that rockers use a special kind of science called opposite reaction, so the plan is to develop a jinx which will prevent that science from working around Azkaban.”

“Thank you, Amelia,” Albus said gravely. “Is that everything?”

“I’ll check if we have anything from six hours forward,” said the voice of Madam Bones, “if so they wouldn’t have told me, but I’ll have them tell you. Do *you* have anything you want to tell me, Albus? Which of those two possibilities is it looking like?”

“Not yet, Amelia,” Albus said, “but I may have word for you soon.”

He straightened up from the fire, then, which faded back to ordinary yellow flames. Every minute of the old wizard’s years, every natural second since his birth and every second which Time-Turning had added, all of that plus a few extra decades for stress, was visible on his lined face.

“Severus?” the old wizard said. “What was it actually?”

“A rocket,” said the half-blood Potions Master, who had grown up in the Muggle town of Spinner’s End. “One of the most impressive Muggle technologies.”

“How likely is *Harry* to know such arts?” said Minerva.

Severus drawled, “Oh, a boy like Mr. Potter knows *all* about rockets; that, dear Minerva, is a certainty. You must remember that things are done differently in the Muggle world.” Severus frowned. “But rockets *are* dangerous, and expensive...”

“Harry has stolen and hidden an unknown amount of money from his Gringotts vault, perhaps thousands of Galleons,” said the Headmaster, and then, to their twin stares, “That was *not* in my plan, but I made the mistake of sending the Defense Professor to supervise Harry’s withdrawal of five Galleons for Christmas presents...” The Headmaster shrugged. “Yes, I agree, sheer folly in retrospect, let us continue.”

Minerva quietly thudded her head a few times against the headrest of her chair.

“Nonetheless, Headmaster,” Severus said. “Just because the Death Eaters never used Muggle artifacts in the first war, that does not mean *he* is ignorant. Rockets fell on Britain as weapons, in the Muggle side of Grindelwald’s war. If he spent the summers of those years in a Muggle or-

phanage, as you told us, Headmaster... then he, too, has heard of rockets. And if he has been listening to reports of Mr. Potter and his mock battles using Muggle artifacts, he would certainly learn his enemy's strengths and try to redouble them himself. That is *just* how he thinks; any power he sees he will try to take for his own."

The old wizard was standing stock still, utterly motionless, even the hairs of his beard frozen in place like solid wires; and the thought came to Minerva, as frightening as any thought she'd ever had, that Albus Dumbledore was rooted to the spot in horror.

"Severus," Albus Dumbledore said, and his voice almost cracked, "do you realize what you are saying? If Harry Potter and Voldemort fight their war with Muggle weapons there will be nothing left of the world but fire!"

"*What?*" said Minerva. She had heard of guns, of course, but they weren't *that* dangerous to an experienced witch—

Severus spoke as though she weren't in the room. "Then perhaps, Headmaster, he is sending a deliberate warning to Harry Potter of exactly that; saying that any attack with Muggle weapons will be met with retaliation in kind. Command Mr. Potter to cease his use of Muggle technology in his battles; that will show him the message is received... and not give him any more ideas." Severus frowned. "Though, come to think of it, Mr. Malfoy—and of course Miss Granger—well, on second thought a blanket prohibition on technology seems wiser—"

The old wizard pressed both his hands to his forehead, and from his lips came an unsteady voice, "I begin to *hope* that it is Harry behind this escape... oh, Merlin defend us all, what have I done, what have I done, what will become of the world?"

Severus shrugged. "From the rumors I have heard, Headmaster, Muggle weapons are only slightly worse than the more... *recondite* aspects of wizardry—"

"*Worse?*" gasped Minerva, and then shut her mouth as though by force.

"Worse than any peril left in these fading years," said Albus. "Not worse than that which erased Atlantis from Time."

Minerva stared at him, feeling the sweat break out all along her spine.

Severus continued, still addressing Albus. "All the Death Eaters save Bellatrix would have betrayed him, all his supporters turned against him, all the powers of the world converged to destroy him, if he had been reckless with any truly dangerous potency. Is this so different, then?"

Some motion, some color, had returned to the old wizard's face. "Perhaps not..."

"And in any case," Severus said with a slightly condescending smile, "Muggle weapons are not so easy to obtain, not for a thousand Galleons or a thousand thousand."

Doesn't Harry just Transfigure the devices he uses in his battles? thought Minerva, but before she could open her mouth to ask—

The fireplace erupted in green flames, then, and the face of Pius Thicknesse, Madam Bones's assistant, appeared therein. "Chief Warlock?" said Thicknesse. "I have a report for you, transmitted from—" Thicknesse's eyes flickered over Minerva and Severus, "six minutes ago."

"Six hours ahead, you mean," said Albus. "These two are meant to hear it; deliver your report."

"We know how it was done," said Thicknesse. "In Bellatrix Black's cell, hidden in one corner, was a potions vial; and testing the traces of remaining fluid shows that it was an Animagus potion."

There was a long pause.

"I see..." Albus said heavily.

"Pardon me?" said Minerva. She didn't.

Thicknesse's head turned toward her. "Animagi, Madam McGonagall, in their Animagus forms, are of less interest to Dementors. All prisoners are tested before their arrival at Azkaban; and if they are Animagi, their Animagus form is destroyed. But we had not considered that someone protected by a Patronus Charm while taking the potion and performing the meditation, might be able to become an Animagus *after* they went to Azkaban—"

"I understood," Severus said, having by now put on his customary sneer, "that the Animagus meditation required considerable time."

"Well, Mr. Snape," Thicknesse barked, "records show that Bellatrix Black was an Animagus *before* she was sentenced to Azkaban and her form

destroyed; so maybe her *second* meditation didn't take as much time as her first!"

"I would not have thought it possible for any prisoner of Azkaban to do such a thing..." Albus said. "But Bellatrix Black was a most powerful sorceress before her incarceration, and she might have done it if any witch could. Can Azkaban be secured against this method?"

"Yes," said the confident head of Pius Thicknesse. "Our expert says that it is nigh-unimaginable that an Animagus meditation could be performed in less than three hours, regardless of experience. All visits to prisoners allowed to receive them will be limited to two hours henceforth, and the Dementors will inform us if any Patronus Charm is maintained in the prison areas for longer than that."

Albus looked unhappy at that, but nodded. "I see. There will be no further attempts of that sort, of course, but do not relax your vigilance. And when Amelia has been told all this, tell her that I have information for her."

The head of Pius Thicknesse vanished without another word.

"No further attempts...?" said Minerva.

"Because, dear Minerva," Severus drawled, having not quite taken off his habitual sneer, "if the Dark Lord had planned to free any of his other servants from Azkaban, he would not have left behind the vial of potion to tell us how it was done." Severus frowned. "I confess... even so I do not see why that vial was left there."

"It is some kind of message..." Albus said slowly. "And I cannot see what it means, not at all..." He drummed his fingers on his desk.

For a long minute or three, the old wizard stared off into nothingness, frowning; while Severus also sat in silence.

Then Albus shook his head in dismay, and said, "Severus, do *you* comprehend this?"

"No," said the Potions Master, and with a sardonic smile, "which is probably all the better for us; whatever we are *intended* to conclude from it, that part of his plan has misfired."

"You are certain, now, that it is You-Know... that it is Voldemort?" said Minerva. "It could not be that some other Death Eater conceived this clever notion?"

"And they knew about rockets, too?" Severus said dryly. "I don't believe the other Death Eaters were so fond of Muggle Studies. It is he."

"Aye, it is he," Albus said. "Azkaban has endured impenetrable for ages, only to fall to an ordinary Animagus potion. It is too clever and too impossible, which was ever Voldemort's signature since the days he was known as Tom Riddle. Anyone who wished to forge that signature must needs be as cunning as Voldemort himself to do so. And there is no one else in the world who would accidentally overestimate my wit, and leave me a message I cannot understand at all."

"Unless he has gauged you exactly," Severus said tonelessly, "in which case all that is just what he intended you to think."

Albus sighed. "Indeed. But even if he has tricked me perfectly, we may at least rely on the conclusion that it was not Harry Potter."

It should have come as a relief, and yet Minerva felt the chill spreading through her spine and her veins, her lungs and her bones.

She remembered conversations like this.

She remembered conversations like this from ten years ago, from a time when blood had run through Britain in wide rivers, when wizards and witches she had once taught in class had been slaughtered by the hundreds, she remembered burning homes and screaming children and flashes of green light—

"What will you tell Madam Bones?" she whispered.

Albus stood from his desk and paced to the center of the room, his hand lightly touching the devices, here an instrument of light, there an instrument of sound; he adjusted his glasses with one hand, used the other to center the long silver beard against his robes, and then finally that ancient wizard turned back and faced them.

"I will tell her what little I know of the Dark Art called horcrux, by which a soul is deprived of death," said Albus Dumbledore, in a soft voice that seemed to fill the whole room, "and I will tell her what may be done with the flesh of the servant."

"I will tell her that I am reconstituting the Order of the Phoenix."

"I will tell her that Voldemort has returned."

"And that the Second Wizarding War is begun."

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CHAPTER 61

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SOME HOURS LATER...

The antique old clock upon the wall of the Deputy Headmistress's office had golden hands, and silver numerals to make the clock-face; it ticked and jerked soundlessly through its motions, for there was a Quieting enchantment on it.

The golden hour hand approached the silver numeral of nine, the golden minute hand did the same, the two linked components of Time nearing each other, soon to be in the same place and never to collide.

It was 8:43 PM, and the time approached when Harry's Time-Turner would open, to be tested in the one way that no imaginable spell could fool, unless that spell could bypass the laws of Time itself. No body or soul, no knowledge or substance, could stretch an extra seven hours in a single day. She would make up a message on the spot, and tell Harry to take that message back six hours to Professor Flitwick at 3PM, and she would ask Professor Flitwick if he had received it in that hour.

And Professor Flitwick would tell her that he had indeed received it at 3PM.

And she would tell Severus and Albus to have a *little* more faith in Harry next time.

Professor McGonagall cast the Patronus Charm, and told her shining cat, "Go to Mr. Potter, and tell him this: Mr. Potter, please come to my office as soon as you hear this, without doing anything else along the way."

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, FINAL

Minerva gazed up at the clock, the golden hands and silver numerals, the jerking motion. Muggles had invented that, and until they had, wizards had not bothered keeping time. Bells, timed by a sanded hourglass, had served Hogwarts for its classes when it was built. It was one of the things that blood purists wished not to be true, and therefore Minerva knew it.

She had received an Outstanding on her Muggle Studies N.E.W.T., which now seemed to her a mark of shame, considering how little she knew. Her younger self had realized, even then, that the class was a sham, taught by a pureblood, supposedly because Muggleborns could not appreciate what wizardborns needed to be told, and actually because the Board of Governors did not approve of Muggles at all. But when she was seventeen the Outstanding grade had been the main thing that mattered to her, she was saddened to remember...

If Harry Potter and Voldemort fight their war with Muggle weapons there will be nothing left of the world but fire!

She couldn't imagine it, and the reason she couldn't imagine it was that she couldn't imagine Harry fighting You-Know-Who.

She had encountered the Dark Lord four times and survived each one, three times with Albus to shield her and once with Moody at her side. She remembered the damaged, snakelike face, the faint green scales scattered over the skin, the glowing red eyes, the voice that laughed in a high-pitched hiss and promised nothing but cruelty and torment: the monster pure and complete.

And Harry Potter was easy to picture in her mind, the bright expression on the face of a young boy who wavered between taking the ludicrous seriously and taking the serious ludicrously.

And to think of the two of them facing off at wandpoint was too painful to be imagined.

They had no right, no right at all to set this on an eleven-year-old boy. She knew what the Headmaster had decided for him this day, for she had been told to make the arrangements; and if it had been her at the same age she would have raged and screamed and cried and been inconsolable for weeks, and...

He is no ordinary first-year, Albus had said. He is marked as the Dark Lord's equal, and he has power the Dark Lord knows not.

The terrible hollow voice booming from Sybill Trelawney's throat, the true and original prophecy, echoed once more through her mind. She had a feeling it didn't mean what the Headmaster thought it did, but there was no way to put the difference into words.

And even so it still seemed true, that if there were any eleven-year-old within the Earth entire who could bear this burden, that boy approached her office now. And if she said anything at all like 'poor Harry' to his face... well, he wouldn't like it.

So now I've got to find some way to kill an immortal Dark Wizard, Harry had said on the day he had first learned. I really wish you had told me that before I started shopping...

She'd been Head of House Gryffindor for long enough, she'd watched enough friends die, to know that there were some people you couldn't save from becoming heroes.

There came a knock at the door, and Professor McGonagall said, "Enter."

When Harry entered, his face had the same cold, alert look she'd seen in Mary's Place; and she wondered for an instant if he'd been wearing that same mask, that same self, this whole day.

The young boy seated himself on the chair before her desk, and said, "So is it time for me to be told what's going on?" Neutral the words, not the sharpness that should have gone with the expression.

Professor McGonagall's eyes rose in surprise before she could stop them, and she said, "The Headmaster told you nothing, Mr. Potter?"

The boy shook his head. "Only that he'd received a warning that I might be in danger, but I was safe now."

Minerva was having trouble meeting his gaze. How could they *do* this to him, how could they lay this upon an eleven-year-old boy, this war, this destiny, this prophecy... and they didn't even *trust* him...

She forced herself to look at Harry directly, and saw that his green eyes were calm as they rested on her.

"Professor McGonagall?" the boy said quietly.

"Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall, "I'm afraid it is not my place to explain, but if after this the Headmaster *still* does not tell you anything, you may come back to me and I will go yell at him for you."

The boy's eyes widened, something of the real Harry showing through the crack before the cool mask was set back in place.

"In any case," Professor McGonagall said briskly. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience, Mr. Potter, but I need to ask you to use your Time-Turner to go back six hours to three o'clock, and give the following message to Professor Flitwick: Silver on the tree. Ask the Professor to note down the time at which you gave him that message. Afterward the Headmaster wishes to meet with you at your convenience."

There was a pause.

Then the boy said, "I am suspected of misusing my Time-Turner, then?"

"Not by *me*!" Professor McGonagall said hastily. "I *am* sorry for the inconvenience, Mr. Potter."

There was another pause, and then the young boy shrugged. "It'll play hob with my sleep schedule but I suppose it can't be helped. Please let the house elves know that if I ask for an early breakfast at, say, three A.M. tomorrow morning, I'm to receive it."

"Of course, Mr. Potter," she said. "Thank you for understanding."

The boy rose up from his chair and gave her a formal nod, then slipped out the door with his hand already going under his shirt to where his Time-Turner waited; and she almost called out *Harry!* only she wouldn't have known what to say after.

Instead she waited, her eyes on the clock.

How long did she need to wait for Harry Potter to go back in time?

She didn't need to wait at all, actually; if he had done it, then it had already happened...

Minerva knew, then, that she was delaying because she was nervous, and the realization saddened her. Mischief, yes, unspeakable unthinkable mischief with all the prudence and foresight of a falling rock—she didn't know how the boy had tricked the Hat into not Sorting him to Gryffindor where he obviously belonged—but nothing dark or harmful, not ever. Beneath that mischief his goodness ran as deep and as true as the Weasley twins', though not even the Cruciatus Curse could have gotten her to say that out loud.

"*Expecto Patronum*," she said, and then, "Go to Professor Flitwick, and bear back his reply after you ask him this: 'Did Mr. Potter give you a message from me, what was that message, and when did you receive it?'"

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One hour earlier, having used the last remaining spin of his Time-Turner after putting on the Cloak of Invisibility, Harry tucked the hourglass back into his shirt.

And he set out toward the Slytherin dungeons, striding as quickly as his invisible legs could manage, though not running. Thankfully the Deputy Headmistress's office was already on a lower floor of Hogwarts...

A few staircases later, taken two steps but not three steps at once, Harry stopped at a corridor around whose final bend lay the entrance to the Slytherin dorms.

Harry took a piece of parchment (not paper) out of his parch, took a Quotes Quill (not pen) out of his pouch, and told the quill, "Write these letters exactly as I say them: Z-P-G-B-S-Y, space, F-V-Y-I-R-E-B-A-G-U-R-G-E-R-R."

There were two kinds of codes in cryptography, codes that stopped your little brother from reading your message and codes that stopped major governments from reading your message, and this was the first kind

of code, but it was better than nothing. In theory, no one should read it anyway; but even if they did, they wouldn't remember anything interesting unless they did cryptography first.

Harry then put that parchment in a parchment envelope, and with his wand melted a little green wax to seal it.

In principle, of course, Harry could've done all that hours earlier, but somehow waiting until *after* he heard the message from Professor McGonagall's own lips seemed less like *Messing With Time*.

Harry then put that envelope inside another envelope, which already contained another sheet of paper with other instructions, and five silver Sickles.

He closed that envelope (which already had a name written on the outside), sealed it with more green wax, and pressed a final Sickle into that seal.

Then Harry put *that* envelope into the very last envelope on which was written in large letters the name "Merry Tavington".

And Harry peeked around the bend to where the scowling portrait that served as the door to the Slytherin dorms waited; and as he did not wish the portrait to recall not-seeing anyone invisible, Harry used the Hover Charm to float the envelope to the scowling man, and tap it against him.

The scowling man looked down at the envelope, peering at it through a monocle, and sighed, and turned around to face toward the inside of the Slytherin dorms, and called, "Message for Merry Tavington!"

The envelope was then allowed to fall to the floor.

A few moments later the portrait door opened, and Merry snatched up the envelope from the floor.

She would open it up and find a Sickle and an envelope addressed to a fourth-year student named Margaret Bulstrode.

(Slytherins did this sort of thing all the time, and a Sickle definitely constituted a rush order.)

Margaret would open *her* envelope, and find five Sickles along with an envelope to be dropped off in an unused classroom...

...*after* she used her Time-Turner to go back five hours...

...whereupon she would find another five Sickles waiting for her, if she got there quickly.

And an invisible Harry Potter would be waiting in that classroom from three PM to three-thirty, just in case someone tried the obvious test.

Well, it had been obvious to Professor Quirrell, anyway.

It had also been obvious to Professor Quirrell that (a) Margaret Bulstrode had a Time-Turner and (b) she wasn't very strict about how she used it, e.g. telling her younger sister really good pieces of gossip "before" anyone else had heard.

Some of the tension leaked off Harry as he strode away from the portrait door, still invisible. Somehow his mind had still managed to worry about the plan, even *knowing* that it had already succeeded. Now there remained only the confrontation with Dumbledore, and then he was done for the day... he'd go to the Headmaster's gargoyles at 9PM, since doing it at 8PM would seem more suspicious. This way he could claim that he'd just misunderstood what Professor McGonagall had meant by "afterward"...

The obscure pain clutched at Harry's heart again as he thought of Professor McGonagall.

So Harry retreated a little further into his dark side, which had worn the calm expression and kept the fatigue off his face, and kept walking.

There would come a reckoning, but sometimes you had to borrow everything you could today, and let the payments come due tomorrow.

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Even Harry's dark side was feeling the exhaustion by the time the spiraling staircase had delivered him to the great oaken door that was the final gate to Dumbledore's office; but since Harry was now *legally* four hours past his natural bedtime, it was safe to let some of the fatigue show, the physical if not the emotional.

The oaken door swung open—

Harry's eyes had already been focused in the direction of the great desk, the throne behind it; so it took a moment to register that the throne was empty, the desk barren but for a single leatherbound volume; and then Harry shifted his gaze to see the wizard standing among his fiddly things, the mysterious unknown devices in their scores. Fawkes and the Sorting Hat occupied their respective perches, a bright cheerful blaze crackled in a nook that Harry had not before realized was a fireplace, and there were the two umbrellas and three red slippers for left feet. All things in their place and in their customary appearance except the old wizard himself, standing tall and dressed in robes of the most formal black. It came as a shock to the eyes, those robes on that person, it was as if Harry had seen his father wearing a business suit.

Very ancient was the appearance of Albus Dumbledore, and sorrowful.

"Hello, Harry," said the old wizard.

From within an alternate self maintained like an Occlumency construct, an innocent-Harry who had absolutely no idea what was happening inclined his head coldly, and said, "Headmaster. I expect you've heard back from Deputy Headmistress McGonagall by now, so if it's fine by you, I would *really* like to know what is going on."

"Yes," said the old wizard, "it is time, Harry Potter." The back straightened, only slightly for the wizard had already been standing straight; but somehow even that small change made the wizard seem a foot taller, and stronger if not younger, formidable though not dangerous, his potency gathered about him like a cowl. In a clear voice, then, he spoke: "This day your war against Voldemort has begun."

"What?" said the outer Harry who knew nothing, while something watching from inside thought much the same only with a lot more profanity attached.

"Bellatrix Black has been taken from Azkaban, she has escaped from a prison inescapable," the old wizard said. "It is a feat that bears Voldemort's signature if ever I have seen it; and she, his most faithful servant, is one of three requisites he must obtain to rise again in a new body. After ten years the enemy you once defeated has returned, as was foretold."

Neither part of Harry could think of anything to say to that, at least not for the few seconds before the old wizard continued.

"It need change little for you, for now," said the old wizard. "I have begun reconstituting the Order of the Phoenix that will serve you, I have alerted the few souls who can and should understand: Amelia Bones, Alastor Moody, Bartemius Crouch, certain others. Of the prophecy—yes, there is a prophecy—I have not told them, but they know that Voldemort is returned, and they know that you are to play some vital role. They and I shall fight your war in its lesser beginnings, while you grow stronger, and perhaps wiser, here at Hogwarts." The old wizard's hand came up, as though beseeching. "So to you, for now, there is but one change, and I implore you to understand its necessity. Do you recognize the book on my desk, Harry?"

The inner part of Harry was screaming and banging its head against imaginary walls, while the outer Harry turned and stared at what proved to be—

There was a rather long pause.

Then Harry said, "It is a copy of *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien."

"You recognized a quote from that book," said Dumbledore, an intent look in his eyes, "so I assume you remember it well. If I am mistaken, let me be corrected."

Harry just stared at him.

"It is important to understand," said Dumbledore, "that this book is not a realistic depiction of a wizarding war. John Tolkien never fought Voldemort. Your war will not be like the books you have read. Real life is not like stories. Do you understand, Harry?"

Harry, rather slowly, nodded yes; and then shook his head no.

"In particular," said Dumbledore, "there is a certain very foolish thing that Gandalf does in the first book. He makes many mistakes, does Tolkien's wizard; but this one error is the most unforgivable. That mistake is this: When Gandalf first suspected, even for a moment, that Frodo held the One Ring, he should have moved Frodo to Rivendell *at once*. He might have been embarrassed, that old wizard, if his suspicions had proven false. He might have found it awkward to so command Frodo, and Frodo would have been greatly inconvenienced, needing to

set aside many other plans and pastimes. But a little embarrassment, and awkwardness, and inconvenience, is as nothing compared to the loss of your whole war, when the nine Nazgul swoop down on the Shire while you are reading old scrolls in Minas Tirith, and take the Ring at once. And it is not Frodo alone who would have been hurt; all Middle-Earth would have fallen into slavery. If it had *not* been only a story, Harry, they would have lost their war. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"Er..." said Harry, "not exactly..." There was something about Dumbledore when he was like this, which made it hard to stay properly cold; his dark side had trouble with weird.

"Then I will spell it out," said the old wizard. His voice was stern, his eyes were sad. "Frodo should have been moved to Rivendell at once by Gandalf himself—and Frodo should never have left Rivendell without guard. There should have been no night of terror in Bree, no Barrow-downs, no Weathertop where Frodo was wounded, they could have lost their entire war any of those times, for Gandalf's folly! Do you understand now what I am saying to you, son of Michael and Petunia?"

And the Harry who knew nothing did understand.

And the Harry who knew nothing saw that it was the smart, the wise, the intelligent and sane, the *right* thing to do.

And the Harry who knew nothing said just what an innocent Harry *would* have said, while the silent watcher screamed in confusion and agony.

"You're saying," Harry said, his voice shaking as the emotions inside burned through the outer calm, "that I'm not going home to my parents for Easter."

"You *will* see them again," the old wizard said swiftly. "I will beg them to come here to be with you, I will extend them every courtesy during their visits. But you are not going home for Easter, Harry. You are not going home for the summer. You are no longer taking lunches in Diagon Alley, even with Professor Quirrell to watch you. Your blood is the second requisite Voldemort needs to rise as strong as before. So you are never again leaving the bounds of Hogwarts's wards without a vital reason, and a guard strong enough to fend off any attack for long enough to get you to safety."

Water was beginning at the corners of Harry's eyes. "Is that a request?" said his quavering voice. "Or an order?"

"I'm sorry, Harry," the old wizard said softly. "Your parents will see the necessity, I hope; but if not... I am afraid they have no recourse; the law, however wrongly, does not recognize them as your guardians. I am sorry, Harry, and I will understand if you despise me for it, but it must be done."

Harry whirled, looked at the door, he couldn't look at Dumbledore any more, couldn't trust his own face.

This is the cost to yourself, said Hufflepuff within his mind, *even as you imposed costs on others. Will that change your whole view of the matter, the way Professor Quirrell thinks it will?*

Automatically, the mask of the innocent Harry said exactly what it would have said: "Are my parents in danger? Do *they* need to be moved here?"

"No," said the old wizard's voice. "I do not think so. The Death Eaters learned, toward the end of the war, not to attack the Order's families. And if Voldemort is now acting without his former companions, he still knows that it is I who make the decisions for now, and he knows that I would give him nothing for any threat to your family. I have taught him that I do not give in to blackmail, and so he will not try."

Harry turned back then, and saw a coldness on the old wizard's face to match the shift in his voice, Dumbledore's blue eyes grown hard as steel behind the glasses, it didn't match the person but it matched the formal black robes.

"Is that everything, then?" said Harry's trembling voice. Later he would think about this, later he would think of some cunning counter-measure, later he would ask Professor Quirrell if there was any way to convince the Headmaster he was mistaken. Right now, maintaining the mask was taking all of Harry's attention.

"Voldemort used a Muggle artifact to escape Azkaban," the old wizard said. "He is watching you and learning from you, Harry Potter. Soon a man named Arthur Weasley at the Ministry will issue an edict that all use of Muggle artifacts must cease in the Defense Professor's battles. In the future, when you have a good idea, keep it closer about yourself."

It didn't seem important by comparison. Harry just nodded, and said again, "Is that everything?"

There was a pause.

"Please," said the old wizard in a whisper. "I have no right to ask your forgiveness, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, but please, at least say that you understand why." There was water in the old wizard's eyes.

"I understand," said the voice of the outer Harry who did understand, "I mean... I was sort of thinking about it anyway... wondering whether I could get you and my parents to let me stay over at Hogwarts during the summer like the orphans, so I could read the library here, it's just more interesting at Hogwarts anyway..."

A choking sound came from Albus Dumbledore's throat.

Harry turned again toward the door. It wasn't escape unscathed, but it was escape.

He took a step forward.

His hand reached to the door-handle.

A piercing cry split the air—

As though in slow motion, as Harry spun, he saw the phoenix already launched through the air and winging toward him.

From the true Harry, the one who knew his own guilt, came a flash of panic, he hadn't thought of that, hadn't anticipated it, he'd prepared to face Dumbledore but he'd forgotten about *Fawkes*—

Flap, flap, and flap, three times the phoenix's wings flapped like the flaring up and dying down of a fire, duration seemed to pass too slowly as *Fawkes* soared over the mysterious devices toward where Harry stood.

And the red-golden bird was hovering in front of him with gentle wing-sweeps, bobbing in the air like a candle-flame.

"What is it, *Fawkes*?" said the false Harry in puzzlement, looking the phoenix in the eyes, as he would if he were innocent. The real Harry, feeling the same awful sickness inside as when Professor McGonagall had expressed her trust in him, thought, *Did I turn evil today, Fawkes? I didn't think I was evil... Do you hate me now? If I've become something a phoenix hates, maybe I should just give it up now, give up everything now and confess—*

Fawkes screamed, the most terrible cry Harry had ever heard, a scream that set all the devices vibrating and made all the sleeping figures

start within their portraits.

It pierced through all of Harry's defenses like a white-hot sword through butter, collapsed all his layers like a punctured balloon popping, reshuffled his priorities in an instant as he remembered the one most important thing; the tears began pouring freely from Harry's eyes, down his cheeks, his voice choked as the words came out of his throat like coughing up lava—

"Fawkes says," Harry's voice said, "he wants me, to do, something, about, the prisoners, in Azkaban—"

"Fawkes, *no!*" said the old wizard. Dumbledore strode forward, reaching out to the phoenix with a pleading hand. The old wizard's voice was almost as desperate as the phoenix's scream had been. "You cannot ask that of him, Fawkes, he's only a boy still!"

"You went to Azkaban," Harry whispered, "you took Fawkes with you, he saw—you saw—you were *there*, you saw—WHY DIDN'T YOU DO ANYTHING? WHY DIDN'T YOU LET THEM OUT?"

When the instruments stopped vibrating, Harry realized that Fawkes had screamed at the same time as his own scream, that the phoenix was now flying next to Harry and facing Dumbledore at his side, the red-golden head level with his own.

"Can you," whispered the old wizard, "can you truly hear the voice of the phoenix so clearly?"

Harry was sobbing almost too hard to speak, for all the metal doors he'd passed, the voices he'd heard, the worst memories, the desperate begging as he walked away, all of it had burst into his mind like fire at the phoenix's scream, all the inner bulwarks smashed. Harry didn't know whether he could truly hear the voice of the phoenix so clearly, whether he would have understood Fawkes without already knowing. All Harry knew was that he had a plausible excuse to say the things Professor Quirrell had told him he must *never* raise in conversation from this day forth; because this was just what an innocent Harry would have said, would have done, if he *had* heard so clearly. "They're hurting—we have to help them—"

"*I can't!*" cried Albus Dumbledore. "Harry, Fawkes, *I can't*, there's nothing I can do!"

Another piercing scream.

“WHY NOT? JUST GO IN AND TAKE THEM OUT!”

The old wizard wrenched his gaze from the phoenix, his eyes meeting Harry’s instead. “Harry, tell Fawkes for me! Tell him it’s not that simple! Phoenixes aren’t mere animals but they *are* animals, Harry, they can’t understand—”

“I don’t understand either,” Harry said, his voice trembling. “I don’t understand why you’re *feeding people to Dementors! Azkaban isn’t a prison, it’s a torture chamber and you’re torturing those people to DEATH!*”

“Percival,” said the old wizard hoarsely, “Percival Dumbledore, my own father, Harry, my own father died in Azkaban! I know, I know it is a horror! *But what would you have of me?* To break Azkaban by force? Would you have me declare open rebellion against the Ministry?”

CAW!

There was a pause, and Harry’s trembling voice said, “Fawkes doesn’t know anything about governments, he just wants you—to take the prisoners out—of their cells—and he’ll help you fight, if anyone stands in your way—and—and so will I, Headmaster! I’ll go with you and destroy any Dementor that comes near! We’ll worry about the political fallout afterward, I bet that you and I together could get away with it—”

“Harry,” whispered the old wizard, “phoenixes do not understand how winning a battle can lose a war.” Tears were streaming down the old wizard’s cheeks, dripping into his silver beard. “The battle is all they know. They are good, but not wise. That is why they choose wizards to be their masters.”

“Can you bring out the Dementors to where I can get at them?” Harry’s voice was begging, now. “Bring them out in groups of fifteen—I think I could destroy that many at a time without hurting myself—”

The old wizard shook his head. “It was hard enough to pass off the loss of one—they might give me one more, but never two—they are considered national possessions, Harry, weapons in case of war—”

Fury blazed in Harry then, blazed up like fire, it might have come from where a phoenix now rested on his own shoulder, and it might have come from his own dark side, and the two angers mixed within him, the cold and the hot, and it was a strange voice that said from his throat, “Tell me something. What does a government have to do, what do the voters

have to do with their democracy, what do the *people* of a *country* have to do, before I ought to decide that I'm not on their side any more?"

The old wizard's eyes widened where he stared at the boy with a phoenix upon his shoulder. "Harry... are those your words, or the Defense Professor's—"

"Because there has to be *some* point, doesn't there? And if it's not Azkaban, where is it, then?"

"Harry, listen, please, hear me! Wizards could not live together if they each declared rebellion against the whole, every time they differed! Always there will be *something*—"

"Azkaban is not just something! It's evil!"

"Yes, even evil! Even some evils, Harry, for wizards are not perfectly good! And yet it is better that we live in peace, than in chaos; and for you and I to break Azkaban by force would be the beginning of *chaos*, can you not see it?" The old wizard's voice was pleading. "And it is possible to oppose the will of your fellows openly or in secret, without *hating* them, without declaring them evil and enemy! I do not think the people of this country deserve that of you, Harry! And even if some of them did—what of the children, what of the students in Hogwarts, what of the many good people mixed in with the bad?"

Harry looked on his shoulder at where Fawkes had perched, saw the phoenix's eyes gazing back at him, they did not glow and yet they blazed, red flames in a sea of golden fire.

What do you think, Fawkes?

"Caw?" said the phoenix.

Fawkes didn't understand the conversation.

The young boy looked at the old wizard, and said in a thick voice, "Or maybe the phoenixes are wiser than us, smarter than us, maybe they follow us around hoping that someday we'll *listen* to them, someday we'll *get* it, someday we'll just *take*, the prisoners, *out*, of their *cells*—"

Harry spun and pulled open the oaken door and stepped onto the staircase and slammed the door behind him.

The stairwell began rotating, Harry began descending, and he put his face in his hands, and began to weep.

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THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT,
FINAL

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It wasn't until he was halfway to the bottom that he noticed the difference, noticed the warmth still spreading through him, and realized that—

“Fawkes?” Harry whispered.

—the phoenix was still on his shoulder, perched there as he had seen him a few times upon Dumbledore's.

Harry looked again into the eyes, red flames in golden fire.

“You're not my phoenix now... are you?”

Caw!

“Oh,” Harry said, his voice trembling a little, “I'm glad to hear that, Fawkes, because I don't think—the Headmaster—I don't think he deserves—”

Harry stopped, took a breath.

“I don't think he deserves that, Fawkes, he was trying to do the right thing...”

Caw!

“But you're angry at him and trying to make a point. I understand.”

The phoenix nestled his head against Harry's shoulder, and the stone gargoyle walked smoothly aside to let Harry pass back into the corridors of Hogwarts.

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, AFTERMATHS

AFTERMATH, HERMIONE GRANGER:

She was just starting to close up her books and put away her homework in preparation for sleep, Padma and Mandy stacking up their own books across the table from her, when Harry Potter walked into the Ravenclaw common room; and it was only then that she realized, she hadn't seen him at all since breakfast.

That realization was rapidly stomped-on by a much more startling one.

There was a golden-red winged creature on Harry's shoulder, a bright bird of fire.

And Harry looked sad and worn and really *tired* like the phoenix was the only thing keeping him on his feet, but there was still a warmth about him, if you crossed your eyes you might have thought you were looking at the Headmaster somehow, that was the impression that went through Hermione's mind even though it didn't make any sense.

Harry Potter trudged across the Ravenclaw common room, past sofas full of staring girls, past cardgame-circles of staring boys, heading for her.

In theory she wasn't talking to Harry Potter yet, his week wasn't up until tomorrow, but whatever was going on was clearly a *whole* lot more important than that—

"Fawkes," Harry said, just as she was opening her mouth, "that girl over there is Hermione Granger, she's not talking to me right now because I'm an idiot, but if you want to be on a good person's shoulder she's better than me."

So much exhaustion and hurt in Harry Potter's voice—

But before she could figure out what to do about it, the phoenix had glided off Harry's shoulder like a fire creeping up a matchstick on fast-forward, flashing toward her; there was a phoenix flying in front of her and staring at her with eyes of light and flame.

"Caw?" asked the phoenix.

Hermione stared at it, feeling like she was facing a question on a test she'd forgotten to study for, the one most important question and she'd gone her whole life without studying for it, she couldn't find anything to say.

"I'm—" she said. "I'm only twelve, I haven't *done* anything yet—"

The phoenix just glided gently around, rotating around one wingtip like the being of light and air that it was, and soared back to Harry Potter's shoulder, where it settled down quite firmly.

"You silly boy," said Padma across from her, looking like she was deciding whether to laugh or grimace, "phoenixes aren't for smart girls who do their homework, they're for idiots who charge straight at five older Slytherin bullies. There's a reason why the Gryffindor colors are red and gold, you know."

There was a lot of friendly laughter in the Ravenclaw common room.

Hermione wasn't one of the laughing ones.

Neither was Harry.

Harry had put a hand over his face. "Tell Hermione I'm sorry," he said to Padma, his voice almost fallen to a whisper. "Tell her I forgot that phoenixes are animals, they don't understand time and planning, they don't understand people who are *going* to do good things later—I'm not sure they understand really the notion of there being something that a person *is*, all they see is what people do. Fawkes doesn't know what twelve means. Tell Hermione I'm sorry—I shouldn't have—it just all goes wrong, doesn't it?"

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THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, AFTERMATHS

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Harry turned to go, the phoenix still on his shoulder, began slowly trudging toward the staircase that led up to his dorm.

And Hermione couldn't leave it at that, she just *couldn't* leave it at that. She didn't know if it was her competition with Harry or something else. She just couldn't leave it with the phoenix turning away from her.

She *had* to—

Her mind keyed a frantic question to the entirety of her excellent memory, found just one thing—

"I was going to run in front of the Dementor to try and save Harry!" she shouted a little desperately at the red-golden bird. "I mean, I actually did start running and everything! That was stupid and courageous, right?"

With a warbling cry the phoenix launched itself from Harry's shoulder again, back toward her like a spreading blaze, it circled her three times like she was the center of an inferno, and for just a moment its wing brushed against her cheek, before the phoenix soared back to Harry.

There was a hush in the Ravenclaw common room.

"Told you so," Harry said aloud, and then he started climbing the stairs up to his bedroom; he seemed to climb very quickly, like he was very light on his feet for some reason, so that in just a moment he and Fawkes were gone.

Hermione held up a trembling hand to her cheek where Fawkes had brushed her with his wing, a spot of warmth lingering there like that one small patch of skin had been very gently set on fire.

She'd answered the question of the phoenix, she supposed, but it felt to her like she'd just barely squeaked by on the test, like she'd gotten a 62 and she could've gotten 104 if she'd tried harder.

If she'd tried at *all*.

She hadn't really *been* trying, when she thought about it.

Just doing her homework—

Who have you saved?

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AFTERMATH, FAWKES:

Nightmares, the boy had expected, screams and begging and howling hurricanes of emptiness, the discharge of the horrors being laid down into memory, and in that fashion, perhaps, becoming part of the past.

And the boy knew that the nightmares would come.

The next night, they would come.

The boy dreamed, and in his dreams the world was on fire, Hogwarts was on fire, his home was on fire, the streets of Oxford were on fire, all ablaze with golden flames that shone but did not consume, and all the people walking through the blazing streets were shining with white light brighter than the fire, like they were flames themselves, or stars.

The other first-year boys came to bed, and saw it for themselves, the wonder whose rumor they had already heard, that in his bed Harry Potter lay silent and motionless, a gentle smile on his face, while perched on his pillow a red-golden bird watched over him, with bright wings swept above him like a blanket pulled over his head.

The reckoning had been put off one more night.

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AFTERMATH, DRACO MALFOY:

Draco straightened his robes, making sure the green trim was straight. He waved his wand over his own head and said a Charm that Father had taught him while other children were still playing in mud, a Charm which ensured that not a single speck of lint or dust would dirty his wizard's robes.

Draco picked up the mysterious envelope that Father had owled him, and tucked it into his robes. He had already used *Incendio* and *Everso* on the mysterious note.

And then he headed off to breakfast, to seat himself on exactly the same tick of the clock where the food appeared, if he could manage it, so that it would seem like all others had been waiting on his appearance to

eat. Because when you were the scion of Malfoy you were first in everything, including breakfast, that was why.

Vincent and Gregory were waiting for him outside the door of his private room, up even before he was—though not, of course, dressed quite as sharply.

The Slytherin common room was deserted, anyone who got up this early was heading straight to breakfast anyway.

The dungeon halls were silent but for their own footsteps, empty and echoing.

The Great Hall was a hubbub of alarm despite the relative few arrivals, some younger children crying, students running back and forth between tables or standing in knots shouting at each other, a red-robed prefect was standing in front of two green-trimmed students and yelling at them and Snape was striding toward the mess—

The noise dimmed a little as people caught sight of Draco, as some of the faces turned to stare at him, and fell quiet.

The food appeared on the tables. No one looked at it.

And Snape spun on his heel, abandoning his target, and headed straight toward Draco.

A knot of fear clutched at Draco's heart, had something happened to Father—no, surely Father would have told him—whatever was happening, why hadn't Father told him—

There were bags of fatigue beneath Snape's eyes, Draco saw as their Head of House came close, the Potions Master had never been a sharp dresser (that was an understatement) but his robes were even dirtier and more disarrayed this morning, spotted with extra grease.

"You haven't heard?" hissed their Head of House as he came close. "For pity's sake, Malfoy, don't you have a newspaper delivered?"

"What is it, Profe—"

"Bellatrix Black was taken from Azkaban!"

"*What?*" said Draco in shock, as Gregory behind him said something he really shouldn't have and Vincent just gasped.

Snape was gazing at him with narrowed eyes, then nodded abruptly. "Lucius told you nothing, then. I see." Snape gave a snort, turned away—

"Professor!" said Draco. The implications were just starting to dawn on him, his mind spinning frantically. "Professor, what should I do—Father didn't instruct me—"

"Then I *suggest*," Snape said sneeringly, as he strode away, "that you *tell* them that, Malfoy, as your father intended!"

Draco glanced back at Vincent and Gregory, though he didn't know why he was bothering, of course they looked even more confused than he did.

And Draco walked forward to the Slytherin table, and sat down at the far end, which was still empty of sitters.

Draco put a sausage omelet on his plate, began eating it with automatic motions.

Bellatrix Black had been taken from Azkaban.

Bellatrix Black had been taken from Azkaban...?

Draco didn't know what to make of that, it was as totally unexpected as the Sun going out—well, the Sun would expectedly go out in six billion years but this was as unexpected as the Sun going out *tomorrow*. Father wouldn't have done it, Dumbledore wouldn't have done it, *no one* should have been *able* to do it—what did it *mean*—what *use* would Bellatrix be to anyone after ten years in Azkaban—even if she got strong again, what use was a powerful sorceress who was completely evil and insane and fanatically devoted to a Dark Lord who wasn't around anymore?

"Hey," said Vincent from where he was sitting next to Draco, "I don't understand, boss, why'd we do that?"

"We didn't do it, you dolt!" snapped Draco. "Oh, for Merlin's sake, if even *you* think we—didn't your father ever tell you any stories about Bellatrix Black? She tortured Father once, she tortured *your* father, she's tortured *everyone*, the Dark Lord once told her to Crucio *herself* and she *did it*! She didn't do crazy things to inspire fear and obedience in the populace, she did crazy things because she's crazy! She's a *bitch* is what she is!"

"Oh, really?" said an incensed voice from behind Draco.

Draco didn't look up. Gregory and Vincent would be watching his back.

"I would've thought you'd be happy—"

“—to hear that a Death Eater had been freed, Malfoy!”

Amycus Carrow had always been one of the *other* problem people; Father had once told Draco to make sure he was never alone in the same room with Amycus...

Draco turned around and gave Flora and Hestia Carrow his Number Three Sneer, the one that said that he was in a Noble and Most Ancient House and they weren't and yes, that mattered. Draco said in their general direction, certainly not deigning to address *them* in particular, “There's Death Eaters and then there's Death Eaters,” and then turned back to his food.

There were two furious huffs in unison, and then two pairs of shoes stormed off toward the other end of the Slytherin table.

It was a few minutes later that Millicent Bulstrode ran up to them, visibly out of breath, and said, “Mr. Malfoy, did you hear?”

“About Bellatrix Black?” said Draco. “Yeah—”

“No, about Potter!”

“What?”

“Potter was going around with a *phoenix* on his shoulder last night, looking like he'd been dragged through ten leagues of mud, they say that the phoenix took him to Azkaban to try to stop Bellatrix and he fought a duel with her and they blew up half the fortress!”

“*What?*” said Draco. “Oh, there is just no way that—”

Draco stopped.

He'd said that a number of times about Harry Potter and had started to notice a trend.

Millicent ran off to tell someone else.

“You don't *really* think—” said Gregory.

“I honestly don't know anymore,” said Draco.

A few minutes later, after Theodore Nott had sat down across from him and William Rosier had gone to sit with the Carrow twins, Vincent nudged him and said, “There.”

Harry Potter had entered the Great Hall.

Draco watched him closely.

There was no alarm on Harry's face as he saw, no surprise or shock, he just looked...

It was the same distant, self-absorbed look Harry wore when he was trying to figure out the answer to a question Draco couldn't understand yet.

Draco hastily shoved himself up from the bench of the Slytherin table, saying "Stay behind," and walked with all decorous speed toward Harry.

Harry seemed to notice his approach just as the other boy was turning toward the Ravenclaw table, and Draco—

—gave Harry one quick look—

—and then walked right past him, straight out of the Great Hall.

It was a minute later that Harry peered around the corner of the small stony nook where Draco had waited, it might not fool everyone but it would create plausible deniability.

"*Quietus*," said Harry. "Draco, what—"

Draco took the envelope out of his robes. "I have a message for you from Father."

"*Huh?*" said Harry, and took the envelope from Draco, and tore it open in a rather un-neat manner, and drew forth a sheet of parchment and unfolded it and—

Harry gave a sharp intake of breath.

Then Harry looked at Draco.

Then Harry looked back down at the parchment.

There was a pause.

Harry said, "Did Lucius tell you to report on my reaction to this?"

Draco paused for a moment, weighing, and then opened his mouth—

"I see he did," said Harry, and Draco cursed himself, he should've known better, only it *had* been hard to decide. "What are you going to tell him?"

"That you were surprised," said Draco.

"Surprised," Harry said flatly. "Yeah. Good. Tell him that."

"What is it?" said Draco. And then, as he saw Harry looking conflicted, "If you're dealing with Father behind my back—"

And Harry, without a word, gave Draco the paper.

It said:

I know it was you.

"WHAT THE—"

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THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, AFTERMATHS

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"I was going to ask *you* that," said Harry. "Have you got *any* idea what's up with your Dad?"

Draco stared at Harry.

Then Draco said, "*Did* you do it?"

"What?" said Harry. "What *possible* reason would I—*how* would I—"

"Did you do it, Harry?"

"No!" Harry said. "Of course not!"

Draco had listened carefully, but he hadn't detected any hesitation or tremor.

So Draco nodded, and said, "I've got no idea what Father's thinking but it *can't*, I mean it *can't possibly* be good. And, um... people are also saying..."

"What," said Harry warily, "are they saying, Draco?"

"Did a phoenix *really* take you to Azkaban to try to stop Bellatrix Black from escaping—"

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AFTERMATH: NEVILLE LONGBOTTOM

Harry had only just sat down at the Ravenclaw table for the first time, hoping to grab a quick bite of food. He knew he needed to go off and think about things, but there was a tiny remaining bit of phoenix's peace (even after the encounter with Draco) that he still wanted to cling to, some beautiful dream of which he remembered nothing but the beauty; and the part of him that *wasn't* feeling peaceful was waiting for all the anvils to finish dropping on him, so that when he went off to think and be by himself for a while, he could batch-process all the disasters at once.

Harry's hand grasped a fork, lifted a bite of mashed potatoes toward his mouth—

And there was a shriek.

Every now and then someone would shout when they heard the news, but Harry's ears *recognized* this one—

Harry was up from the bench in an instant, heading toward the Hufflepuff table, a horrible sick feeling dawning in the pit of his stomach. It

was one of those things he hadn't considered when he'd decided to commit the crime, because Professor Quirrell had planned for no one to know; and now, afterward, Harry just—hadn't *thought* of it—

This, Hufflepuff said with bitter intensity, *is also your fault*.

But by the time Harry got there, Neville was sitting down and eating fried sausage patties with Snippyfig Sauce.

The Hufflepuff boy's hands were trembling, but he cut the food, and ate it, without dropping it.

"Hello, General," Neville said, his voice wavering only slightly. "Did you fight a duel with Bellatrix Black last night?"

"No," Harry said. His own voice was also wavery, for some reason.

"Didn't think so," said Neville. There was a scraping sound as his knife cut the sausage again. "I'm going to hunt her down and kill her, can I count on you to help?"

There were startled gasps from the mass of Hufflepuffs who had gathered around Neville.

"If she comes after you," Harry said hoarsely, *if it was all a terrible mistake, if it was all a lie*, "I'll defend you even with my life," *won't let you get hurt for what I did, no matter what*, "but I won't help you go after her, Neville, friends don't help friends commit suicide."

Neville's fork paused on the way to his mouth.

Then Neville put the bite of food in his mouth, chewed again.

And Neville swallowed it.

And Neville said, "I didn't mean *right now*, I mean after I graduate Hogwarts."

"Neville," Harry said, keeping his voice under very careful control, "I think, even after you graduate, that might still be a *just plain stupid idea*. There's got to be much more experienced Aurors tracking her—" *oh, wait, that's not good—*

"Listen to him!" said Ernie Macmillan, and then an older-looking Hufflepuff girl standing close to Neville said, "Nevvy, please, think about it, he's right!"

Neville stood up.

Neville said, "Please don't follow me."

Neville walked away from all of them; Harry and Ernie reaching out involuntarily toward him, and some of the other Hufflepuffs as well.

And Neville sat down at the Gryffindor table, and distantly (though they had to strain to hear) they heard Neville say, "I'm going to hunt her down and kill her after I graduate, anyone want to help?" and at least five voices said "Yes" and then Ron Weasley said loudly, "Get in line, you lot, I got an owl from Mum this morning, she says to tell everyone she's called dibs" and someone said "*Molly Weasley against Bellatrix Black?* Who does she even think she's kidding—" and Ron reached over to a plate and hefted a muffin—

Someone tapped Harry on the shoulder, and he turned around and saw an unfamiliar green-trimmed older girl, who handed him a parchment envelope and then quickly strode away.

Harry stared at the envelope for a moment, then started walking toward the nearest wall. That wasn't very private, but it should be private enough, and Harry didn't want to give the impression of having much to hide.

That had been a Slytherin System delivery, what you used if you wanted to communicate with someone without anyone else knowing that the two of you had talked. The sender gave an envelope to someone who had a reputation for being a reliable messenger, along with ten Knuts; that first person would take five Knuts and pass the envelope to another messenger along with the other five Knuts, and the second messenger would open up that envelope and find another envelope with a name written on it and deliver that envelope to that person. That way neither of the two people passing the message knew both the sender *and* the recipient, so no one else knew that those two parties had been in contact...

When Harry reached the wall, he put the envelope inside his robes, opened it beneath the folds of cloth, and carefully snuck a peek at the parchment he drew forth.

It said,

Classroom to the left of Transfiguration, 8 in the morning.

—LL.

Harry stared at it, trying to remember if he knew anyone with the initials LL.

His mind searched...

Searched...

Retrieved—

“The *Quibbler* girl?” Harry whispered incredulously, and then shut his mouth. She was only ten years old, she shouldn’t be in Hogwarts at all!

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AFTERMATH: LESATH LESTRANGE.

Harry was standing in the unused classroom next to Transfiguration at 8AM, waiting, he’d at least managed to get some food into himself before facing the next disaster, Luna Lovegood...

The door to the classroom opened, and Harry saw, and gave himself a really *hard* mental kick.

One more thing he hadn’t thought of, one more thing he *really should* have.

The older boy’s green-trimmed formal robes were askew, there were red spots on them looking very much like small dots of fresh blood, and one corner of his mouth had the look of a place that had been cut and healed, by *Episkey* or some other minor medical Charm that didn’t quite erase all the damage.

Lesath Lestrange’s face was streaked with tears, fresh tears and half-dried tears, and there was water in his eyes, a promise of still more on the way. “*Quietus*,” said the older boy, and then “*Homenum Revelio*” and some other things, while Harry thought frantically and without much luck.

And then Lesath lowered his wand and sheathed it in his robes, and slowly this time, formally, the older boy dropped to his knees on the dusty classroom floor.

Bowed his head all the way down, until his forehead also touched the dust, and Harry would have spoken but he was voiceless.

Lesath Lestrangle said, in a breaking voice, “My life is yours, my Lord, and my death as well.”

“I,” Harry said, there was a huge lump in his throat and he was having trouble speaking, “I—” *didn’t have anything to do with it*, he should have been saying, should be saying *right now*, but then again the innocent Harry would have had trouble speaking too—

“Thank you,” whispered Lesath, “thank you, my Lord, oh, thank you,” the sound of a choked-off sob came from the kneeling boy, all Harry could see of him was the hair on the back of his head, nothing of his face. “I’m a fool, my Lord, an ungrateful bastard, unworthy to serve you, I cannot abase myself enough, for I—I shouted at you after you helped me, because I thought you were refusing me, and I didn’t even realize until this morning that I’d been such a fool as to ask you in front of Longbottom—”

“I didn’t have anything to do with it,” Harry said.

(It was still very hard to tell an outright lie like that.)

Slowly Lesath raised his head from the floor, looked up at Harry.

“I understand, my Lord,” said the older boy, his voice wavering a little, “you do not trust my cunning, and indeed I have shown myself a fool... I only wanted to say to you, that I am not ungrateful, that I know it must have been hard enough to save only one person, that they’re alerted now, that you can’t—get Father—but I am not ungrateful, I will never be ungrateful to you again. If ever you have a use for this unworthy servant, call me wherever I am, and I will answer, my Lord—”

“I was not involved in any way.”

(But it got easier each time.)

Lesath gazed up at Harry, said uncertainly, “Am I dismissed from your presence, my Lord...?”

“I am not your Lord.”

Lesath said, “Yes, my Lord, I understand,” and pushed himself back up from the floor, stood straight and bowed deeply, then backed away from Harry until he turned to open the classroom door.

As Lesath’s hand touched the doorknob, he paused.

Harry couldn’t see Lesath’s face, as the older boy’s voice said, “Did you send her to someone who would take care of her? Did she ask about me at all?”

And Harry said, his voice perfectly level, "Please stop that. I was not involved in any way."

"Yes, my Lord, I'm sorry, my Lord," said Lesath's voice; and the Slytherin boy opened the door and went out and shut the door behind him. His feet sped up as he ran away, but not fast enough that Harry couldn't hear him start sobbing.

Would I cry? wondered Harry. *If I knew nothing, if I was innocent, would I cry right now?*

Harry didn't know, so he just kept looking at the door.

And some unbelievably tactless part of him thought, *Yay, we completed a quest and got a minion—*

Shut up. If you ever want to vote on anything ever again... shut up.

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AFTERMATH, AMELIA BONES:

"Then his life isn't in danger, I take it," said Amelia.

The healer, a stern-eyed old man who wore his robes white (he was a Muggleborn and honoring some strange tradition of Muggles, of which Amelia had never asked, although privately she thought it made him look too much like a ghost), shook his head and said, "Definitely not."

Amelia looked at the human form resting unconscious on the healer's bed, the burned and blasted flesh, the thin sheet that covered him for modesty's sake having been peeled back at her command.

He might make a full recovery.

He might not.

The healer had said it was too early to say.

Then Amelia looked at the other witch in the room, the detective.

"And you say," Amelia said, "that the burning matter was Transfigured from *water*, presumably in the form of ice."

The detective nodded her head, and said, sounding puzzled, "It could have been much worse, if not for—"

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“How *very nice* of them,” she spat, and then pressed a weary hand to her forehead. No... no, it *had* been intended as a kindness. By the final stage of the escape there would be no point in trying to fool anyone. Whoever had done this, then, *had* been trying to mitigate the damage—and they’d been thinking in terms of Aurors breathing the smoke, not of anyone being attacked with the fire. If it had been them still in control, no doubt, they would have steered the rocker more mercifully.

But Bellatrix Black had ridden the rocker out of Azkaban alone, all the watching Aurors had agreed on that, they’d had their Anti-Disillusionment Charms active and there had been only one woman on that rocker, though the rocker had sported two sets of stirrups.

Some good and innocent person, capable of casting the Patronus Charm, had been tricked into rescuing Bellatrix Black.

Some innocent had fought Bahry One-Hand, carefully subduing an experienced Auror without significantly injuring him.

Some innocent had Transfigured the fuel for the Muggle artifact on which the two of them had been to ride out of Azkaban, making it from frozen water for the benefit of her Aurors.

And then their usefulness to Bellatrix Black had ended.

You would have expected anyone capable of subduing Bahry One-Hand to have foreseen that part. But then you wouldn’t have expected anyone who could cast the Patronus Charm to try rescuing Bellatrix Black in the first place.

Amelia passed her hand down over her eyes, closing them for a moment in silent mourning. *I wonder who it was, and how You-Know-Who manipulated them... what story they could possibly have been told...*

She didn’t even realize until a moment later that the thought meant she was starting to believe. Perhaps because, no matter how difficult it was to believe Dumbledore, it was becoming more difficult *not* to recognize the hand of that cold, dark intelligence.

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CHAPTER 63

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AFTERMATH, ALBUS DUMBLEDORE:

It might have been only fifty-seven seconds before breakfast ended and he might have needed four twists of his Time-Turner, but in the end, Albus Dumbledore did make it.

“Headmaster?” squeaked the polite voice of Professor Filius Flitwick, as the old wizard passed him by on his way to his seat. “Mr. Potter left a message for you.”

The old wizard stopped. He looked inquiringly at the Charms Professor.

“Mr. Potter said that after he woke up, he realized how unfair had been the things he said to you after Fawkes screamed. Mr. Potter said that he wasn’t saying anything about anything else, just apologizing for that one part.”

The old wizard kept looking at his Charms Professor, and still did not speak.

“Headmaster?” squeaked Filius.

“Tell him I said thank you,” said Albus Dumbledore, “but that it is wiser to listen to phoenixes than to wise old wizards,” and sat down at his place three seconds before all the food vanished.

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AFTERMATH, PROFESSOR QUIRRELL:

“No,” Madam Pomfrey snapped at the child, “you may *not* see him! You may not *pester* him! You may not ask him *one little question!* He is to rest *in bed* and do *nothing* for at least *three days!*”

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AFTERMATH, MINERVA MCGONAGALL:

She was heading toward the infirmary, and Harry Potter was leaving it, when they passed each other.

The look he gave her wasn't angry.

It wasn't sad.

It didn't say much at all.

It was like... like he was looking at her just long enough to make it clear that he *wasn't* deliberately avoiding looking at her.

And then he looked away before she could figure out what look to give him in return; as though he wanted to spare her that, as well.

He didn't say anything as he walked past her.

Neither did she.

What could there possibly be to say?

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AFTERMATH, FRED AND GEORGE WEASLEY:

They actually yelped out loud, when they turned the corner and saw Dumbledore.

It wasn't that the Headmaster had popped up out of nowhere and was staring at them with a stern expression. Dumbledore was always doing *that*.

But the wizard was dressed in formal black robes and looking *very* ancient and *very* powerful and he was giving the two of them a SHARP LOOK.

"Fred and George Weasley!" spake Dumbledore in a Voice of Power.

"Yes, Headmaster!" they said, snapping upright and giving him a crisp military salute they'd seen in some old pictures.

"Hear me well! You are the friends of Harry Potter, is this so?"

"Yes, Headmaster!"

"Harry Potter is in danger. He *must not* go beyond the wards of Hogwarts. Listen to me, sons of Weasley, I beg you listen: you know that I am as Gryffindor as yourselves, that I too know there are higher rules than

rules. But this, Fred and George, this one thing is of the most terrible importance, there must be no exception this time, small or great! If you help Harry to leave Hogwarts he may *die*! Does he send you on a mission, you may go, does he ask you to bring him items, you may help, but if he asks you to smuggle his own person out of Hogwarts, you *must refuse*! Do you understand?"

"Yes, Headmaster!" They said it without even thinking, really, and then exchanged uncertain looks with each other—

The bright blue eyes of the Headmaster were intent upon them. "No. Not without thinking. If Harry asks you to bring him out, you must refuse, if he asks you to tell him the way, you must refuse. I will not ask you to report him to me, for that I know you would never do. But beg him on my behalf to go to *me*, if it is of such importance, and *I* will guard him as he walks. Fred, George, I am sorry to strain your friendship so, but it is his *life*."

The two of them looked at each other for a long while, not communicating, only thinking the same things at the same time.

They looked back at Dumbledore.

They said, with a chill running through them as they spoke the name, "Bellatrix Black."

"You may safely assume," said the Headmaster, "that it is at least that bad."

"Okay—"

"—got it."

AFTERMATH, ALASTOR MOODY AND SEVERUS SNAPE:

When Alastor Moody had lost his eye, he had commandeered the services of a most erudite Ravenclaw, Samuel H. Lyall, whom Moody mistrusted slightly less than average because Moody had refrained from reporting him as an unregistered werewolf; and he had paid Lyall to compile a list of every known magical eye, and every known hint to their location.

When Moody had gotten the list back, he hadn't bothered reading most of it; because at the top of the list was the Eye of Vance, dating back to an era before Hogwarts, and currently in the possession of a powerful Dark Wizard ruling over some tiny forgotten hellhole that wasn't in Britain or anywhere else he'd have to worry about silly rules.

That was how Alastor Moody had lost his left foot and acquired the Eye of Vance, and how the oppressed souls of Urulat had been liberated for a period of around two weeks before another Dark Wizard moved in on the power vacuum.

He'd considered going after the Left Foot of Vance next, but had decided against it after he realized that would be *just what they were expecting*.

Now Mad-Eye Moody was turning slowly, always turning, surveying the graveyard of Little Hangleton. It should have been a lot gloomier, that place, but in the broad daylight it seemed like nothing but a grassy place marked by ordinary tombstones, demarcated by the chained twists of fragile, easily climbable metal that Muggles used instead of wards. (Moody could not comprehend what the Muggles were thinking on that score, if they were *pretending* to have wards, or what, and he had decided not to ask whether Muggle criminals respected the pretense.)

Moody didn't actually *need* to turn to survey the graveyard.

The Eye of Vance saw the full globe of the world in every direction around him, no matter where it was pointing.

But there was no particular reason to let a former Death Eater like Severus Snape know that.

Sometimes people called Moody 'paranoid'.

Moody always told them to survive a hundred years of hunting Dark Wizards and then get back to him about that.

Mad-Eye Moody had once worked out how long it had taken him, in retrospect, to achieve what he now considered a decent level of caution—weighed up how much experience it had taken him to get *good* instead of *lucky*—and had begun to suspect that most people died before they got there. Moody had once expressed this thought to Lyall, who had done some ciphering and figuring, and told him that a typical Dark Wizard hunter would die, on average, eight and a half times along the way to becoming ‘paranoid’. This explained a great deal, assuming Lyall wasn’t lying.

Yesterday, Albus Dumbledore had told Mad-Eye Moody that the Dark Lord had used unspeakable dark arts to survive the death of his body, and was now awake and abroad, seeking to regain his power and begin the Wizarding War anew.

Someone else might have reacted with incredulity.

“I can’t believe you lot never told me about this resurrection thing,” Mad-Eye Moody said with considerable acerbity. “D’you realize how long it’ll take me to do the grave of every ancestor of every Dark Wizard I’ve ever killed who could’ve been smart enough to make a horcrux? You’re not just *now* doing this one, are you?”

“I redose this one every year,” Severus Snape said calmly, uncapping the third flask of what the man had *claimed* would be seventeen bottles, and beginning to wave his wand over it. “The other ancestral graves we’ve been able to locate were poisoned with only the long-lasting substances, since some of us have less free time than yourself.”

Moody watched the fluid spiraling out of the vial and vanishing, to appear within the bones where marrow had once been. “But you think it’s worth the effort of the trap, instead of just Vanishing the bones.”

“He *does* have other avenues to life, should he perceive this one blocked,” Snape said dryly, uncapping a fourth bottle. “And before you ask, it must be the original grave, the place of first burial, the bone removed during the ritual and not before. Thus he cannot have retrieved it earlier; and also there is no point in substituting the skeleton of a weaker ancestor. He would notice it had lost all potency.”

“Who else knows about this trap?” Moody demanded.

“You. Me. The Headmaster. No one else.”

Moody snorted. "Pfah. Did Albus tell Amelia, Bartemius, and that McGonagall woman about the resurrection ritual?"

"Yes—"

"If Voldie finds out that Albus knows about the resurrection ritual and that Albus told *them*, Voldie'll figure that Albus told *me*, and Voldie *knows* I'd think of this." Moody shook his head in disgust. "What're these other ways Voldie could come back to life?"

Snape's hand paused on the fifth bottle (it was all Disillusioned, of course, the whole operation was Disillusioned, but that meant less than nothing to Moody, it just marked you in his Eye's sight as trying-to-hide), and the former Death Eater said, "You don't need to know."

"You're learning, son," said Moody with mild approval. "What's in the bottles?"

Snape opened the fifth bottle, gestured with his wand to begin the substance flowing toward the grave, and said, "This one? A Muggle narcotic called LSD. A conversation yesterday put me in mind of Muggle things, and LSD seemed the most interesting option, so I hurried to obtain some. If it is incorporated into the resurrection potion, I suspect its effects will be permanent."

"What does it do?" said Moody.

"It is said that the effects are impossible to describe to anyone who has not used it," drawled Snape, "and I have not used it."

Moody nodded approval as Snape opened the sixth flask. "What about that one?"

"Love potion."

"*Love potion?*" said Moody.

"Not of the standard sort. It is meant to trigger a two-way bond with an unbearably sweet Veela woman named Verdandi who the Headmaster hopes might be able to redeem even him, if they truly loved each other."

"*Gah!*" said Moody. "That bloody sentimental fool—"

"Agreed," Severus Snape said calmly, his attention focused on his work.

"Tell me you've at least got some Malaclaw venom in there."

"Second flask."

"Tocane powder."

"Either the fourteenth or fifteenth bottle."

"Bahl's Stupefaction," Moody said, naming an extremely addictive narcotic with interesting side effects on people with Slytherin tendencies; Moody had once seen an addicted Dark Wizard go to ridiculous lengths to get a victim to lay hands on a certain exact portkey, instead of just having someone toss the target a trapped Knut on their next visit to town; and after going to all that work, the addict had gone to the *further* effort to lay a *second Portus*, on the *same portkey*, which had, on a second touch, transported the victim back to safety. To this day, even taking the drug into account, Moody could not imagine what could have possibly been going through the man's mind at the time he had cast the second Portus.

"Tenth vial," said Snape.

"Basilisk venom," offered Moody.

"*What?*" spat Snape. "Snake venom is a positive component of the resurrection potion! Not to mention that it would dissolve the bone and all the other substances! And where would we even get—"

"Calm down, son, I was just checking to see if you could be trusted."

Mad-Eye Moody continued his (secretly unnecessary) slow turning, surveying the graveyard, and the Potions Master continued pouring.

"Hold on," Moody said suddenly. "How do you know *this* is really where—"

"Because it says 'Tom Riddle' on the easily moved headstone," Snape said dryly. "And I have just won ten Sickles from the Headmaster, who bet you would think of that before the fifth bottle. So much for constant vigilance."

There was a pause.

"How long did it take Albus to reali—"

"Three years after we learned of the ritual," said Snape, in a tone not quite like his usual sardonic drawl. "In retrospect, we should have consulted you earlier."

Snape uncapped the ninth bottle.

"We poisoned all the other graves as well, with long-lasting substances," remarked the former Death Eater. "It is possible that we are in the correct graveyard. He may not have planned this far ahead back

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when he was slaughtering his family, and he cannot move the grave itself—”

“The true location doesn’t look like a graveyard any more,” Moody said flatly. “He moved all the *other* graves here and Memory-Charmed the Muggles. Not even Bellatrix Black would be told anything about that until just before the ritual started. *No one* knows the true location now except him.”

They continued their futile work.

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AFTERMATH, BLAISE ZABINI:

The Slytherin common room could be accurately and precisely described as a remilitarized zone; the moment you stepped through the portrait hole you would see that the left half of the room was Definitely Not Talking to the right half and vice versa. It was very clear, it did not need to be explained to anyone, that you did *not* have the option of *not taking sides*.

At a table in the exact middle of the room, Blaise Zabini sat by himself, smirking as he did his homework. He had a reputation now, and meant to keep it.

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AFTERMATH, DAPHNE GREENGRASS AND TRACEY DAVIS:

“You doing anything interesting today?” said Tracey.

“Nope,” said Daphne.

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AFTERMATH, HARRY POTTER:

If you went high enough in Hogwarts, you didn't see many other people around, just corridors and windows and staircases and the occasional portrait, and now and then some interesting sight, such as a bronze statue of a furry creature like a small child, holding a peculiar flat spear...

If you went high enough in Hogwarts, you didn't see many other people around, which suited Harry.

There were much worse places to be trapped, Harry supposed. In fact you probably couldn't think of anywhere *better* to be trapped than an ancient castle with a fractal ever-changing structure that meant you couldn't ever run out of places to explore, full of interesting people and interesting books and incredibly important knowledge unknown to Muggle science.

If Harry hadn't been told that he *couldn't* leave, he probably would've *jumped* at the chance to spend more time in Hogwarts, he would've plotted and connived to get it. Hogwarts was literally *optimal*, not in all the realms of possibility maybe, but certainly on the real planet Earth, it was the Maximum Fun Location.

How could the castle and its grounds seem so much smaller, so much more confining, how could the rest of the world become so much more interesting and important, the instant Harry had been told that he wasn't allowed to leave? He'd spent *months* here and hadn't felt claustrophobic *then*.

You know the research on this, observed some part of himself, it's just standard scarcity effects, like that time where as soon as a county outlawed phosphate detergents, people who'd never cared before drove to the next county in order to buy huge loads of phosphate detergent, and surveys showed that they rated phosphate detergents as gentler and more effective and even easier-pouring... and if you give two-year-olds a choice between a toy in the open and one protected by a barrier they can go around, they'll ignore the toy in the open and go for the one behind the barrier... salespeople know that they can sell things just by telling the customer it might not be available... it was all in Cialdini's book Influence, ev-

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everything you're feeling right now, the grass is always greener on the side that's not allowed.

If Harry hadn't been told that he couldn't leave, he probably would've jumped at the chance to stay at Hogwarts over the summer...

...but not the rest of his life.

That was sort of the problem, really.

Who knew whether there *was* still a Dark Lord Voldemort for him to defeat?

Who knew whether He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named still existed outside of the imagination of a possibly-not-just-pretending-to-be-crazy old wizard?

Lord Voldemort's body had been found burned to a crisp, there couldn't really be such things as souls. How could Lord Voldemort still be alive? How did Dumbledore *know* that he was alive?

And if there wasn't a Dark Lord, Harry couldn't defeat him, and he would be trapped in Hogwarts forever.

...maybe he would be legally allowed to escape after he graduated his seventh year, six years and four months and three weeks from now. It wasn't *that* long as lengths of time went, it only *seemed* like long enough for protons to decay.

Only it wasn't *just* that.

It wasn't *just* Harry's freedom that was at stake.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts, the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, was quietly sounding the alarm.

A false alarm.

A false alarm which Harry had triggered.

You know, said the part of him that refined his skills, didn't you sort of ponder, once, how every different profession has a different way to be excellent, how an excellent teacher isn't like an excellent plumber; but they all have in common certain methods of not being stupid; and that one of the most important such techniques is to face up to your little mistakes before they turn into BIG mistakes?

...although this already seemed to qualify as a BIG mistake, actually...

The point being, said his inner monitor, it's getting worse literally by the minute. The way spies turn people is, they get them to commit a little sin, and then

they use the little sin to blackmail them into a bigger sin, and then they use THAT sin to make them do even bigger things and then the blackmailer owns their soul.

Didn't you once think about how the person being blackmailed, if they could foresee the whole path, would just decide to take the punch on the first step, take the hit of exposing that first sin? Didn't you decide that you would do that, if anyone ever tried to blackmail you into doing something major in order to conceal something little? Do you see the similarity here, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres?

Only it wasn't little, it already wasn't little, there would be a lot of very powerful people extremely angry at Harry, not just for the false alarm but for freeing Bellatrix from Azkaban, if the Dark Lord *did* exist and did come after him later, that war might already be lost—

You don't think they'll be impressed by your honesty and rationality and foresight in stopping this before it snowballs even further?

Harry did *not*, in fact, think this; and after a moment's reflection, whichever part of himself he was talking to, had to agree that this was absurdly optimistic.

His wandering feet took him near an open window, and Harry went over, and leaned his arms on the ledge, and stared down at the grounds of Hogwarts from high above.

Brown that was barren trees, yellow that was dead grass, ice-colored ice that was frozen creeks and frozen streams... whichever school official had dubbed it 'The Forbidden Forest' really hadn't understood marketing, the name just made you want to go there even more. The sun was sinking in the sky, for Harry had been thinking for some hours now, thinking mostly the same thoughts over and over, but with key differences each time, like his thoughts were not going in circles, but climbing a spiral, or descending it.

He still couldn't believe that he'd gone through the *entire* thing with Azkaban—he'd switched off his Patronus before it took all his life, he'd stunned an Auror, he'd figured out how to hide Bella from the Dementors, he'd faced down twelve Dementors and scared them away, he'd invented the rocket-assisted broomstick, and ridden it—he'd gone through the *entire* thing without ever *once* rallying himself by thinking, *I have to do this... because... I promised Hermione I'd come back from lunch!* It felt like an irrevocably missed opportunity; like, having done it wrong *that* time, he would

never be able to get it *right* no matter what sort of challenge he faced next time, or what promise he made. Because then he would just be doing it awkwardly and deliberately to make up for having missed it the *first* time around, instead of making the heroic declarations he could've made if he'd remembered his promise to Hermione. Like that one wrong turn was irrevocable, you only got one chance, had to do it right on the first try...

He should've remembered that promise to Hermione *before* going to Azkaban.

Why had he decided to do that, again?

My working hypothesis is that you're stupid, said Hufflepuff.

That is not a useful fault analysis, thought Harry.

If you want a little more detail, said Hufflepuff, *the Defense Professor of Hogwarts was all like 'Let's get Bellatrix Black out of Azkaban!' and you were like 'Okay!'*

Hold on, THAT'S not fair—

Hey, said Hufflepuff, *notice how, once you're all the way up here, and the individual trees sort of blur together, you can actually see the shape of the forest?*

Why had he done it...?

Not because of any cost-benefit calculation, that was for sure. He'd been too embarrassed to pull out a sheet of paper and start calculating expected utilities, he'd worried that Professor Quirrell would stop respecting him if he said no or even hesitated too much to help a maiden in distress.

He'd thought, somewhere deep inside him, that if your mysterious teacher offered you the first mission, the first chance, the call to adventure, and you said *no*, then your mysterious teacher walked away from you in disgust, and you never got another chance to be a hero...

...yeah, that had been it. In retrospect, that had been it. He'd gone and started thinking his life had a plot and here was a plot twist, as opposed to, oh, say, here was a proposal to *break Bellatrix Black out of Azkaban*. That had been the true and original reason for the decision in the split second where it had been made, his brain perceptually recognizing the narrative where he said 'no' as dissonant. And when you thought about it, that wasn't a rational way to make decisions. Professor Quirrell's ulterior

motive to obtain the last remains of Slytherin's lost lore, before Bellatrix died and it was irrevocably forgotten, seemed impressively sane by comparison; a benefit commensurate with what had appeared at the time as a small risk.

It didn't seem fair, it didn't seem *fair*, that *this* was what happened if he lost his grip on his rationality for just a tiny fraction of a second, the tiny fraction of a second required for his brain to decide to be more comfortable with 'yes' arguments than 'no' arguments during the discussion that had followed.

From high above, far enough above that the individual trees blurred together, Harry stared out at the forest.

Harry *didn't* want to confess and ruin his reputation forever and get everyone angry at him and maybe end up killed by the Dark Lord later. He'd rather be trapped in Hogwarts for six years than face that. That was how he felt. And so it was in fact helpful, a relief, to be able to cling to a single decisive factor, which was that if Harry confessed, Professor Quirrell would go to Azkaban and die there.

(A catch, a break, a stutter in Harry's breathing.)

If you phrased it *that* way... why, you could even pretend to be a hero, instead of a coward.

Harry lifted his eyes from the Forbidden Forest, looked up at the clear blue forbidden sky.

Stared out the glass panes at the big bright burning thing, the fluffy things, the mysterious endless blue in which they were embedded, that strange new unknown place.

It... actually did help, it helped quite a lot, to think that his own troubles were nothing compared to being in Azkaban. That there were people in the world who were *really* in trouble and Harry Potter was not one of them.

What was he going to do about Azkaban?

What was he going to do about magical Britain?

...which side was he on, now?

In the bright light of day, everything that Albus Dumbledore had said certainly *sounded* a lot wiser than Professor Quirrell. Better and brighter, more moral, more *convenient*, wouldn't it be nice if it were true. And the

thing to remember was that Dumbledore believed things *because* they sounded nice, but Professor Quirrell was the one who was *sane*.

(Again the catch in his breathing, it happened each time he thought of Professor Quirrell.)

But just because something sounded nice, didn't make it *wrong*, either.

And if the Defense Professor *did* have a flaw in his sanity, it was that his outlook on life was *too negative*.

Really? inquired the part of Harry that had read eighteen million experimental results about people being too optimistic and overconfident. *Professor Quirrell is too pessimistic? So pessimistic that his expectations routinely undershoot reality? Stuff him and put him in a museum, he's unique. Which one of you two planned the perfect crime, and then put in all the error margin and fallbacks that ended up saving your butt, just in case the perfect crime went wrong? Hint hint, his name wasn't Harry Potter.*

But "pessimistic" wasn't the correct word to describe Professor Quirrell's problem—if a problem it truly was, and not the superior wisdom of experience. But to Harry it looked like Professor Quirrell was constantly interpreting everything in the worst possible light. If you handed Professor Quirrell a glass that was 90% full, he'd tell you that the 10% empty part proved that no one *really* cared about water.

That was a very good analogy, now that Harry thought about it. Not all of magical Britain was like Azkaban, that glass was well over half full...

Harry stared up at the bright blue sky.

...although, *following* the analogy, if Azkaban existed, then maybe it *did* prove that the 90% good part was there for other reasons, people trying to *make a show of kindness* as Professor Quirrell had put it. For if they were truly kind they would not have made Azkaban, they would storm the fortress to tear it down... wouldn't they?

Harry stared up at the bright blue sky. If you wanted to be a rationalist you had to read an awful lot of papers on flaws in human nature, and some of those flaws were innocent logical failures, and some of them looked a lot darker.

Harry stared up at the bright blue sky, and thought of the Milgram experiment.

Stanley Milgram had done it to investigate the causes of World War II, to try to understand why the citizens of Germany had obeyed Hitler.

So he had designed an experiment to investigate *obedience*, to see if Germans were, for some reason, more liable to obey harmful orders from authority figures.

First he'd run a pilot version of his experiment on American subjects, as a control.

And afterward he hadn't bothered trying it in Germany.

Experimental apparatus: A series of 30 switches set in a horizontal line, with labels starting at '15 volts' and going up to '450 volts', with labels for each group of four switches. The first group of four labeled 'Slight Shock', the sixth group labeled 'Extreme Intensity Shock', the seventh group labeled 'Danger: Severe Shock', and the two last switches left over labeled just 'XXX'.

And an actor, a confederate of the experimenter, who had appeared to the true subjects to be someone just like them: someone who had answered the same ad for participants in an experiment on learning, and who had lost a (rigged) lottery and been strapped into a chair, along with the electrodes. The true experimental subjects had been given a slight shock from the electrodes, just so that they could see that it worked.

The true subject had been told that the experiment was on the effects of punishment on learning and memory, and that part of the test was to see if it made a difference what sort of person administered the punishment; and that the person strapped to the chair would try to memorize sets of word pairs, and that each time the 'learner' got one wrong, the 'teacher' was to administer a successively stronger shock.

At the 300-volt level, the actor would stop trying to call out answers and begin kicking at the wall, after which the experimenter would instruct the subjects to treat non-answers as wrong answers and continue.

At the 315-volt level the pounding on the wall would be repeated.

After that nothing would be heard.

If the subject objected or refused to press a switch, the experimenter, maintaining an impassive demeanor and dressed in a gray lab coat, would say 'Please continue', then 'The experiment requires that you continue', then 'It is absolutely essential that you continue', then 'You have

no other choice, you *must* go on'. If the fourth prod still didn't work, the experiment halted there.

Before running the experiment, Milgram had described the experimental setup, and then asked fourteen psychology seniors what percentage of subjects *they* thought would go all the way up to the 450-volt level, what percentage of subjects would press the last of the two switches marked XXX, after the victim had stopped responding.

The most pessimistic answer had been 3%.

The actual number had been 26 out of 40.

The subjects had sweated, groaned, stuttered, laughed nervously, bitten their lips, dug their fingernails into their flesh. But at the experimenter's prompting, they had, most of them, gone on administering what they believed to be painful, dangerous, possibly lethal electrical shocks. All the way to the end.

Harry could hear Professor Quirrell laughing, in his mind; the Defense Professor's voice saying something along the lines of: *Why, Mr. Potter, even I had not been so cynical; I knew men would betray their most cherished principles for money and power, but I did not realize that a stern look also sufficed.*

It was dangerous, to try and guess at evolutionary psychology if you weren't a professional evolutionary psychologist; but when Harry had read about the Milgram experiment, the thought had occurred to him that situations like this had probably arisen many times in the ancestral environment, and that most potential ancestors who'd tried to disobey Authority were dead. Or that they had, at least, done less well for themselves than the obedient. People *thought* themselves good and moral, but when push came to shove, some switch flipped in their brain, and it was suddenly a lot harder to heroically defy Authority than they thought. Even if you could do it, it wouldn't be easy, it wouldn't be some effortless display of heroism. You would tremble, your voice would break, you would be afraid; would you be able to defy Authority even then?

Harry blinked, then; because his brain had just made the connection between Milgram's experiment and what Hermione had done on her first day of Defense class, she'd refused to shoot a fellow student, even when Authority had told her that she must, she had trembled and been afraid

but she had still refused. Harry had seen that happen right in front of his own eyes and he still hadn't made the connection until now...

Harry stared down at the reddening horizon, the Sun was sinking lower, the sky fading, darkening, even if most of it was still blue, soon it would turn to night. The gold and red colors of Sun and sunset reminded him of Fawkes; and Harry wondered, for a moment, if it must be a sad thing to be a phoenix, and call and cry and scream without being heeded.

But Fawkes would never give up, as many times as he died he would always be reborn, for Fawkes was a being of light and fire, and despairing over Azkaban belonged to the darkness just as much as did Azkaban itself.

If you were given a glass half-empty and half-full, then that was the way reality was, that was the truth and it was so; but you still had a choice of how to *feel* about it, whether you would despair over the empty half or rejoice in the water that was there.

Milgram had tried certain other variations on his test.

In the eighteenth experiment, the experimental subject had only needed to call out the test words to the victim strapped into the chair, and record the answers, while someone *else* pressed the switches. It was the same apparent suffering, the same frantic pounding followed by silence; but it wasn't *you* pressing the switch. *You* just watched it happen, and read the questions to the person being tortured.

37 of 40 subjects had continued their participation in that experiment to the end, the 450-volt end marked 'XXX'.

And if you were Professor Quirrell, you might have decided to feel cynical about that.

But 3 out of 40 subjects had *refused* to participate all the way to the end. The Hermiones.

They did exist, in the world, the people who wouldn't fire a Simple Strike Hex at a fellow student even if the Defense Professor ordered them to do it. The ones who had sheltered Gypsies and Jews and homosexuals in their attics during the Holocaust, and sometimes lost their lives for it.

And were those people from some other species than humanity? Did they have some extra gear in their heads, some additional chunk of neural circuitry, which lesser mortals did not possess? But that was not likely, given the logic of sexual reproduction which said that the genes for com-

plex machinery would be scrambled beyond repair, if they were not universal.

Whatever parts Hermione was made from, everyone had those same parts inside them somewhere...

...well, that was a nice thought but it wasn't *strictly* true, there was such a thing as literal brain damage, people could *lose* genes and the complex machine could stop working, there were sociopaths and psychopaths, people who lacked the gear to care. Maybe Lord Voldemort had been born like that, or maybe he had known good and yet still chosen evil; at this point it didn't matter in the slightest. But a *supermajority* of the population ought to be capable of learning to do what Hermione and Holocaust resisters did.

The people who had been run through the Milgram experiment, who had trembled and sweated and nervously laughed as they went all the way to pressing the switches marked 'XXX', many of them had written to thank Milgram, afterward, for what they had learned about themselves. That, too, was part of the story, the legend of that legendary experiment.

The Sun had almost sunk below the horizon now, a last golden tip peeking above the faraway tops of trees.

Harry looked at it, that tip of Sun, his glasses were supposed to be proof against UV so he ought to be able to look directly at it without damaging his eyes.

Harry stared directly at it, that tiny fraction of the Light that was not obscured and blocked and hidden, even if it was only 3 parts out of 40, the other 37 parts were there somewhere. The 7.5% of the glass that was full, which proved that people really did care about water, even if that force of caring within themselves was too often defeated. If people truly didn't care, the glass would have been truly empty. If everyone had been like You-Know-Who inside, secretly cleverly selfish, there would have been no resisters to the Holocaust at all.

Harry looked at the sunset, on the second day of the rest of his life, and knew that he had switched sides.

Because he couldn't believe in it any more, he couldn't really, not after going to Azkaban. He couldn't do what 37 out of 40 people would vote for him to do. Everyone might have inside them what it took to be Her-

mione, and someday they might learn; but *someday* wasn't *now*, not here, not today, not in the real world. If you were on the side of 3 out of 40 people then you weren't a political majority, and Professor Quirrell had been right, Harry would not bow his head in submission when that happened.

There was a sort of awful appropriateness to it. You shouldn't go to Azkaban and come back having not changed your mind about anything important.

So is Professor Quirrell right, then? asked Slytherin. *Leaving out whether he's good or evil, is he right? Are you, to them, whether they know it or not, their next Lord? We'll just leave out the Dark part, that's him being cynical again. But is it your intention now to rule? I've got to say, that makes even me nervous.*

Do you think you can be trusted with power? said Gryffindor. *Isn't there some sort of rule that people who want power shouldn't have it? Maybe we should make Hermione the ruler instead.*

Do you think you're fit to run a society and not have it collapse into total chaos inside of three weeks flat? said Hufflepuff. *Imagine how loudly Mum would scream if she'd heard you'd been elected Prime Minister, now ask yourself, are you sure she's wrong about that?*

Actually, said Ravenclaw, *I have to point out that all this political stuff sounds overwhelmingly boring. How about if we leave all the electioneering to Draco and stick to science? It's what we're actually good at, and that's been known to improve the human condition too, y'know.*

Slow down, thought Harry at his components, *we don't have to decide everything right now. We're allowed to ponder the problem as fully as possible before coming to a solution.*

The last part of the Sun sank below the horizon.

It was strange, this feeling of not quite knowing who you were, which side you were on, of having *not already made up your mind* about something as major as that, there was an unfamiliar sensation of freedom in it...

And that reminded him of what Professor Quirrell had said to his last question, which reminded him of Professor Quirrell, which made it hard once more to breathe, started that burning sensation in Harry's throat, sent his thoughts around that loop of the climbing spiral once again.

Why was he so sad, now, whenever he thought of Professor Quirrell? Harry was used to knowing himself, and he didn't know why he felt so

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sad...

It felt like he'd lost Professor Quirrell forever, lost him in Azkaban, that was how it felt. As surely as if the Defense Professor had been eaten by Dementors, consumed in the empty voids.

Lost him! Why did I lose him? Because he said Avada Kedavra and there was in fact a perfectly good reason even though I didn't see it for a couple of hours? Why can't things go back to the way they were?

But then it hadn't *been* the Avada Kedavra. That might have played a part in irreversibly collapsing a structure of rationalizations and flinches and carefully not thinking about certain things. But it hadn't been the Avada Kedavra, that hadn't been the disturbing thing that Harry had seen.

What did I see...?

Harry looked at the fading sky.

He'd seen Professor Quirrell turn into a hardened criminal while facing the Auror, and the apparent change of personalities had been effortless, and complete.

Another woman had known the Defense Professor as 'Jeremy Jaffe'.

How many different people are you, anyway?

I cannot say that I bothered keeping count.

You couldn't help but wonder...

...whether 'Professor Quirrell' was just one more name on the list, just one more person that had been *turned into*, made up in the service of some unguessable goal.

Harry would always be wondering now, every time he talked to Professor Quirrell, if it was a mask, and what motive was behind that mask. With every dry smile, Harry would be trying to see what was pulling the levers on the lips.

Is that how other people will start thinking of me, if I get too Slytherin? If I pull off too many plots, will I never be able to smile at anyone again, without them wondering what I really mean by it?

Maybe there was some way to restore a trust in surface appearances and make a normal human relationship possible again, but Harry couldn't think of what it might be.

That was how Harry had lost Professor Quirrell, not the person, but the... connection...

Why did that hurt so much?

Why did it feel so lonely, now?

Surely there were other people, maybe better people, to trust and befriend? Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick, Hermione, Draco, not to mention Mum and Dad, it wasn't like Harry was *alone*...

Only...

A choking sensation grew in Harry's throat as he understood.

Only Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick, Hermione, Draco, they all of them sometimes knew things that Harry didn't, but...

They did not excel above Harry *within* his own sphere of power; such genius as they possessed was not like his genius, and his genius was not like theirs; he might look upon them as peers, but not look *up* to them as his *superiors*.

None of them had been, none of them could ever be...

Harry's mentor...

That was who Professor Quirrell had been.

That was who Harry had lost.

And the manner in which he had lost his first mentor might or might not allow Harry to ever get him back. Maybe someday he would know all Professor Quirrell's hidden purposes and the doubts between them would go away; but even if that seemed possible, it didn't seem very probable.

There was a gust of wind, outside Hogwarts, it bent the empty trees, rippled the lake whose heart was still unfrozen, made a whispering sound as it slid past the window that looked upon the half-twilit world, and Harry's thoughts wandered outward for a time.

Then returned inward again, to the next step of the spiral.

Why am I different from the other children my age?

If Professor Quirrell's answer to that had been an evasion, then it was a very well-calculated one. Deep enough and complex enough, sufficiently full of suggestions of hidden meaning, to serve as a trap for a Ravenclaw who couldn't be diverted by less. Or maybe Professor Quirrell

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had meant his answer honestly. Who knew what motive might have pulled that lever on those lips?

I will say this much, Mr. Potter: You are already an Occlumens, and I think you will become a perfect Occlumens before long. Identity does not mean, to such as us, what it means to other people. Anyone we can imagine, we can be; and the true difference about you, Mr. Potter, is that you have an unusually good imagination. A playwright must contain his characters, he must be larger than them in order to enact them within his mind. To an actor or spy or politician, the limit of his own diameter is the limit of who he can pretend to be, the limit of which face he may wear as a mask. But for such as you and I, anyone we can imagine, we can be, in reality and not pretense. While you imagined yourself a child, Mr. Potter, you were a child. Yet there are other existences you could support, larger existences, if you wished. Why are you so free, and so great in your circumference, when other children your age are small and constrained? Why can you imagine and become selves more adult than a mere child of a playwright should be able to compose? That I do not know, and I must not say what I guess. But what you have, Mr. Potter, is freedom.

If that was a snow job it was one heck of a distracting one.

And the still more worrisome thought was that Professor Quirrell hadn't *realized* how disturbed Harry would be, how *wrong* that speech would sound to him, how much damage it would do to his trust in Professor Quirrell.

There ought to always be one real person who you *truly* were, at the center of everything...

Harry stared out at the falling night, the gathering darkness.
...right?

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It was almost bedtime when Hermione heard the scattered intakes of breath and looked up from her copy of *Beauxbatons: A History* to see the missing boy, the boy who had been misplaced at lunch that Sunday, whose dinner nonappearance had been accompanied by rumors—and she hadn't believed them because they were *completely ridiculous*, but she'd

felt a little queasiness inside—that he’d withdrawn from Hogwarts in order to hunt down Bellatrix Black.

“*Harry!*” she shrieked, she didn’t even realize that she was talking directly to him for the first time in a week, or notice how some other students started at the sound of her yelling all the way across the Ravenclaw common room.

Harry’s eyes had already lifted to her, he was already walking toward her, so she stopped halfway out of her chair—

A few moments later, Harry was seated across from her, and he was putting away his wand after casting a Quieting barrier around them.

(And an awful lot of Ravenclaws were trying not to look like they were watching.)

“Hey,” Harry said. His voice wavered. “I missed you. You’re... going to talk to me again, now?”

Hermione nodded, she just nodded, she couldn’t think of what to say. She’d missed Harry too, but she was realizing, with a guilty sort of feeling, that it might’ve been a lot worse for him. She had other friends, Harry... it didn’t feel *fair*, sometimes, that Harry talked to only her like that, so that she *had* to talk to him; but Harry had a look about him like unfair things had been happening to *him*, too.

“What’s been going on?” she said. “There’s all sorts of rumors. There were people saying you’d run off to fight Bellatrix Black, there were people saying you’d run off to *join* Bellatrix Black—” and *those* rumors had said that Hermione had just made up the thing about the phoenix, and she’d yelled that the whole Ravenclaw common room had seen it, so then the next rumor had claimed she’d made up *that* part too, which was stupidity of such an inconceivable level that it left her *completely flabbergasted*.

“I can’t talk about it,” Harry said in a bare whisper. “Can’t talk about a lot of it. I wish I could tell you everything,” his voice wavered, “but I can’t... I guess, if it helps or anything, I’m not going to lunch with Professor Quirrell any more...”

Harry put his hands over his face, then, covering his eyes.

Hermione felt the queasy feeling all through her stomach.

“Are you crying?” said Hermione.

"Yeah," said Harry, his voice sounding a little breathy. "I don't want anyone else to see."

There was a little silence. Hermione wanted to help but she didn't know what to do about a boy crying, and she didn't know what was happening; she felt like huge things were happening around her—no, around Harry—and if she knew what they were she would probably be scared, or alarmed, or something, but she didn't know anything.

"Did Professor Quirrell do something wrong?" she said at last.

"That's not why I can't go to lunch with him any more," Harry said, still in that bare whisper with his hands pressed over his eyes. "That was the Headmaster's decision. But yeah, Professor Quirrell said some things to me that made me trust him less, I guess..." Harry's voice sounded very shaky. "I'm feeling kind of alone right now."

Hermione put her hand on her cheek where Fawkes had touched her yesterday. She'd kept thinking about that touch, over and over, maybe because she *wanted* it to be important, to mean something to her...

"Is there any way I can help?" she said.

"I want to do something normal," Harry said from behind his hands. "Something very normal for first-year Hogwarts students. Something eleven-year-olds and twelve-year-olds like us are *supposed* to do. Like play a game of Exploding Snap or something... I don't suppose you have the cards or know the rules or anything like that?"

"Um... I *don't* know the rules, actually..." said Hermione. "I know they *explode*."

"I don't suppose Gobstones?" said Harry.

"Don't know the rules and they *spit* at you. Those are *boy* games, Harry!"

There was a pause. Harry ground his hands against his face to wipe it, and then took his hands away; and then he was looking at her, looking a little helpless. "Well," Harry said, "what *do* wizards and witches our age do, when they play, you know, the kind of pointless silly games we're *supposed* to play at this age?"

"Hopscotch?" said Hermione. "Jump-rope? Unicorn attack? I don't know, I read books!"

Harry started laughing, and Hermione started giggling along with him even though she didn't know quite why, but it *was* funny.

"I guess that helped a little," said Harry. "Actually I think it helped more than playing Gobstones for an hour could've possibly helped, so thanks for being you. And no matter what, I'm *not* having anyone Obliviate everything I know about calculus. I'd sooner die."

"*What?*" said Hermione. "Why—why would you *ever* want to do *that*?"

Harry stood up from the table, and there was a rush of restored background noise as his rise broke the Quieting Charm. "I'm a tad sleepy so I'm going off to bed," Harry said, now his voice was ordinary and wry, "I've got some lost time to make up for, but I'll see you at breakfast, and then at Herbology, if that's all right. Not to mention it wouldn't be fair to dump all my depression on you. G'night, Hermione."

"Good night, Harry," she said, feeling very confused and alarmed. "Pleasant dreams."

Harry stumbled a little as she said that, and then he continued on toward the stairs that led to the first-year-boys' dorms.

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Harry turned the Quieting Charm all the way up, on the head of his bed-board, so that he wouldn't wake anyone else up if he screamed.

Set his alarm to wake him up for breakfast (if he wasn't up already by that hour, if indeed he slept at all).

Got into bed, laid down—

—felt the lump beneath his pillow.

Harry stared up at the canopy above his bed.

Hissed under his breath, "Oh, you've got to be kidding me..."

It took a few seconds before Harry could muster the heart to sit up in bed, pull the blanket over himself and his pillow to obscure the deed from the other boys, cast a low-intensity *Lumos* and see what was under his pillow.

There was a parchment, and a deck of playing cards.

The parchment read,

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A little bird told me that Dumbledore has shut the door of your cage.

I must admit, on this occasion, that Dumbledore may have a point. Bellatrix Black is loosed upon the world once more, and that is not good news for any good person. If I stood in Dumbledore's place, I might well do the same.

But just in case... The Salem Witches' Institute in America accepts boys as well, despite the name. They are good people and would protect you even from Dumbledore, if you needed it. Britain holds that you need Dumbledore's permission to emigrate to magical America, but magical America disagrees. So in the final extremity, get outside the wards of Hogwarts and tear in half the King of Hearts from this deck of cards.

That you should resort to it only in the final extremity goes without saying.

Be well, Harry Potter.

—Santa Claus

Harry stared down at the pack of cards.

It *couldn't* take him anywhere else, not right now, portkeys didn't work here.

But he still felt unnerved about the prospect of picking it up, even to hide it inside his trunk...

Well, he'd *already* picked up the parchment, which could just as easily have been enchanted with a trap, if a trap was involved.

But still.

"Wingardium Leviosa," Harry whispered, and Hovered the packet of cards to lie next to where his alarm clock rested in a pocket of the headboard. He'd deal with it tomorrow.

And then Harry lay back in bed, and closed his eyes, to dream without any phoenix to protect him, and pay his reckoning.

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He came awake with a gasp of horror, not a scream, he'd yet to scream this night, but his blanket was all tangled around him from where his sleeping

form had jerked as he dreamed of running, trying to get away from the gaps in space that were pursuing him through a corridor of metal lit by dim gaslight, an endlessly long corridor of metal lit by dim gaslight, and he hadn't *known*, in the dream, that touching those voids meant he would die horribly and leave his still-breathing body empty behind him, all he'd known was that he had to run and run and run from the wounds in the world sliding after him—

Harry started to cry again, it wasn't for the horror of the chase, it was that he'd run away while someone behind him was screaming for help, screaming for him to come back and save her, help her, she was being eaten, she was going to die, and in the dream Harry had run away instead of helping her.

"DON'T GO!" The voice came in a scream from behind the metal door. "No, no, no, don't go, don't take it away, don't don't don't—"

Why had Fawkes ever rested on his shoulder? He'd walked away. Fawkes should hate him.

Fawkes should hate Dumbledore. *He'd* walked away.

Fawkes should hate everyone—

The boy wasn't awake, wasn't dreaming, his thoughts were jumbled and confused in the shadowlands that bordered sleep and waking, unprotected by the safety rails that his aware mind imposed on itself, the careful rules and censors. In that shadowland his brain had woken up enough to think, but something else was too sleepy to act; his thoughts ran free and wild, unconstrained by his self-concept, his waking self's ideals of what he shouldn't think. That was the freedom of his brain's dreams, as his self-concept slept. Free to repeat, over and over, Harry's new worst nightmare:

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

A rage grew in him alongside the self-loathing, a terrible hot wrath / icy cold hatred, for the world which had done that to her / for himself, and in his half-awake state Harry fantasized escapes, fantasized ways out of the moral dilemma, he imagined himself hovering above the vast triangular horror of Azkaban, and whispering an incantation unlike any syllables

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THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, AFTERMATHS

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that had ever been heard before on Earth, whispers that echoed all the way across the sky and were heard on the other side of the world, and there was a blast of silver Patronus fire like a nuclear explosion that tore apart all the Dementors in an instant and ripped apart the metal walls of Azkaban, shattered the long corridors and all the dim orange lights, and then a moment later his brain remembered that there were people in there, and rewrote the half-dream fantasy to show all the prisoners laughing as they flew away in flocks from the burning wreck of Azkaban, the silver light restoring the flesh to their limbs as they flew, and Harry started crying harder into his pillow, because he couldn't do it, because he wasn't God—

He'd sworn upon his life and magic and his art as a rationalist, he'd sworn by all he held sacred and all his happy memories, he'd given his oath so now he had to do something, *had to do something, had to DO SOMETHING—*

Maybe it was pointless.

Maybe trying to follow rules was pointless.

Maybe you just burned down Azkaban however.

And in fact he'd sworn he'd do it, so now that was what he had to do.

He'd just do whatever it took to get rid of Azkaban, that was all. If that meant ruling Britain, fine, if that meant finding a spell to whisper that would echo all across the sky, whatever, the important thing was to destroy Azkaban.

That was the side he was on, that was who he was, so there, it was done.

His waking mind would have demanded a lot more details before accepting that as an answer, but in his half-dreaming state it felt like enough of a resolution to let his tired mind fall truly asleep again, and dream the next nightmare.

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FINAL AFTERMATH:

She came awake with a gasp of horror, a disruption of her breathing that left her feeling deprived of air and yet her lungs didn't move, she woke up with an unvoiced scream on her lips and no words, no words came forth, for she could not understand what she had seen, *she could not understand what she had seen*, it was too large for her to encompass and still taking shape, she could not put words to that formless shape and so she could not discharge it, could not discharge it and become innocent and unknowing once more.

"What time is it?" she whispered.

Her golden jeweled alarm clock, the beautiful and magical and expensive alarm clock that the Headmaster had given her as a gift upon her employment at Hogwarts, whispered back, "Around two in the morning. Go back to sleep."

Her sheets were soaked in sweat, her nightclothes soaked in sweat, she took her wand from beside the pillow and cleaned herself up before she tried to go back to sleep, she tried to go back to sleep and eventually succeeded.

Sybill Trelawney went back to sleep.

This book was formatted by fans of the story, and built on 2016-12-16 at 10:11. The text was set in Huerta Tipografica's Alegría type family. Chapter headings were set in Lumos, inspired by the display font used in the US editions of the Harry Potter books, drawn by Sarah McFalls. The book was typeset using \LaTeX . The artwork for the cover was created with the GIMP. The source code for this PDF can be found at <https://github.com/rjl20/hpmor/>.