# HARRY JAMES POTTER-EVANS-VERRES AND THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

#### Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality

Ι

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres and the Letters from Hogwarts

II

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres and the Shadows of Death

III

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres and the Philosopher's Stone

### HARRY JAMES POTTER-EVANS-VERRES

#### AND THE

## PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

Book Three of Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality

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#### Based on the characters of

## J. K. ROWLING

and her books:

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix
Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

## CONTENTS

SEVENTY-EIGHT
Taboo Tradeoffs, Prelude: Cheating — 1

SEVENTY-NINE
Taboo Tradeoffs, Part I — 43

EIGHTY

Taboo Tradeoffs, Part II: The Horns Effect — 65

EIGHTY-ONE
Taboo Tradeoffs, Part III — 81

EIGHTY-TWO Taboo Tradeoffs, Final — 97

EIGHTY-THREE
Taboo Tradeoffs, Aftermath, Part I — 109

EIGHTY-FOUR
Taboo Tradeoffs, Aftermath, Part II — 113

EIGHTY-FIVE
Taboo Tradeoffs, Aftermath, Part III: Distance — 141

EIGHTY-SIX Multiple Hypothesis Testing — 159

EIGHTY-SEVEN
Hedonic Awareness — 213

EIGHTY-EIGHT Time Pressure, Part I — 229

EIGHTY-NINE Time Pressure, Part II — 247 NINETY

Roles, Part I — 255

NINETY-ONE

Roles, Part II — 271

NINETY-TWO

Roles, Part III — 283

NINETY-THREE

Roles, Part IV — 289

NINETY-FOUR

Roles, Part V — 299

NINETY-FIVE

Roles, Part VI — 309

NINETY-SIX

Roles, Part VII — 321

NINETY-SEVEN

Roles, Part VIII - 331

NINETY-EIGHT

Roles, Final — 349

NINETY-NINE

Roles, Aftermath — 359

ONE HUNDRED

Precautionary Measures, Part I — 361

ONE HUNDRED AND ONE

Precautionary Measures, Part II — 377

ONE HUNDRED AND TWO

Caring — 385

ONE HUNDRED AND THREE

Tests — 397

ONE HUNDRED AND FOUR

The Truth, Part I: Riddles and Answers — 405

ONE HUNDRED AND FIVE The Truth, Part II — 433

ONE HUNDRED AND SIX
The Truth, Part III — 443

ONE HUNDRED AND SEVEN
The Truth, Part IV — 449

ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHT
The Truth, Part V: Answers and Riddles — 461

ONE HUNDRED AND NINE Reflections, Part I — 497

ONE HUNDRED AND TEN Reflections, Part II — 511

ONE HUNDRED AND ELEVEN Failure, Part I — 517

ONE HUNDRED AND TWELVE Failure, Part II — 539

ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTEEN
Final Exam — 543

ONE HUNDRED AND FOURTEEN Shut Up and Do The Impossible, Part I — 555

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTEEN

Shut Up and Do The Impossible, Part II — 561

ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTEEN

Aftermath: Something to Protect, Part 0 — 571

ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTEEN
Something to Protect: Minerva McGonagall — 577

ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTEEN
Something to Protect: Professor Quirrell — 583

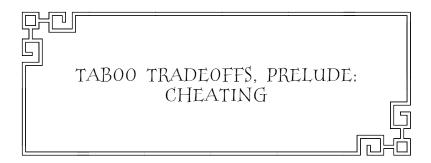
ONE HUNDRED AND NINETEEN
Something to Protect: Albus Dumbledore — 587

## ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY Something to Protect: Draco Malfoy — 613

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-ONE Something to Protect: Severus Snape — 621

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-TWO
Something to Protect: Hermione Granger — 625

#### CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT



SATURDAY, APRIL 4TH, 1992.

Tr. and Mrs. Davis looked rather nervous, as they sat in a certain special section of the Hogwarts Quidditch stands — though today the cushioned benches did not look upon flying broomsticks, but rather viewed a gigantic square of something like parchment; a great white blankness soon to flicker with windows into grass and soldiers. For now it showed only the reflected dull grey color of the surrounding overcast skies. (Looking rather stormy, though the weather-wizards had promised that the rain wouldn't break before nightfall.)

Ordinarily it was the ancient tradition of Hogwarts that mere parents were to Stay Out — for much the same reason that impatient children are told to get out of the kitchen and not meddle in the cook's affairs. The only reason for a parent-teacher conference was if a teacher felt that a parent wasn't shaping up properly. It took an exceptional circumstance to make the Hogwarts administration feel that it had to justify itself to *you*. On any given occasion, generally speaking, the Hogwarts administration was backed up by eight hundred years of distinguished history and you were not.

Thus it had been with some trepidation that Mr. and Mrs. Davis had insisted on an audience with Deputy Headmistress McGonagall. It was hard to muster

a proper sense of indignation when you were confronting the same dignified witch who, twelve years and four months earlier, had given both of you two weeks' detention after catching you in the act of conceiving Tracey.

On the other hand, Mr. and Mrs. Davis's courage had been helped by angrily waving about a copy of *The Quibbler* whose headline showed, in bright bold text for all the world to see:

# Pacts With Potter? Bones, Davis, Granger In Love Rectangle Of Fear

And so Mr. and Mrs. Davis had argued their way into the Faculty Box of the Hogwarts Quidditch stands, where they were now ensconced with an excellent view of Professor Quirrell's enchanted screens, so that the two of them could see for themselves "Just what the Fiddly-Snocks has been going on in this school, if you'll pardon the expression, Deputy Headmistress McGonagall!"

Seated to the left of Mr. Davis was another concerned parent, a white-haired man in elegant black robes of unmatchable quality, one Lucius Malfoy, political leader of the strongest faction of the Wizengamot.

To the left of Lord Malfoy, a sneeringly aristocratic man with a scarred face who had been introduced to them as Lord Jugson.

Then an elderly but sharp-eyed fellow named Charles Nott, rumored to be nearly as wealthy as Lord Malfoy, seated on Lord Jugson's left.

On the right of Mrs. Davis, one would find the comely Lady and yet handsomer Lord of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Greengrass. Young they were as wizards counted age, garbed in grey silken robes set with tiny dark emeralds embroidered into the shape of grass blades. The Lady Greengrass was considered a key swing vote on the Wizengamot, her own mother having retired from the body with surprising speed. Her charming husband, though his family was not noble or wealthy of itself, had taken a seat on the Hogwarts Board of Governors.

To their right, a square-jawed and incredibly tough-looking old witch, who had shaken hands with Mr. and Mrs. Davis without the slightest hint of condescension. This was Amelia Bones, Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

To Amelia's right was a seniorish woman who had set the fashion scene of

magical Britain on its ear by integrating a live vulture into her hat, one Augusta Longbottom. Though she was not addressed as Lady, Madam Longbottom would exercise the full rights of the Longbottom family for so long as their last scion had yet to attain his majority, and she was considered a prominent figure in a minority faction of the Wizengamot.

At the side of Madam Longbottom was seated none other than Chief Warlock Supreme Mugwump Headmaster Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, legendary defeater of Grindelwald, protector of Britain, rediscoverer of the fabled twelve uses of dragon's blood, the most powerful wizard in the world, etc.

And finally, on the far right, one would find the enigmatic Defense Professor of Hogwarts, Quirinus Quirrell, who was leaning back on the cushioned benches as though resting; seeming entirely and naturally at ease in the rarefied company of a voting quorum of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, which had dropped by on this fine Saturday to learn just what the Fiddly-Snocks had been going on at Hogwarts in general and with Draco Malfoy, Theodore Nott, Daphne Greengrass, Susan Bones, and Neville Longbottom in particular. The name of Harry Potter had also been much discussed.

Oh, and one mustn't forget Tracey Davis, of course. Director Bones's eyebrows had climbed in some interest upon hearing the young couple introduced as her parents. Lord Jugson had given them a brief, incredulous stare before dismissing them with a snort. Lucius Malfoy had greeted them politely, his smile containing a hint of grim amusement mixed with pity.

Mr. and Mrs. Davis, whose last vote on anything of significance had been touching their wands to the name of Minister Fudge, who had all of three hundred Galleons stored in their Gringotts vault, and who respectively worked at selling cauldrons in a Potions shop and enchanting Omnioculars, were pressed up tightly against each other, sitting rigidly erect upon their cushioned benches, and desperately wishing they'd worn nicer robes.

The sky above was a solid mass of cloud dispersed into darker and lighter greys, grim with the promise of future storms; though no lightning flickered as yet, nor distant rumbles of thunder echoed; and only a few threatening droplets had fallen.

To their designated starting place in a certain forest, the Sunshine Regiment marched, though it was really more like a slow walk; you wouldn't want to tire yourself out before the battle even started, and the breezes of April were annoyingly humid, though cool. Ahead of them, a yellow flame wandered slowly through the air, guiding them according to their pace.

Susan Bones kept throwing worried glances toward the Sunshine General as they marched through the greyly illuminated forest. Professor Snape's going after Hermione seemed to have really shaken her. Hermione had even missed her Sunshine Regiment Official Planning Meeting, which seemed understandable enough; but when Susan had offered her sympathy afterward, Hermione had stammered that she'd lost track of time, which wasn't at all a usual thing for her to say, and the girl had looked exhausted and frightened like she'd just spent three days locked in a bathroom stall with a Dementor. Even now, when all the Sunshine General's focus should've been on the coming battle, the Ravenclaw girl's gaze was constantly darting in all directions, as though she expected Dark Wizards to jump out of the bushes and sacrifice her.

"The ban on Muggle artifacts cuts down our options a lot," Anthony Goldstein was saying in the dour tones the boy used to denote deliberate pessimism. "I had the idea of trying to Transfigure nets to throw on people, but —"

"No good," said Ernie Macmillan. The Hufflepuff boy shook his head, looking even more serious than Anthony. "I mean, it's just like throwing a hex, they'd *dodge*."

Anthony nodded. "That's what I figured, too. Do you have any ideas, Seamus?"

The former Chaotic Lieutenant still looked a bit nervous and out-of-place, marching along with his new comrades in the Sunshine Regiment. "Sorry," said the newly minted Captain Finnigan. "I'm more the strategic master type."

"I'm the strategic master type," said Ron Weasley, sounding put-off.

"There are *three* armies," the Sunshine General said acerbically, "which means we fight *two* armies at once, which means we need more than one strategist, which means shut up, Ron!"

Ron gave their General a surprised and worried look. "Hey," the Gryffindor boy said in a calming tone, "you shouldn't let Snape get to you so much —"

"What do *you* think we ought to do, General?" Susan said very loudly and quickly. "I mean, we don't really have a plan at this point." Their official

planning session had failed *amazingly* with Hermione gone and both Ron and Anthony thinking they were in charge.

"Do we really need a plan?" the Sunshine General said, sounding a little distracted. "We've got you and me and Lavender and Parvati and Hannah and Daphne and Ron and Ernie and Anthony *and* Captain Finnigan."

"That —" began Anthony.

"Sounds like a pretty good strategy," Ron said with an approving nod. "We've got as many strong soldiers now as both other armies put together. Chaos's only got Potter and Longbottom and Nott left — well, and Zabini too, I suppose —"

"And Tracey," said Hermione.

Several people swallowed nervously.

"Oh, stop it," Susan said sharply. "She's just a battle-hardened member of S.P.H.E.W., that's all General Sunshine means."

"Still," Ernie said, turning to look seriously at Susan, "I think you'd better go with whatever group fights Chaos, Captain Bones. I know you can't use your double magical powers except when innocents are in danger, but I mean — just in case Miss Davis *does*, you know, go out of control and try to eat someone's soul —"

"I can handle her," Susan told him, keeping her voice reassuring. Admittedly, Susan hadn't been replaced by a Metamorphmagus at the moment, but then Tracey probably wasn't Polyjuiced Dumbledore or whoever.

Captain Finnigan intoned in a deep, sort-of-rumbling voice, "I find your lack of skepticism disturbing." He raised his hand with his thumb and forefinger almost touching, pointed at Ernie.

For some reason Anthony Goldstein seemed to be having a sudden choking fit. "What's that supposed to mean?" said Ernie.

"It's just something General Potter says sometimes," said Captain Finnigan. "Funny, when you first join the Chaos Legion it all seems crazy, and then after a couple of months you realize that actually everyone who *isn't* in the Chaos Legion is crazy —"

"I said," Ron said loudly, "it sounds like good strategy. We don't Transfigure anything, we don't tire ourselves out, we handle whatever they throw at us, and then we just overrun them."

"Okay," said Hermione. "Let's do that."

"But —" said Anthony, shooting a glare at Ron. "But General, Harry

Potter's got *sixteen* people left in his army. Dragon and us each have twenty-eight. Harry knows that, he knows he's got to come up with something incredible —"

"Like what?" demanded Hermione, sounding stressed. "If we don't know what he's planning, we might as well save our magic for doing massed *Finites*. Like we should've done *last* time!"

Susan touched Hermione gently on the shoulder. "General Granger?" said Susan. "I think you should take a break for a bit before the battle."

She'd been expecting Hermione to argue, but Hermione just nodded and then walked a little faster, pulling away from the Sunshine Regiment Official Officer Group, her eyes still watching the forest, and sometimes the sky.

Susan followed her. It wouldn't do, having it look like the Sunshine General was being ejected from her own Official Officer Group.

"Hermione?" Susan said softly, after they'd walked a bit away. "You've got to focus. Professor Quirrell's in charge here, not Snape, and he won't let anything bad happen to you or anyone."

"You're not helping," Hermione said, sounding shaky. "You're not helping at all, Captain Bones."

The two of them walked faster, circling around some of the other soldiers, inspecting the marching perimeter and glancing at the surrounding trees.

"Susan?" Hermione said in a small voice, when they'd gotten further away from all the others. "Do you think Daphne's right about Draco Malfoy plotting something?"

"Yes," Susan said at once, not even thinking about it. "You can tell, because his name's got the letters M-A-L-F-O and Y in it."

Hermione looked around, as if to make sure that nobody was watching, although of course that was a wonderful way to get other people to pay attention to you. "Could Malfoy have been behind what Snape did?"

"Snape could be behind Malfoy," Susan said thoughtfully, remembering dinner-table conversations she'd heard at Auntie's, "or Lucius Malfoy could be behind both of them." A slight chill went down Susan's spine as this last thought occurred to her. Suddenly, telling Hermione to just focus on the coming battle seemed a lot less reasonable. "Why, did you find some sort of clue about that?"

Hermione shook her head. "No," the Ravenclaw girl said, in a voice that sounded almost like she was about to cry. "I was — just thinking about it

myself — that's all."

In their designated place in a forest near Hogwarts, the Dragon General and the warriors of Dragon Army waited where their red flame had led them, beneath grey skies.

At Draco's right side stood Padma Patil, his second-in-command, who had once led all of Dragon Army after Draco had been stunned. At Draco's back was Vincent, the son of Crabbe, a family which had served the Malfoys into the distance of forgotten memory; the muscular boy was watchful as he was always watchful, whether battle had been declared or no. Further back, Gregory of the Goyles stood waiting beside one of the two broomsticks Dragon Army had been given; if the Goyles had not served the Malfoys so long as the Crabbes, yet they had served no less well.

And at Draco's left side, now, stood one Dean Thomas of Gryffindor, a Mudblood or possible half-blood who knew nothing of his father.

Sending Dean Thomas to Dragon Army had been a quite deliberate move on Harry's part, Draco was certain. Three other former Chaotics had also been transferred to Dragon Army, and all were watching Draco hawklike to see if he offered the former Lieutenant the slightest insult.

Some might have called it sabotage, but Draco knew better. Harry had also sent Lieutenant Finnigan to the Sunshine Regiment, even though Professor Quirrell's mandate had only required that Harry give up *one* Lieutenant. That too had been a deliberate move, making crystal clear to everyone that Harry *wasn't* dumping his least-favored soldiers.

In one sense, it might have been easier for Draco to win the true loyalties of his new soldiers if they'd thought Harry hadn't wanted them. In another sense... well, it wasn't easy to put into words. Harry had given him good soldiers with their pride intact, but it was more than that. Harry had showed kindliness toward his soldiers, but it was more than *that*. It wasn't just Harry playing fair, it was something that... that you couldn't help but contrast with the way the game was played in Slytherin House.

So Draco hadn't offered the slightest insult to Mr. Thomas, but brought him straight to his side, subordinate to himself and Padma but no one else. It was a test, Draco had told Mr. Thomas and everyone, not a promotion. Mr. Thomas

would have to show himself worthy of rank within Dragon Army — but he would be given a chance, and the chance *would* be fair. Mr. Thomas had looked surprised at the ceremony of it (the Chaos Legion, from what Draco had heard, didn't stand on formality) but the Gryffindor boy had stood a little straighter, and nodded.

And then, after Mr. Thomas had done well enough in one of Dragon Army's training sessions, he'd been brought into the strategy session in Dragon Army's huge military office. And a few minutes into the session, Padma had happened to ask — as though it was a perfectly normal question — whether Mr. Thomas had any ideas about how to defeat the Chaos Legion.

The Gryffindor boy had said cheerfully that Harry had predicted that General Malfoy would get one of his soldiers to ask him that, and that Harry had given him the message that General Malfoy should ask himself where his relative advantage lay — what Draco Malfoy could do, or what Dragon Army could do, that the Chaos Legion couldn't match — and then try to exploit it for all it was worth. Dean Thomas couldn't think of what that advantage might be, but if he *did* come up with any ideas for beating Chaos, he'd share them. Harry had ordered him to, after all.

*Sigh*, Draco had thought, since he couldn't actually sigh out loud. But it was good advice, and Draco had followed it, sitting at his bedroom desk with quill and parchment listing out everything that might be a relative advantage.

And, almost to Draco's own surprise, he'd had an idea, a real one. In fact he'd had *two*.

The hollow bell sounded through the forest, somehow sounding more ominous than ever before. On the instant, the two pilots cried "*Up!*" and leapt onto their broomsticks, heading into the grey sky.

Mr. and Mrs. Davis had now slumped slightly against each other, more from sheer muscle exhaustion than from any decrease of tension. Before them, the vast blank white parchment flickered with three great windows, as though holes had been cut through into the forest, showing three armies on the march. Lesser windows showed the six riders upon their broomsticks, and the corner of the parchment showed a view of the entire forest, with glowing dots to indicate armies and scouts.

The window into Sunshine showed General Granger and her Captains marching in the center of the Sunshine Regiment, protected by *Contego* screens along with a number of other young witches. The Sunshine Regiment, the Defense Professor had remarked, knew well that it had now acquired a strong advantage in experienced soldiers, and it meant to protect those soldiers from a surprise attack. Aside from that, the Sunshine Soldiers were moving forward at a steady march, conserving their strength.

The soldiers in General Malfoy's army, at least those with higher Transfiguration scores, were picking up leaves and Transfiguring them into... well, if you looked at Padma Patil, who was almost done with hers, it looked like her leaf was becoming a left-handed glove bearing a dangling strap. (The window had zoomed in to show this.)

Lord Jugson was watching the screen with a flat expression; his voice, when he spoke, seemed to ooze and drip with disdain. "What *is* your son doing, Lucius?"

The foreign-born witch who stood at Draco Malfoy's right side had finished Transfiguring her glove, and was now bringing it before the Dragon General like a sacrifice.

"I do not know," said Lucius Malfoy, his tone calm though no less aristocratic, "but I must trust that he has good reason for doing it."

All Dragon Army stopped for a moment as Padma slid the glove over her left hand, strapped it in place, and presented it before Draco Malfoy; who also stopped in place, took several deep breaths, raised his wand, executed a precise set of eight movements and bellowed "Colloportus!"

The Dragon Warrior raised her gloved hand, flexed it, and gave a small bow to Draco Malfoy, who returned it more shallowly, though the Dragon General was staggering slightly. Padma then returned to her place at Draco's side, and the Dragons began marching once more.

"Well," remarked Augusta Longbottom. "I don't suppose someone would care to explain?" Amelia Bones was frowning slightly as she gazed at the screen.

"For some reason or other," said the amused voice of Professor Quirrell, "it seems that the scion of Malfoy is able to cast surprisingly strong magic for a first-year student. Due to the purity of his blood, of course. Certainly the good Lord Malfoy would not have openly flouted the underage magic laws by arranging for his son to receive a wand before his acceptance into Hogwarts."

"I suggest you be careful in your implications, Quirrell," Lucius Malfoy

said coldly.

"Oh, I am," Professor Quirrell said. "A *Colloportus* cannot be dispelled by *Finite Incantatem;* it requires an *Alohomora* of equal strength. Until then, a glove so Charmed will resist lesser material forces, deflect the Sleep Hex and the Stunning Hex. And as neither Mr. Potter nor Miss Granger can cast a counterspell powerful enough, that Charm is invincible upon this battlefield. It is not the original intent of the Charm, nor the intent of whoever taught Mr. Malfoy an emergency spell for evading his enemies. But it would seem that Mr. Malfoy has been learning creativity."

Lucius Malfoy had straightened as the Defense Professor spoke; he now sat erect upon his cushioned bench, his head held perceptibly higher than before, and when he spoke it was with quiet pride. "He will be the greatest Lord Malfoy that has yet lived."

"Faint praise," Augusta Longbottom said under her breath; Amelia Bones chuckled, as did Mr. Davis for a tiny, fatal fraction of a second before he stopped with a strangled gargle.

"I quite agree," said Professor Quirrell, though it wasn't clear to whom he spoke. "Unfortunately for Mr. Malfoy, he is still new to the art of creativity, and so he has committed a classic error of Ravenclaw."

"And what might that be?" said Lucius Malfoy, his voice now turned chill once more.

Professor Quirrell had leaned back in his seat, the pale blue eyes briefly unfocusing as one of the windows shifted its viewpoint within the greater screen, zooming in to show the sweat now on Draco Malfoy's forehead. "It is such a beautiful idea that Mr. Malfoy has quite overlooked its pragmatic difficulties."

"Would someone care to explain that?" said Lady Greengrass. "Not all of us present are experts at such... affairs."

Amelia Bones spoke, the old witch's voice somewhat dry. "It will tempt them to try to catch hexes that they would be wiser to simply dodge. The more so, if they have had little practice catching them. And the casting of so many Charms will tire their strongest warrior."

Professor Quirrell gave the DMLE Director a half-nod of acknowledgment. "As you say, Madam Bones. Mr. Malfoy is new to the business of having ideas, and so when he has one, he becomes proud of himself for having it. He has not yet had enough ideas to unflinchingly discard those that are beautiful in

some aspects and impractical in others; he has not yet acquired confidence in his own ability to think of better ideas as he requires them. What we are seeing here is not Mr. Malfoy's best idea, I fear, but rather his only idea."

Lord Malfoy simply turned to watch the screens again, as though the Defense Professor had used up his right to exist.

"But —" said Lord Greengrass. "But what in Merlin's name is Harry Potter —"

Sixteen remaining soldiers of the Chaos Legion — or fifteen plus Blaise Zabini, rather — marched confidently through the forest, their shoes thudding over the still-dry ground. Their camouflage uniforms blended into the forest even more than usual, all colors washed out by the tints of an overcast day.

Sixteen Chaos Legionnaires, against twenty-eight Dragon Warriors and twenty-eight Sunshine Soldiers.

The common consensus had been that, with odds that bad, it was practically impossible for them to lose. After all, General Chaos was bound to come up with something really *spectacular*, facing odds like that.

There was something almost nightmarish about how everyone seemed to now expect Harry to pull miracles out of his hat, on demand, any time one was needed. It meant that if you couldn't do the impossible, you were *disappointing* your friends and failing to live up to your potential...

Harry hadn't bothered complaining to Professor Quirrell about 'too much pressure'. Harry's mental model of the Defense Professor had predicted him looking severely annoyed, saying things along the lines of *You are perfectly capable of solving this problem, Mr. Potter; did you even try?* and then deducting several hundred Quirrell points.

From above, from where two broomsticks watched their march, the high young voice of Tess Walsh cried "Friend!" and after another moment, "Gingersnap!"

A handful of seconds later, the soldier who'd code-named herself Gingersnap returned bearing a double handful of acorns, sweating slightly in the cool but humid air from the jog that had taken her to the oak tree Neville had spotted. Gingersnap approached to where Shannon was holding a uniform-shirt with the neck tied off, in lieu of anyone having to Transfigure a bag. When Gingersnap brought her hands forward to try and dump her acorns into the holding-shirt, Chaotic Shannon, giggling, jerked the shirt to the right, then to the left again as Gingersnap made another effort to dump the acorns, until a sharp "Miss Friedman!" from Lieutenant Nott caused Shannon to sigh and hold the shirt still. Gingersnap dumped her acorns into those accumulated, and then headed out for more.

Somewhere in the background, Ellie Knight was singing her very own version of the Chaos Legion's marching song, and around half the other soldiers were trying to step along with it despite not knowing the tune in advance. Nearby, Nita Berdine, who had a high Transfiguration score, finished creating yet another pair of green sunglasses, and handed them to Adam Beringer, who folded up the sunglasses before tucking them into his uniform pocket. Other soldiers were already wearing their own green sunglasses, despite the cloudy day.

You might guess that there was some sort of incredibly complicated and fascinating explanation behind this, and you would be right.

Two days earlier Harry had been sitting amid his bookcases in the comfy rocking-chair he'd obtained for his trunk's cavern level, pondering silently in the quiet span between classes and dinnertime, thinking about power.

For sixteen Chaotics to defeat twenty-eight Sunnies and twenty-eight Dragons they would need a force amplifier. There were limits to what you could do with maneuver. There *had* to be a secret weapon and it had to be invincible, or at least moderately unstoppable.

Muggle artifacts were now illegal in Hogwarts's mock battles, banned by Ministry edict. And the trouble with finding some other clever and unusual spell was that an army twice your own size could brute-force *Finite* almost anything you tried. The Sunshine Regiment might have missed that tactic with the Transfigured chainmail, but nobody would miss it again now that Professor Quirrell had pointed it out. And *Finite Incantatem* was a brute-force counterspell which required at least as much magic as the spell being canceled... which, if you were severely outnumbered, made it a whole new order of military challenge. The enemy could *Finite* anything you tried, and still have enough magic left over for shields and volleys of Sleep Hexes.

Unless, somehow, you could invoke potencies beyond the ordinary strength of first-year Hogwarts students, something too powerful for the enemy to *Finite*.

So Harry had asked Neville if he'd ever heard of any *small*, *safe* sacrificial rituals —

And then, after the screaming and the shouting had subsided, after Harry had stopped trying to argue about Unbreakable Vows and just given up the whole thing as impossible from a public relations standpoint, Harry had realized that he hadn't even needed to go there. They taught you how to invoke potencies far beyond your own strength in ordinary Hogwarts classes.

Sometimes, even though you were looking straight at something, you didn't realize *what* you were looking at until you happened to ask exactly the right question.

Defense. Charms. Transfiguration. Potions. History of Magic. Astronomy. Broomstick Flying. Herbology...

"Foe!" screamed the voice from above.

It was a good thing that Neville Longbottom hadn't the tiniest idea that his grandmother was watching; or he would've been more self-conscious about screaming scary battlecries at the top of his lungs while casting *Luminos* every three seconds as he rocketed through a dense forest of trees, hot on the tail of Gregory Goyle.

("But —" Augusta Longbottom said, her expression showing almost as much astonishment as worry. "But Neville is afraid of heights!")

("Not all fears last," said Amelia Bones. The old witch was favoring the great screen before them with a measuring gaze. "Or perhaps he has found courage. It is much the same, in the end.")

A glimmer of red —

Neville dodged, very nearly into a tree but he did dodge; and then Neville somehow also managed to dodge *almost* all of the branches before they smacked him in the face.

Now Mr. Goyle's broomstick was pulling further and further away — even though the two of them were riding exactly the same broomstick and Mr. Goyle weighed more, somehow Neville was still falling behind. So Neville slowed down, pulled back, angled up out of the forest and began to accelerate back toward where the Chaos Legion still marched.

Twenty seconds later — it hadn't been a long chase, just an exciting one —

Neville was back among his fellow Chaotics, and dismounted his broom to walk on the ground for a little bit.

"Neville —" said General Potter. Harry's voice was a little distant, as he walked carefully and steadily through the forest, his wand still applied to the almost-finished Form of the object he was slowly Transfiguring. Beside him, Blaise Zabini, working a smaller version of the same Transfiguration, looked like a shambling Inferi as he stumbled forward. "I told you — Neville — you don't have to —"

"Yes, I do," said Neville. He looked down at where his fingers grasped the broomstick, and saw that not just his hands, but his whole arms were shaking. But unless anyone else in Chaos had been practicing dueling for an hour a day with Mr. Diggory, and then practicing their aim in private for another hour afterward, Neville was probably the best shot from a broomstick even after taking into account that he wasn't a very good flyer.

"Good show, Neville," Theodore said from where he was walking ahead of them all, leading the Chaos Legion forward through the forest while wearing only his undershirt.

(Augusta Longbottom and Charles Nott exchanged brief astonished glances and then wrenched their gazes away from one another as though stung.)

Neville took a few deep breaths, trying to steady his hands, trying to think; Harry might not be good for deep strategic thinking while he was in the middle of an extended Transfiguration. "Lieutenant Nott, do you have any idea why Dragon Army just did that? They lost a broom —" The Dragons had started the combat with a feint to provide a distraction for Mr. Goyle's approach through the forest; Neville hadn't realized there were *two* brooms attacking until almost too late. But the Chaos Legion had *gotten* the other pilot. That was why broomsticks usually didn't attack before armies met, it meant a whole army would concentrate fire on the broomstick. "And the Dragons didn't even get anyone, did they?"

"Nope!" Tracey Davis said proudly. She too was now marching by General Potter's side, her wand gripped low and watchful as her eyes scanned the surrounding forest. "I threw up a Prismatic Sphere like a split second before Mr. Goyle's hex got Zabini, and the way Mr. Goyle had his other arm stretched out I think he planned to knock down the General, too." The Slytherin witch smiled with vicious confidence. "Mr. Goyle tried a Breaking Drill Hex, but learned to his dismay that his weak magic was no match for my newfound

dark powers, hahahaha!"

Some Chaotics laughed with her, but a queasy sensation was starting in Neville's stomach as he realized how close the Chaos Legion had come to complete disaster. If Mr. Goyle had managed to disrupt both Transfigurations —

"Report!" snapped the Dragon General, doing his best to conceal the fatigue he felt after casting seventeen Locking Charms, with more yet to come.

Beads of sweat now dotted Gregory's forehead. "The enemy got Dylan Vaughan," Gregory said formally. "Harry Potter and Blaise Zabini were each Transfiguring something dark-grey and roundish, I don't think it was finished but it looked like it would be big and hollow, sort of cauldron-shaped. Zabini's was smaller than Potter's. I couldn't get either of them or disrupt their Transfigurations, Tracey Davis blocked me. Neville Longbottom is on a broomstick and he's still a terrible flyer but his aim is really good."

Draco listened, frowning, and then he glanced at Padma and Dean Thomas, who both shook their own heads, indicating that they also couldn't think of what might be big and grey and shaped like a cauldron.

"Anything else?" said Draco. If that was it, they'd lost a broom for nothing —

"The only other weird thing I saw," Gregory said, sounding puzzled, "was that some Chaotics were wearing... sort of like goggles?"

Draco thought about this, not noticing that he'd stopped marching or that all of Dragon Army had automatically stopped with him.

"Was there anything special about the goggles?" Draco said.

"Um..." Gregory said. "They were... greenish, maybe?"

"Okay," said Draco. Again without thinking, he began walking once more and his Dragons followed. "Here's our new strategy. We're only going to send eleven Dragons against the Chaos Legion, not fourteen. That should be enough to beat them, now that we can neutralize their special advantage." It was a gamble, but you had to take gambles sometimes, if you wanted to come in first in a three-way battle.

"You figured out Chaos's plan, General Malfoy?" said Mr. Thomas with considerable surprise.

"What are they doing?" said Padma.

"I haven't the faintest idea," said Draco, with a smirk of the most refined smugness. "We'll just do the obvious thing."

Harry, having now finished his cauldron, was carefully scooping acorns into the container while the scouts searched for a nearby source of water that could be used as a liquid base. They'd come across frequent sinkholes and miniature creeks in the forest before, so it ought not to take long. Another scout had brought a straight stick that would serve as a stirrer, so Harry didn't have to Transfigure one.

Sometimes, even though you were looking straight at something, you didn't realize *what* you were looking at until you happened to ask exactly the right question...

How can I invoke magical powers that ought to be beyond the reach of first-year students?

There was a cautionary tale the Potions Master had told them (with much sneers and laughter to make the stupidity seem low-status instead of daring and romantic) about a second-year witch in Beauxbatons who'd stolen some extremely restricted and expensive ingredients, and tried to brew Polyjuice so she could borrow the form of another girl for purposes better left unmentioned. Only she'd managed to contaminate the potion with *cat hairs*, and then instead of seeking a healer immediately, the witch had hidden herself in a bathroom, hoping the effects would just wear off; and when she'd finally been found, it had been too late to reverse the transformation completely, condemning her to a life of despair as a sort of cat-girl hybrid.

Harry hadn't realized what that *meant* until the instant of thinking the right question — but what that implied was that a young wizard or witch could do things with Potions-Making that they couldn't even come close to doing with Charms. Polyjuice was one of the most potent potions known... but what made Polyjuice a N.E.W.T.-level potion, apparently, wasn't the required age before you had enough magical power; it was how difficult the potion was to brew precisely and what happened to you if you screwed up.

Nobody in any army had tried brewing any potions up until then. But Professor Quirrell would let you get away with nearly anything, if it was something you could also have done in a real war. *Cheating is technique*, the Defense Professor had once lectured them. Or rather, cheating is what the losers call technique, and will be worth extra Quirrell points when executed successfully. In principle, there was nothing unrealistic about Transfiguring a couple of cauldrons and brewing potions out of whatever came to hand, if you had enough time before the armies met.

So Harry had retrieved his copy of *Magical Drafts and Potions*, and begun looking for a safe but useful potion he could brew in the minutes before the battle started — a potion which would win the battle too fast for counterspells, or produce spell effects too strong for first-years to *Finite*.

Sometimes, even though you were looking straight at something, you didn't realize *what* you were looking at until you happened to ask exactly the right question...

What potion can I brew using only components gathered from an ordinary forest?

Every recipe in *Magical Drafts and Potions* used at least one ingredient from a magical plant or animal. Which was unfortunate, because all the *magical* plants and animals were in the Forbidden Forest, not the safer and lesser woods where battles were held.

Someone else might have given up at that point.

Harry had turned the pages from one recipe to another, skimming faster and faster in dawning realization, confirming what he had already read and was now *seeing* for the first time.

Every single Potions recipe seemed to demand at least one magical ingredient, but why should that be true?

Charms required no material components at all; you just said the words and waved your wand. Harry had been thinking about Potions-Making as essentially analogous: Instead of your spoken syllables triggering a spell effect for no comprehensible reason, you collected a batch of disgusting ingredients and stirred four times clockwise, and that arbitrarily triggered a spell effect.

In which case, given that most potions used ordinary components like porcupine quills or stewed slugs, you'd expect to see some potions using *only* ordinary components.

But instead every single recipe in *Magical Drafts and Potions* demanded at least *one* component from a magical plant or animal — an ingredient like silk from an Acromantula or petals from a Venus Fire Trap.

Sometimes, even though you were looking straight at something, you didn't

realize what you were looking at until you happened to ask exactly the right question...

If making a potion is like casting a Charm, why don't I fall over from exhaustion after brewing a draught as powerful as boil-curing?

The Friday before last, Harry's double Potions class had brewed *potion of boil-curing...* although even the most trivial healing Charms, if you tried to cast them with wand and incantation, were at least fourth-year spells. And afterward, they'd all felt the way they usually felt after Potions class, namely, *not* magically exhausted to any discernible degree.

Harry had shut his copy of *Magical Drafts and Potions* with a snap, and rushed down to the Ravenclaw common room. Harry had found a seventh-year Ravenclaw doing his N.E.W.T. potions homework and paid the older boy a Sickle to borrow *Moste Potente Potions* for five minutes; because Harry hadn't wanted to run all the way to the library to find confirmation.

After skimming through five recipes in the seventh-year book, Harry had read the sixth recipe, for a *potion of fire breathing*, which required Ashwinder eggs... and the book warned that the resulting fire could be no hotter than the magical fire which had spawned the Ashwinder which had laid the eggs.

Harry had shouted "*Eureka!*" right in the middle of the Ravenclaw common room, and been severely rebuked by a nearby prefect, who'd thought Mr. Potter was trying to cast a spell. Nobody in the wizarding world knew or cared about some ancient Muggle named Archimedes, nor the ur-physicist's realization that the water displaced from a bathtub would equal the volume of the object entering the bathtub...

Conservation laws. They'd been the critical insight in more Muggle discoveries than Harry could easily count. In Muggle technology you couldn't raise a feather one meter off the ground without the power coming from *somewhere*. If you looked at molten lava spilling from a volcano and asked where the heat came from, a physicist would tell you about radioactive heavy metals in the center of the Earth's molten core. If you asked where the energy to power the radioactivity came from, the physicist would point to an era before the Earth had formed, and a primordial supernova in the early days of the galaxy which had baked atomic nuclei heavier than the natural limit, the supernova compressing protons and neutrons into a tight unstable package that yielded back some of the supernova's energy when it split. A light bulb was fueled by electricity, fueled by a nuclear power plant, fueled by a supernova... You

could play the game all the way back to the Big Bang.

Magic did *not* appear to work like this, to put it mildly. Magic's attitude toward laws like Conservation of Energy was somewhere between a giant extended middle finger, and a shrug of total indifference. *Aguamenti* created water out of nothingness, so far as anyone knew; there was no known lake whose water level went down each time. That was a simple fifth-year spell, not considered impressive by wizards, because creating a mere glass of water didn't seem amazing to them. They didn't have the wacky notion that mass ought to be conserved, or that creating a gram of mass was somehow equivalent to creating 90,000,000,000,000 joules of energy. There was an upper-year spell Harry had run across whose *literal incantation* was '*Arresto Momentum!*' and when Harry had asked if the momentum went anywhere *else* he'd just gotten a puzzled look. Harry had kept an increasingly desperate eye out for *some* kind of conservation principle in magic, anywhere whatsoever...

... and the whole time it had been right in front of him in every Potions class. Potions-Making didn't *create* magic, it *preserved* magic, that was why every potion needed at least one magical ingredient. And by following instructions like 'stir four times counterclockwise and once clockwise' — Harry had hypothesized — you were doing something like casting a small spell that reshaped the magic in the ingredients. (And unbound the physical form so that ingredients like porcupine quills dissolved smoothly into a drinkable liquid; Harry strongly suspected that a Muggle following exactly the same recipe would end up with nothing but a spiny mess.) That was what Potions-Making really *was*, the art of transforming existing magical essences. So you were a little tired after Potions class, but not much, because you weren't empowering the potions yourself, you were just reshaping magic that was already there. And that was why a second-year witch could brew Polyjuice, or at least get close.

Harry had kept scanning through *Moste Potente Potions*, looking for something that might disprove his shiny new theory. After five minutes he'd flipped the older boy another Sickle (over his protests) and kept going.

The *potion of giant strength* required a Re'em to trample the mashed Dugbogs you stirred into the potion. It was odd, Harry had realized after a moment, because crushed Dugbogs weren't strong themselves, they were just . . . very, very crushed after the Re'em got through with them.

Another recipe said to 'touch with forged bronze', i.e., grasp a Knut in

pliers so you could skim the potion's surface; and if you dropped the Knut all the way in, the book warned, the potion would instantly superheat and boil over the cauldron.

Harry had stared at the recipes and their warnings, forming a second and stranger hypothesis. Of course it wouldn't be as simple as Potions-Making using magical potentials imbued in the ingredients, like Muggle cars fueled by the combustion potential of gasoline. Magic would never be as sensible as that...

And then Harry had gone to Professor Flitwick — since he didn't want to approach Professor Snape outside of class — and Harry had told Professor Flitwick that he wanted to invent a new potion, and he knew what the ingredients ought to be and what the potion should do, but he didn't know how to deduce the required stirring pattern —

After Professor Flitwick had stopped screaming in horror and running in little circles, and Professor McGonagall had been called into the ensuing fierce interrogation to promise Harry that in this case it was both acceptable and important for him to reveal his underlying theory, it had developed that Harry had not made an original magical discovery, but rediscovered a law so ancient that nobody knew who had first formulated it:

A potion spends that which is invested in the creation of its ingredients.

The heat of goblin forges that had cast the bronze Knut, the Re'em's strength that had crushed the Dugbogs, the magical fire that had spawned the Ashwinder: all these potencies could be recalled, unlocked, and restructured by the spell-like process of stirring the ingredients in exact patterns.

(From a Muggle standpoint it was just *odd*, a deranged version of thermodynamics invented by someone who thought life ought to be *fair*. From a Muggle standpoint, the heat expended in forging the Knut hadn't gone into the bronze, the heat had left and dissipated into the environment, becoming permanently less available. Energy was conserved, could be neither created nor destroyed; *entropy* always increased. But wizards didn't think that way: from their perspective, if you'd put some amount of work into making a Knut, it stood to reason that you could get exactly the same work back out. Harry had tried to explain why this sounded a bit odd if you'd been raised by Muggles, and Professor McGonagall had asked bemusedly why the Muggle perspective was any better than the wizarding one.)

The fundamental principle of Potions-Making had no name and no standard

phrasing, since then you might be tempted to write it down.

And someone who wasn't wise enough to figure out the principle themselves might read it.

And they would start having all sorts of bright ideas for inventing new Potions.

And then they would be turned into catgirls.

It had been made very clear to Harry that he wasn't going to be sharing this particular discovery with Neville, or Hermione either after the next armies' battle. Harry had tried to say something about Hermione seeming really off lately and this being just the sort of thing that might cheer her up. Professor McGonagall had said flatly that he wasn't even to think it, and Professor Flitwick had raised his little hands and made a gesture as of snapping a wand in half.

Although the two Professors had been kind enough to suggest that if Mr. Potter thought he knew what the potion's ingredients should be, he might be able to find an already-existing recipe that did the same thing; and Professor Flitwick had mentioned several volumes in the Hogwarts library that might be useful...

The vast parchment-like screen now showed only an aerial view of the forest, from which you could barely make out the camouflaged forms of three armies, split up into two groups each, converging to fight their three-way battle.

The benches of the Quidditch stadium were now rapidly filling up with the more easily bored sort of spectator who only wanted to be there for the final battle and skip out on all the boring points along the way. (If there was anything wrong with Professor Quirrell's battles, it was widely agreed, it was that his spectacles didn't last nearly as long as Quidditch matches, once they actually started. To this Professor Quirrell had replied only, *Such is realism*, and that had been that.)

Within the huge window — it was all one window now, observing from a great height — the vague collections of tiny camouflaged forms grew closer.

Closer.

Almost touching —

The vast white parchment window showed the first touch of battle between Sunshine and Chaos, a screaming mass of running children with smiley-faces upon their breasts, charging forward with *Contego* shields held high and others shouting "Somnium!" —

Until one of their number shrieked "*Prismatis!*" in a terrified voice and the entire charge came to a sudden halt before the sparkling wall of force that had appeared in front of them.

Tracey Davis had walked out from behind the trees.

"That's right," said Tracey, her voice low and grim as she leveled her wand on the barrier. "You should fear me. For I am Tracey Davis, the Darke Lady! That's Darke Lady spelled D-A-R-K-E, with an E!"

(Amelia Bones, Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, was sending an inquiring look at Mr. and Mrs. Davis, both of whom looked like they would have dearly preferred to die on the spot.)

Behind the Prismatic Barrier, there was some kind of hushed argument taking place among the Sunshine Soldiers, one of whom in particular seemed to be getting scolded by several of the others.

Then, a moment later, Tracey flinched.

Susan Bones had come to the front of the Sunshine contingent.

("Goodness," said Augusta Longbottom. "What *do* you suppose your grandniece has been learning at Hogwarts?")

("I don't know," Amelia Bones said calmly, "but I shall owl her a Chocolate Frog and instructions to learn more of it.")

The Prismatic Barrier vanished.

The Sunshine Soldiers resumed their charge forward.

Tracey yelled, her voice high with strain, "Inflammare!" and the Sunshine charge came to another sudden halt as a line of fire blazed up between them in the half-dry grass, extending to follow the path of Tracey's wand as she pointed it; an instant later Susan Bones cried "Finite Incantatem!" and the flames dimmed, brightened, dimmed in the contest of their wills, other soldiers raising their wards to aim at Tracey; and that was when Neville Longbottom plunged shrieking out of the sky.

One of the Dragon Warriors, Raymond Arnold, made a hand-sign, pointing forward and oblique left; and there was a sudden hushed hiss of whispers among the Dragon Army contingent as they all quietly reoriented themselves in the direction of the enemy. The Sunnies knew they were there, of course both armies knew; but somehow, in this moment, they had all become instinctively quiet.

The Dragons crept forward further, and then further, the dull camouflaged forms of the Sunnies beginning to appear among the distant trees, and still nobody spoke, nobody bellowed the call to charge.

Draco was now at the forefront of his soldiers, Vincent behind him and Padma only a shade further back; if the three of them could take the shock of Sunshine's best, the rest of Dragon Army might stand a chance.

Then Draco saw one Sunnie staring at him from the distance, in the vanguard of her own army; staring at him with a look of fury —

Across the forest battleground, their eyes met.

Draco had only a fraction of a second to wonder, in the back of his mind, what Hermione Granger was so angry about, before the shout went up from both their armies; and they were all running forward to the charge.

The other Chaotics had appeared now from among the trees, some had dropped out of trees, and the battle was in full force now, everyone firing in every direction at anything that looked like an enemy. Plus a number of Sunnies crying "Luminos!" at Neville Longbottom as the Chaos Hufflepuff twisted and rocketed up through the air on courses that could only be described as, indeed, "chaotic" —

And it happened, the way it happened only one time out of twenty in mock aerial combat, that Neville Longbottom's broomstick glowed bright red beneath his clenched hands.

It should've meant that Longbottom was out of the game.

Then, in the Hogwarts stands, among the watching crowds of students, a scream went up —

Combat realism. It was Professor Quirrell's one master rule. You could get away with anything if it was realistic, and in real life, a soldier didn't just vanish when their *broomstick* got hit by a curse.

Neville was falling toward the ground and screaming "Chaotic landing!" and the Chaotics were wrenching their attention away from fights to cast the Hover Charm (and run at the same time so they wouldn't be sitting ducks), almost everyone else stopping to gape —

And Neville Longbottom slammed into the leaf-laden forest ground, landing on one knee, one foot, and both hands, as though he were kneeling down to be knighted.

Everything stopped. Even Tracey and Susan paused in their duel.

In the stadium, all crowd noises vanished.

There was a universal silence composed of astonishment, concern, and sheer dumbstruck gaping awe, as everyone waited to see what would happen next.

And then Neville Longbottom slowly rose to his feet, and leveled his wand at the Sunshine Soldiers.

Though nobody on the battlefield heard it, a large segment of the stadium audience had begun chanting, in steadily rising notes each time the word was uttered, "DOOM DOOM DOOM DOOM DOOM", because you just couldn't see that and *not* think it required musical accompaniment.

"The crowd is cheering your grandson," said Amelia Bones. The old witch was favoring the screen with a measuring look.

"So they are," said Augusta Longbottom. "Some, if I hear correctly, are cheering, Our blood for Neville! Our souls for Neville!"

"Quite," said Amelia, taking a sip from a teacup which had not been there moments earlier. "It shows the lad has leadership potential."

"These cheers," continued Augusta, her voice taking on an even more stunned quality, "seem to be coming from the Hufflepuff benches."

"It is the House of the loyal, my dear," said Amelia.

"Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore! What in Merlin's name has been happening in this school?"

Lucius Malfoy was watching the screens with an ironic smile, his fingers tapping at his armrest in no discernible pattern. "I do not know what is more frightening, the thought that he has some hidden plan behind all this, or the thought that he does not."

"Look!" cried the Lord of Greengrass. The dapper young man had risen half out of his chair, pointing his finger at the screen. "There she goes!"

"We'll both take him at once," Daphne whispered. She knew that a few fear-filled minutes of real combat experience, a handful of times each week, might not be enough to match Neville's regular dueling practice with Harry and Cedric Diggory over the same period. "He's too much for one of us, but both of us together — I'll use my Charm, you just try to stun him —"

Hannah, beside her, nodded, and then they both screamed at the top of their lungs and charged forward, the Hover Charms of two supporting Sunshine Soldiers moving them faster and making them light on their feet, Daphne already crying "Tonare!" even as Hannah kept a huge Contego shield moving in front of them, and with a brief extra lift they leapt over the heads of the front screen of soldiers and landed in front of Neville with their hair billowing high around them —

(Photographs were strictly prohibited at all Hogwarts games, but somehow this moment *still* ended up on the front page of the next day's *Quibbler*.)

— and in the same instant, because fighting older bullies had burned away the slightest traces of hesitation, Hannah fired her first Sleep Hex at Neville (she'd started the incantation while she was still in the air) even as Daphne, concentrating more on speed than on force, slashed down with her Ancient Blade at where she thought Neville's thighs would be *after* he dodged —

But Neville leapt up, not sideways, leapt up higher than he should've been able to go, so that her glowing sword cut only the air beneath his feet. Somehow Daphne realized what it meant, that Neville still had other Chaotics Hovering him, in time for her to raise her Blade up over her head, but Neville *fell too fast* and when his Blade smashed into hers it was like being hit by a Bludger. It knocked Daphne off her feet and sent her sprawling backward onto the grass, hitting the ground hard on her back. It might have been all over for her, then, if Neville hadn't landed too hard himself and gone to his knees with a pained gasp. And then before Neville could bring his glowing Blade down, Hannah shouted "Somnium!" and Neville lurched frantically backward — though of course no spell had actually come from Hannah's wand, the Hufflepuff girl couldn't really have fired again that fast — which gave Daphne a second to scramble to her feet and get both hands around her wand again —

"Dear Merlin," said Lady Greengrass. Her voice seemed unsteady, the aristocratic poise well-punctured. "My daughter is fighting with the Charm of the Most Ancient Blade. In her first year. I never knew she possessed — such extraordinary talent —"

"Excellent blood," Charles Nott said approvingly, causing Augusta to snort. "My good Lady," said Professor Quirrell, sounding grave. "Do not wrong your daughter so. That is not mere talent which you see." His voice grew a little dryer. "Rather, it is what happens when children put their competitive efforts into a game which involves actual spellcasting."

"Expelliarmus!" shouted Draco, trying not to let his voice crack as he simultaneously dodged the blazing red stunbolt that Hermione Granger had fired at him, his muscles twisting with the need to dodge in the wrong direction — she'd pointed to his left, and then with a mysterious twitch fired right —

Hermione dodged the fast-moving dueling hex, and cried with hardly another moment's pause, "Steleus!", a wide-angle Hex that Draco couldn't avoid, but he managed to point his wand at his own face and cry "Quiescus!" before the sudden urge to inhale could devolve into a sneezing fit that would've ended the battle.

Draco Malfoy was already half-exhausted from all the Locking Charms and Transfigurations earlier, but his confusion was beginning to give way to a sense of his own blood boiling, he didn't know why Granger was attacking him so angrily all of a sudden, but *if she wanted a fight he'd give her one* —

(The Dragons and Sunnies weren't stopping to watch the duel of their Generals, the Dragons were too disciplined to stop and watch and that meant the Sunnies had to go on fighting too; but the gaping audience in the Hogwarts Quidditch stands were being distracted even from Neville and Daphne's spectacle, shifting their eyes to the duel of two Generals as Malfoy and Granger fired hex after hex and jinx after jinx at each other, casting more rapidly than any other student in their year could have managed, the Dragon General's trained dueling dance matched by the Sunshine General's frantic energy, the combat between them beginning to resemble an adult duel as the two most magically powerful first-years resorted to spells more exotic than the usual Sleep Hex.)

- although, Draco was beginning to realize, when he and Harry and

Professor Quirrell had dismissed Miss Granger as having as much intent to kill as a bowl of wet grapes, they'd never seen her *angry*.

Daphne lashed out with her Ancient Blade, again not trying to hit hard but just moving the Blade as fast as possible, at the same time Hannah cried "Somnium!" and Neville leapt back again, but it had been another bluff and Hannah was moving in to fire a real spell almost point-blank —

— and Neville Longbottom did exactly what — he would explain afterward — Cedric Diggory had trained him to do if he was fighting Bellatrix Black, which was to spin around and kick Hannah *really hard* in the pit of her stomach.

The Hufflepuff girl made a sad little sound, a gasping cry of pain, as she was knocked off her feet by the hard shoe sinking into her abdomen with the force of Neville's whole body behind it.

For an instant the battlefield stood still, everything halted except Hannah's falling form.

Then Neville's face turned to absolute dismay and he lowered his wand, the Chaotic Lieutenant starting instinctively toward his House-mate as he reached for her with his other hand —

Even as Hannah turned her fall into a roll and came out with her wand raised and shot him.

A fractional second later, Daphne, who hadn't hesitated either, sank her Most Ancient Blade squarely into Neville's back, causing the Chaotic Lieutenant's muscles to jerk convulsively with the stunning magic discharging into him even as Hannah's Sleep Hex took effect, and then the last scion of Longbottom was sprawled still on the ground with a look of total surprise frozen to his face.

"Today Mr. Longbottom has learned a valuable lesson about his feelings of pity and remorse," said Professor Quirrell.

"And chivalry," said Amelia, sipping her tea again.

"Are you all right?" whispered Daphne, as she stood protectively over where Hannah lay on the ground clutching her stomach. The girl didn't give anything back in reply except more retching sounds that sounded like Hannah was trying not to throw up while trying not to cry.

Somehow, even though it might not have been good tactics — it would've been better if Hannah had been hexed outright, than for other soldiers to be tied up protecting her — a number of Sunnies seemed to be standing in front of Hannah with their wands clutched tightly, staring angrily at the Chaotics. Someone had thrown up a Prismatic barrier between the two groups, Daphne couldn't see who.

And for some reason the Chaotics didn't seem to be pressing the attack. Even Tracey had completely dropped the grim look on her face and was shifting her weight nervously from one foot to another, as though she was having trouble remembering which side she was on —

"Hold!" shouted a voice. "Hold battle!"

There wasn't much battle going on anyway, but it held.

General Potter, looking every inch the Boy-Who-Lived, strode out from the trees with something large and camouflage-cloth-covered held under one arm.

"Is Miss Abbott breathing all right?" General Potter yelled.

Daphne didn't look back. She didn't trust that this wasn't a trap — it was absolutely certain that if the Chaotics took the opportunity to attack, Professor Quirrell would not only rule it legal but also award them extra points afterward. But Daphne could hear the answer well enough with her ears, it wasn't like Hannah was trying to breathe *quietly*, and so she said, "Sort of."

"She should get out of here and to someone who can use healing Charms," Harry said. "Just in case that broke something."

From behind Daphne, a small gasping voice said, "I — can — still — fight —" "Miss Abbott, don't —" Harry said, just as there was the sound from behind Daphne of someone collapsing back to the grass after trying and failing to get to her feet. Everyone winced, but Daphne didn't turn her back on Harry.

"Why haven't the teachers stopped the battle?" said Susan, her voice angry.

"I expect it's because Miss Abbott is in no danger of permanent damage and Professor Quirrell thinks we're learning valuable lessons," Harry said in a hard voice. "Look, Miss Abbott, if you go, Tracey will also retire from the battle. You already outnumber us, so that's a very good deal for your side. Please take it."

"Hannah, just go!" said Daphne. "I mean, just say you're out!"

When Daphne glanced back she saw that Hannah was shaking her head, still curled up in a ball on the grass.

"Oh, screw this," said Harry. "Chaotics! The faster we stun them, the faster she's out of here! We're going to do this very quickly, even if we take casualties! End truce! TUNAFISH!"

Daphne's political hindbrain had only an instant to admire how Harry's few words had just made the Chaotics the *good* guys, and then in almost perfect unison, the Chaotics were plunging their hands into the pockets of their uniforms and drawing out green sunglasses in an unfamiliar style. Not like anything you would wear to the beach, more like goggles for advanced Potions —

Then Daphne realized what was about to happen and snapped up her other hand to shield her eyes, just as Harry ripped the cloth off the cauldron.

The fluid that spilled forth as Harry Potter threw the cauldron's contents into the air was too bright to be seen, too brilliant to be imagined, incandescent like the Sun magnified a dozen times —

(which was exactly what it was)

(the sunlight which had been invested to create the acorns, the bright energy that had fueled a tree rising up from the bare dirt)

(blazing a searing purple, the color of the mixed blue and red wavelengths that chlorophyll absorbed)

(with almost none of the green wavelengths that chlorophyll reflected to create the green color of leaves)

(which was the color of the Chaos Legion's sunglasses, made to pass through green wavelengths, blocking red and blue, reducing even the most incandescent purple glare to something bearable)

— the violet light blazed on and on, Daphne tried dropping her arm from her eyes but found that she couldn't look directly at anything, even the secondhand purple glare was so bright she had to squint; and she had only time to cry one *Finite Incantatem*, which didn't work, before a Sleep Hex took her.

What was left of the battle didn't take very long after that.

"NOW!" bellowed Blaise Zabini, formerly of Sunshine, now commanding a detachment of Chaos Legionnaires. "I mean, TUNAFISH!" The Slytherin boy's hand grasped the cloth shielding the cauldron from the triggering touch of daylight, already beginning to move it aside.

"NOW!" bellowed Dean Thomas, formerly of Chaos, commanding a consignment of Dragon Warriors. "DO WHATEVER THEY DO!"

The Chaotics of Zabini's detachment plunged their hands into their uniform pockets, and came forth bearing green sunglasses —

— an action almost perfectly mirrored by Dean and the Dragon Warriors, who drew forth green-colored Potions goggles, and quickly drew the straps over their own heads, even as the Chaotics put on their sunglasses and the violet incandescence blasted forth.

(As General Malfoy had explained, if Mr. Goyle reported that the Chaos Legion was wearing green-colored Potions goggles, you didn't have to know why to Transfigure some copies.)

"THAT'S CHEATING!" shrieked Blaise Zabini.

"THAT'S TECHNIQUE!" Dean yelled back. "DRAGONS, CHARGE!" ("Pardon me," the Lady Greengrass said. "Could you stop laughing like that, Mr. Quirrell? It's unnerving.")

"FINITE THEIR GOGGLES!" shouted Blaise Zabini, as the two armies ran headlong toward each other through omnipresent eye-searing purple glare. "WE CAN STILL WIN!"

"YOU HEARD HIM!" bellowed Dean. "GET THEIR GLASSES!" Blaise Zabini's reply to this wasn't anything articulate.

That battle went on a lot longer.

Draco didn't dodge, he didn't counter, he didn't have enough energy left for either, all he could do was whip his left hand into position and hope —

The red stunbolt dissipated again on Draco's *Colloportused* glove, which he'd Transfigured and spell-locked to his hand the same as the rest of Dragon Army. It was all that was saving him now, that shield.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Stupefy!" shrieked the Sunshine General.

It should have been a time to counterattack, but Draco could only catch his breath, as the two of them danced backward and forward beneath the trees in the never-ending movements of their duel. Across from him, General Granger was panting hard, the young girl's face glistening with sweat like dew, her chestnut hair wetted into brown plaits. Her camouflage uniform was stained with damp spots, her shoulders visibly trembling with exhaustion, but her wand was still steel-steady where it stayed level on Draco through all their motion. Her eyes glaring, her cheeks flushed with rage.

So, little girl, why're you pretending to fight like a grownup today?

The taunt came to mind, but he didn't really think he needed Granger any angrier; so instead Draco just said — though he could hear his own voice cracking —"Any reason you're feeling mad at me, Granger?"

The girl was gasping for breath herself, her own voice wobbling as she spoke. "I know what you're up to," said Hermione Granger, her voice rising. "I know what you and Snape are up to, Malfoy, and I know who's behind it!"

"Huh?" Draco said without even thinking about it.

That only seemed to increase Granger's fury, and her fingers whitened on the wand she held leveled on him.

And then Draco got it, and it boiled his own blood in his veins. Even *she* thought he was secretly plotting against her —

"You too?" Draco yelled. "Ihelped you, you bucktoothed bint! You, you, you,"—stuttering past all the Dark curses that came to mind until he found something he could actually cast at her —"DENSAUGEO!"

But Granger flashed and whirled around the Tooth-Lengthening Hex, and then her own wand came around and leveled at almost point-blank range, even as Draco brought up his left hand like a shield, placing the magic-locked glove between himself and whatever she was about to fire, and the Sunshine General's own voice rose to a shriek audible across the whole battleground —

## "ALOHOMORA!"

Time should have paused.

But it didn't.

Instead the padlock clicked and fell off the glove.

Just like that.

Just like that.

The screens showed it all very clearly, to the entire watching Hogwarts stadium.

And the bone-dead-silent hush that fell over every bench in every bleacher said that everyone understood quite clearly what it meant, that the scion of House Malfoy had just had his magic overcome by a Muggleborn.

Hermione Granger didn't pause in her fight, gave no sign that she even knew what she'd done; instead her foot snapped out in a Muggle-style kick that knocked Draco's wand cleanly out of his hand, his shocked mind and body moving just a little too slowly. Draco dove after his wand, scrabbling frantically on the ground, but from behind him a girl's cracking voice said "Somnium!" and Draco Malfoy fell and didn't rise again.

There was another moment of frozen silence. The Sunshine General was wobbling on her feet, looking like she might faint.

Then the Dragon Warriors screamed at the top of their lungs and charged forward to avenge their fallen commander.

Mr. and Mrs. Davis were shaking as they stood up from the comfortable chairs of the faculty Quidditch box; they couldn't quite clutch each other while walking, but they held hands tightly, pretending hard to be invisible. If they'd been children young enough for accidental magic they probably would've spontaneously Disillusioned themselves.

The elderly Charles Nott said nothing as he stood from his chair. The scarred Lord Jugson said nothing, as he stood from his own chair.

Lucius Malfoy said nothing as he stood.

All three of them turned without pause and strode toward the stairwell of the elevated bleachers, moving in eerie unison like an Auror trio —

"Lord Malfoy," the Defense Professor said in mild tones. That man was still seated in his own chair, looking upon his parchment-like screens, arms limp at his side, as though for some reason he didn't feel like moving.

The white-haired man halted just before reaching the exit archway, and the elderly man and the scarred man halted as well, flanking him. Lord Malfoy's head turned, too slightly to be any form of acknowledgment, but in the Defense Professor's direction.

"Your son performed exceptionally well today," said Professor Quirrell. "I must confess that I underestimated him. And he has earned his army's loyalty, as you have witnessed." Still very mild, the Defense Professor's voice. "Speaking

as your son's teacher, it is my opinion that he will not benefit if you interfere in his —"

Lord Malfoy and his compatriots vanished down the stairs.

"A fine try, Quirinus," Dumbledore said quietly. The old wizard's face showed small lines of worry; he hadn't risen from his own seat either, staring at the parchment screens as though they were still active. "Do you think he will listen?"

The Defense Professor's shoulders twitched in a slight shrug, the only movement they'd shown since the battle ended.

"Well," said the Lady Greengrass, as she rose up and cracked her knuckles, stretching, her husband silent beside her. "I must say, that was quite... interesting..."

Amelia Bones had risen from her own cushioned seat without any fuss. "Interesting indeed," said Director Bones. "I do confess, I find myself disturbed by the skill with which those children were fighting one another."

"The skill?" Lord Greengrass said. "Their spells didn't seem all that impressive to me. Except for Daphne's, of course."

The old witch did not move her eyes from where she was gazing at the Defense Professor's balding head. "The Stunning Hex is not a first-year spell, Lord Greengrass, but that is not the skill I had in mind. They supported each other with those simple spells, they reacted at speed to surprises..." The Director of the DMLE paused, as though searching for words that a mere civilian could understand. "In the midst of battle," she said finally, "with spells flying in every direction... those children seemed quite at home."

"Indeed, Director Bones," said the Defense Professor. "Some arts are best begun in youth."

The old witch's eyes narrowed. "You are readying them to become a military force, Professor. To what end?"

"Now hold on!" interjected Lord Greengrass. "There's plenty of schools where they teach dueling in first year!"

"Dueling?" said the Defense Professor. From behind it wasn't visible if the pale face was smiling. "That is nothing, Lord Greengrass, to what my students have learned. They have learned not to hesitate in the face of ambushes and greater foes. They have learned to adapt when combat conditions change and change again. They have learned to protect their allies, to protect more those who are more valuable, to abandon pieces which cannot be rescued. They have

learned that to survive they must follow orders. Some have even learned a little creativity. Oh, no, Lord Greengrass, *these* wizards will not hide in their manors and wait to be protected, when the next threat comes. They will know that they know how to fight."

Augusta Longbottom loudly clapped her hands together three times.

We won.

It was the first thing Draco heard when he woke up on the battlefield, Padma telling him how his soldiers had rallied after he fell. How, thanks to the Dragon General's foresight, Mr. Thomas had led his detachment to victory over Chaos. How General Potter had defeated the portion of the Sunshine Regiment that clashed with him. How Mr. Thomas's Dragon Warriors had rejoined the main body of soldiers bearing both their own goggles and the sunglasses of the defeated Chaotics. How, only moments later, General Potter's remaining contingent had attacked both other armies with a potion that emitted searing purple light. But Dragon had held the numerical advantage over Sunshine and Chaos both, and enough sunglasses for their warriors; and so Padma had managed to lead her inherited army to victory.

From the light in Padma's eyes and her arrogant smile that would have done proud to a Malfoy, she was expecting congratulations. Draco managed to grit out some form of praise from between his clenched teeth, and couldn't have said afterward what it was. The foreign-born witch, it appeared, hadn't any idea what'd happened, or what it meant.

I lost.

The Dragons trudged back to Hogwarts beneath grey skies, cold droplets landing heavy on Draco's skin, one by one. While he'd been stunned, it had begun, the long-promised rain finally beginning to fall. There was only one option left to Draco now. A forced move, as Mr. MacNair, who'd taught Draco chess, would have termed it. Harry Potter probably wouldn't like it, if he really was in love with Granger the way everyone said. But the forced move, as Mr. MacNair had defined it, was one you needed to make if you wanted the game to continue at all.

It kept on playing in Draco's mind, over and over again, even as he walked like an automaton through the massive portals of Hogwarts, sent away Vincent

and Gregory with two sharp words, and became alone within his private bedroom, sitting on his bed, staring at the wall above his desk. Filling his mind like a Dementor had locked him into the memory.

The padlock on his glove clicking and falling away —

Draco knew, he *knew* what he'd done wrong. He'd been so tired after casting twenty-seven Locking Charms for all the other Dragon Warriors. Less than a minute wasn't enough time to recover after each spell. And so he'd *just* cast *Colloportus* on his own padlocked glove, *just* cast the spell, not put in all his strength to bind it stronger than Harry Potter or Hermione Granger could undo.

But nobody was going to believe that, even if it was true. Even in Slytherin, nobody would believe that. It sounded like an excuse, and an excuse was all that anyone would hear.

Granger whirled and spun and screamed 'ALOHOMORA!' —

Draco's mind kept playing it over and over as the resentment built. He'd helped Granger — cooperated with her on banning traitors — held her hand as she'd dangled off the roof — stopped a riot from breaking out around her in the Great Hall — did she have any idea what he'd risked, what he'd probably already *lost*, what it meant for the heir of House Malfoy to do that for a *Mudblood* —

And now there was only one move left, and the thing about a forced move was that you *had* to make it, even if it meant getting detention and losing House points. Professor Snape would know and understand, but there were limits (Father had warned him) to what the Potions Master would overlook.

Challenge Granger to a wizard's duel, in open defiance of Hogwarts regulations. Attack her outright, if she tried to refuse. Defeat her one-on-one, in public, not with clever dueling technique, but by *overpowering* her magic. Beat her solidly, completely, crush her as utterly as the Dark Lord himself had crushed his enemies. Make it absolutely clear to everyone, so that nobody could possibly doubt, that Draco had just been exhausted from casting the spell so many times. Prove that the Malfoy blood was stronger than any Mudblood's —

Only it's not, Harry Potter's voice whispered inside Draco's mind. It's easy to forget what's really true, Draco, once you start trying to win at politics. But in reality there's only one thing that makes you a wizard, remember?

Draco knew, then, he knew the reason for the disquiet in the back of his mind, as he stared at the blank wall above his desk contemplating his forced

move. It should've been simple — when you only had one move, the thing to do was make it — but —

Granger whirling, spinning, sweat-dampened hair flying around her, bolts flying from her wand as fast as his own, jinx and counter-jinx, glowing bats flying at his face, and through all of it the look of fury in Granger's eyes —

There'd been a part of him admiring that, before it had all gone wrong, admiring Granger's fury and power; a part of him that had exulted in the first real fight he'd ever been in, against . . .

... an equal opponent.

If he challenged Granger, and *lost*...

It ought not to be possible, Draco had gotten his wand two full years before anyone else in his Hogwarts class.

Only there was a reason why they usually didn't bother giving wands to nine-year-olds. Age counted too, it wasn't just how long you'd held a wand. Granger's birthday had been only a few days into the year, when Harry had bought her that pouch. That meant she was twelve now, that she'd been twelve almost since the start of Hogwarts. And the truth was, Draco hadn't been practicing much outside of class, probably not nearly as much as Hermione Granger of Ravenclaw. Draco hadn't thought he needed any more practice to stay ahead...

And Granger was exhausted too, whispered the Voice of Contrary Evidence inside him. Granger must have been exhausted from all those Stunning Hexes, and even in that state she'd been able to undo his Locking Charm.

And Draco *could not* afford to challenge Granger publicly, one-on-one with no excuses, and lose.

Draco knew what you were supposed to do in this sort of situation. You were supposed to cheat. But if anyone discovered Draco cheating, it would be disastrous, perfect blackmail material even if it never got out publicly, and any Slytherins watching would *know* that, they'd be *looking*...

And then, if you were watching, you would have seen Draco Malfoy get up from his bed, and go to his desk, and take out a sheet of the finest sheepskin parchment, and a pearl-carven inkwell, filled with greenish-silver ink that had been made with true silver and crushed emeralds. From the great trunk at his bed's foot, the Slytherin drew forth a book bound also in silver and emeralds, entitled *The Etiquette of the Houses of Britain*. And with a new, clean quill, Draco Malfoy began to write, frequently looking to the book where it lay

open as a reference. There was a grim smile on the boy's face, making the young Malfoy look very much like his father, as he carefully drew each letter as though it were a separate artwork.

From Draco, son of Lucius son of Abraxis Lords of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy, son also of Narcissa daughter of Druella Lady of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, scion and heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy:

To Hermione, the first Granger:

(That form might have been meant to sound polite, long ago when it had been invented; nowadays, after centuries of being used to address Mudbloods, it carried a lovely tinge of refined venom.)

I, Draco, of Most Ancient House, demand redress, for

Draco paused, carefully moving the quill aside so that it wouldn't drip. He needed a pretext for this, at least if he wanted to impose the duel's conditions. The challenged had the choice of terms *unless* they had insulted a Noble House. He needed to make it look like Granger had insulted him...

What was he thinking? Granger had insulted him.

Draco flipped the book to the page of standard formulae, and found one that seemed appropriate.

I, Draco, of Most Ancient House, demand redress, for that I have thrice over helped you and offered you only my goodwill, and in return you <u>falsely</u> accused me of plotting against you,

Draco had to stop and take a breath, forcing down the seething anger; he was starting to genuinely feel the insult now, and he'd just written out the last phrase and underlined it without thinking, like it was an ordinary letter. After a moment's reflection, he decided to let it stand; it might not be the exact formal phrasing but it had a raw, angry tone that seemed appropriate.

which insult you committed before the eyes of Britain.

Thus I, Draco, compel you, Hermione, by custom, by law, by

"The seventeenth ruling of the thirty-first Wizengamot," Draco said aloud without looking, a line delivered in many plays; he sat straighter as he said it, feeling every pulse of the noble blood in his veins.

Thus I, Draco, compel you, Hermione, by custom, by law, by the 17th ruling of the 31st Wizengamot, to meet me in wizard's duel with terms: That we each come alone and in silence, speaking to none before or after,

If the duel went poorly, Draco could just say nothing and leave it at that. And if he did defeat Granger, he would have learned experimentally that he could beat her *again* in a public challenge. It wasn't cheating, but it was Science, which was almost as good.

contesting by magic solely, without death or lasting injury,

... where? Draco had been told about a room in Hogwarts that was good for duels, where everything valuable was already protected by wards, and there were no portraits to tattle on you... which one had it been again...

in the trophy room of the Castle of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,

And their second and public duel had better be soon, like tomorrow, it would take very little time for his reputation in Slytherin to go irretrievably to sludge. He needed to fight Granger for the first time *tonight*.

upon midnight's stroke that shall end this very day.

Draco, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy.

Draco signed the formal parchment, and then drew forth his ordinary and lesser parchment, and his regular ink, for his post scriptum:

If you don't know how the rules work, Granger, here's how it is. You insulted a Most Ancient House, and I've got the lawful right to challenge. And if you affront the conditions of the duel, like by having Flitwick show up at the trophy room, or even just telling anyone else, my father will take

you and your false honor straight to the Wizengamot.

Draco Malfo

On the last letter his quill pressed down on the parchment so viciously that the nib snapped off, creating a streak of ink and a small rip in the parchment, which Draco decided also looked appropriate.

That night at dinnertime, Susan Bones came to Harry Potter and told him that she thought Draco Malfoy was going to carry out his plot against Hermione very soon. She was warning all the members of S.P.H.E.W., and she'd warned Professor Sprout, and she'd warned Professor Flitwick, and she was going to send a letter to her Aunt tonight, and now she was warning Harry Potter, too. Only they couldn't quite talk about it with Padma — Susan said, looking very serious — because Padma was feeling torn between her loyalty to Hermione and her loyalty to her General.

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, who was at this point feeling more frustrated with the entire situation than anything really *productive*, snapped at her that *yes*, he knew something had to be done.

After Susan Bones left, Harry looked over at the other end of the Ravenclaw table, where Hermione had sat down away from him or Padma or Anthony or any of her other friends.

But Hermione didn't look like she was in a mood where somebody going over and bothering her would be taken very well.

Later, looking backward, Harry would think of how, in his SF and fantasy novels, people always made their big, important choices for big, important reasons. Hari Seldon had created his Foundation to rebuild the ashes of the Galactic Empire, not because he would look more important if he could be in charge of his own research group. Raistlin Majere had severed ties with his brother because he wanted to become a god, not because he was incompetent at personal relationships and unwilling to ask for advice on how to do better. Frodo Baggins had taken the Ring because he was a hero who wanted to save Middle-Earth, not because it would've been too awkward not to. If anyone ever wrote a true history of the world — not that anyone ever could or would — probably 97% of all the key moments of Fate would turn out to be constructed

of lies and tissue paper and trivial little thoughts that somebody could've just as easily thought differently.

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres looked at Hermione Granger, where she'd sat down at the other end of the table, and felt a sense of reluctance to bother her when she looked like she was already in a bad mood.

So then Harry thought that it probably made more sense to talk to Draco Malfoy first, just so that he could absolutely positively definitely assure Hermione that Draco really wasn't plotting against her.

And later on after dinner, when Harry went down to the Slytherin basement and was told by Vincent that *the boss ain't to be disturbed* ... then Harry thought that maybe he should see if Hermione would talk to him right away. That he should just get started on unraveling the whole mess before it raveled any further. Harry wondered if he might just be procrastinating, if his mind had just found a clever excuse to put off something unenjoyable-but-necessary.

He actually thought that.

And then Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres decided that he'd just talk to Draco Malfoy the next morning instead, after Sunday breakfast, and *then* talk to Hermione.

Human beings did that sort of thing all the time.

It was Sunday morning, April 5th, 1992, and the simulated sky above the Great Hall of Hogwarts showed great torrents of rain pouring down in such density that the lightning flashes were diminished and scattered into small pulses of white light that sometimes transformed the House tables, paling their faces and making all the students appear briefly to be ghosts.

Harry sat at the Ravenclaw table, wearily eating a waffle, waiting for Draco to make an appearance so that he could get started on sorting this whole thing out. There was a *Quibbler* being passed around which had somehow ended up with Hannah and Daphne on the front page, but it hadn't gotten to his place yet.

A few minutes later Harry finished eating his waffle, and then looked around again to see if Draco had arrived yet for breakfast at the Slytherin table.

It was odd.

Draco Malfoy was almost never late.

Since Harry was looking in the direction of the Slytherin table, he didn't see Hermione Granger entering through the huge doors of the Great Hall. Thus he was rather startled when he turned back and discovered Hermione sitting down directly beside him at the Ravenclaw table, just as if she hadn't not-done that for more than a week.

"Hi, Harry," Hermione said, her voice sounding almost exactly normal. She started to put toast on her plate and a selection of healthy fruits and vegetables. "How are you?"

"Within one standard deviation of my own peculiar little average," Harry automatically replied. "How are you doing? Did you sleep okay?"

There were dark bags under Hermione Granger's eyes.

"Why, yes, I'm fine," said Hermione Granger.

"Um," Harry said. He took a slice of pie onto his plate (as his brain was occupied with other things, Harry's hand simply took the tastiest thing within range, without evaluating complex concepts like whether he was ready to eat dessert). "Um, Hermione, I'm going to need to talk to you later today, is that okay?"

"Sure," said Hermione. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"Because —" Harry said. "I mean — you and I haven't — for the last few days —"

*Shut up*, suggested an internal part of Harry that seemed to have been recently allocated for governing Hermione-related issues.

Hermione Granger didn't look like she was paying much attention to him in any case. She just stared down at her plate, and then, after about ten seconds of awkward silence, began to eat her tomato slices, one after another, without pause.

Harry looked away from her and began to eat a slice of pie which, he discovered, had somehow materialized on his plate.

"So!" Hermione Granger suddenly said after she'd polished off most of her plate in silence. "Anything happening today?"

"Um..." Harry said. He looked around frantically, as though to find something-happening that he could use as conversational fodder.

And so Harry was one of the first to see it, and wordlessly point, although the sudden swell of whispers that swept through the Great Hall showed that a number of other people had seen it too.

The distinctive crimson tinge of the robes would have been recognizable

anywhere, but it still took Harry's brain a few moments to place the faces. An Asianish-looking man, solemn, and today looking rather grim. A man with a piercing gaze that swept over the room, his long black hair waving behind him in a ponytail. A man thin and pale and unshaven, with a face so blank that it was like stone. It took Harry a few moment to place the faces, and remember the names, from that long-ago day in January when the Dementor had come to Hogwarts: *Komodo, Butnaru, Goryanof.* 

"An Auror trio?" Hermione said in a strange bright voice. "Why, I wonder what they'd be doing here."

Dumbledore was in their company as well, looking as worried as Harry had ever seen him; and after a moment's pause while the old wizard's eyes scanned the Great Hall and the students whispering over their breakfasts, he pointed —

- straight at Harry.

"Oh, now what," Harry said under his breath. His inward thoughts were a lot more panicked than that, as he wondered frantically if anyone had connected him to the Azkaban breakout somehow. He looked at the Head Table, trying to make the glance casual, and realized that Professor Quirrell was nowhere to be seen, this morning —

The Aurors swept toward him with swift strides, Auror Goryanof approaching from the other side of the Ravenclaw table as though to block any escape in that direction, Auror Komodo and Auror Butnaru approaching from Harry's side, the Headmaster following straight on Komodo's heels.

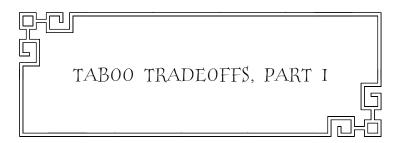
All conversation everywhere had ground to utter silence.

The Aurors reached Harry's place at the table, surrounding him from three angles.

"Yes?" Harry said, as normally as he could. "What is it?"

"Hermione Granger," Auror Komodo said in a toneless voice, "you are under arrest for the attempted murder of Draco Malfoy."

## CHAPTER SEVENTY-NINE



he words dropped into Harry's consciousness and shattered his thoughts into a hundred shards of incredulity, the shock of adrenaline running into so much confusion that —

"She —" Harry said. "She — she wouldn't — WHAT?"

The Aurors weren't paying any attention to him. Komodo spoke again, still in that colorless voice. "Mr. Malfoy has regained consciousness in St. Mungo's and named you, Hermione Granger, as his assaulter. He has repeated these accusations under two drops of Veritaserum. The Blood-Cooling Charm you cast upon Mr. Malfoy would have killed him if he had not been found and treated, and it must be presumed known to you that this was a fatal curse. I therefore arrest you upon the serious charge of attempted murder and you will be taken into Ministry custody to be interrogated under three drops of Veritaserum —"

"Are you mad?" the words burst out of Harry's mouth, as he shoved himself up from the Ravenclaw table, an instant before Auror Butnaru's hand clamped down hard upon his shoulder. Harry ignored it. "That's Hermione Granger you're trying to arrest, the nicest girl in Ravenclaw, she helps Hufflepuffs with their homework, she'd die before she tried to kill anyone—"

Hermione Granger's face had crumpled. "I did it," she whispered in a tiny voice. "It was me."

Another huge rock fell on Harry's thoughts and crushed their fragile order, bursting fragments of comprehension into dust.

Dumbledore's face seemed to have aged decades over the course of seconds. "Why, Miss Granger?" Dumbledore said, his own voice barely above a whisper. "Why would you do such a thing?"

"I'm," Hermione said, "I'm, I'm — sorry — I don't know why I —" She seemed to collapse in on herself, her voice was formed of nothing but sobs, and the only words that could be made out were, "I thought — killed him — sorry —"

And Harry should have said something, should have done something, should have jumped up out of his seat and stunned all three Aurors and then gone on to some incredibly clever next move, but the twice-shattered fragments of his thought processes could yield no output. Butnaru's hand pushed Harry gently but firmly back into his seat and Harry found himself *stuck* there like he'd been glued, he tried to grab his wand for a *Finite* and it wouldn't come out of his pocket, the three Aurors and Dumbledore escorted Hermione out of the Great Hall amid a rising storm of outcries and the doors began to swing shut behind them — nothing made sense, it was surreal beyond all reckoning, like he'd been transported into an alternate universe, and then Harry's mind flashed back to another day of confusion and in a moment of desperate inspiration he finally realized what the Weasley twins had done to Rita Skeeter, and his voice rose in a scream, "HERMIONE YOU DIDN'T DO IT YOU'VE BEEN FALSE-MEMORY-CHARMED!"

But the doors had already shut.

Minerva couldn't possibly have stood still, she paced back and forth through the Headmaster's office, the back of her mind half-expecting Severus or Harry to tell her to shut up and sit down, but neither the Potions Master or the Boy-Who-Lived seemed much concerned with her, both of their gazes focused on Albus Dumbledore where he had emerged from the Floo. There were sounds in the background that nobody heard. Severus seemed as passionless as ever, sitting in a small cushioned chair beside the Headmaster's desk. The old wizard stood terrible and upright by the still-burning fireplace, robed in black like a starless night, radiating power and dismay. All her own thoughts were

of utter confusion and horror. Harry Potter sat on a wooden stool with his fingers gripping the seat, and his eyes were fury and freezing ice.

At 6:33 AM, Quirinus Quirrell had Flooed St. Mungo's from his office for immediate pickup of Draco Malfoy. Professor Quirrell had found Mr. Malfoy in the trophy room of Hogwarts, on the verge of death from the continuing effects of the Blood-Cooling Charm slowly lowering his body temperature. Professor Quirrell had immediately dispelled the Charm, cast stabilizing spells on Mr. Malfoy, and levitated him to his office to Floo him to St. Mungo's for further treatment. After this, Professor Quirrell had informed the Headmaster, stating the facts briefly before vanishing through the Floo; the Aurors, notified by St. Mungo's, had demanded his presence for questioning.

The clear intent of the Blood-Cooling Charm had been to kill Draco Malfoy so slowly that the wards of Hogwarts, set to detect sudden injury, would not trigger. Under interrogation, Professor Quirrell had told the Aurors that he had cast several tracking Charms upon Mr. Malfoy's person in January, shortly after Mr. Malfoy's return to Hogwarts from Yuletime break. Professor Quirrell had cast tracking Charms because he had learned of a person with a motive to harm Mr. Malfoy. Professor Quirrell had refused to identify this person. The tracking Charms which Professor Quirrell had cast were triggered by Mr. Malfoy's health falling below an absolute level, rather than by sudden changes, and had therefore alerted Professor Quirrell before Mr. Malfoy had died.

Two drops of Veritaserum, sufficient to prevent Mr. Malfoy from withholding any meliorating or moderating information in his statements, had shown that Mr. Malfoy had — legally under the laws of Noble Houses, illegally under the regulations of Hogwarts — challenged Hermione Granger to a duel. Mr. Malfoy had won the duel but had then, as he left, been attacked from behind by Miss Granger with a Stunning Hex. After this Mr. Malfoy knew nothing.

Three drops of Veritaserum, requiring her to volunteer all relevant information, had caused Hermione Granger to confess that she had stunned Draco Malfoy from behind, and then, in a fit of anger, cast the Blood-Cooling Charm on him, with the deliberate intention of killing him slowly enough to evade identification from the Hogwarts wards, whose workings she had read about in *Hogwarts: A History*. She had been horrified at herself upon awakening the next morning, but had not told anyone of what she'd done, believing Draco

Malfoy to be already dead — as he certainly would have been after seven hours, had his body's own magic not been resisting the effects of the Blood-Cooling Charm.

"Her trial," said Albus Dumbledore, "is set for tomorrow at noon."

"What?" the word burst out of Harry Potter. The Boy-Who-Lived didn't rise from his chair, but Minerva saw his fingers whiten where they gripped the wooden seat beneath him. "That's insane! You can't do a police investigation in one day —"

The Potions Master raised his voice. "This is not *Muggle* Britain, Mr. Potter!" Severus's face was as expressionless as ever, but the bite in his voice was sharp. "The Aurors have an accusation under Veritaserum and a confession under Veritaserum. So far as they are concerned, the investigation is *done*."

"Not quite," said Dumbledore, just as Harry seemed ready to explode. "I have insisted to Amelia that this matter be given the utmost scrutiny. Unfortunately, as the ill-fated duel was at midnight —"

"Supposed duel," Harry said sharply.

"As the *supposed* duel was at midnight — yes, you're quite right, Harry — it is beyond the range of any Time-Turner —"

"Also *supposedly*," the Boy-Who-Lived said coldly. "And rather *suspiciously*, since the alleged murder suspect doesn't know about Time-Turners. I hope that an invisible Auror was immediately sent back in time as far as possible to observe —"

Dumbledore inclined his head. "I went *myself*, Harry, the moment I heard. But by the time I reached the trophy room, Mr. Malfoy was already unconscious and Miss Granger had gone —"

"No," said Harry Potter. "You reached the trophy room and saw Draco unconscious. That is all you observed, Headmaster. You did not *observe* Hermione there, or watch her leave. Let us distinguish observation from inference." The boy's head turned to look at her. "Imperius, Obliviation, False Memory Charm, Legilimency. Professor McGonagall, am I leaving out any mind-affecting spell that could have made Hermione do this or make her believe she'd done it?"

"The Confundus Charm," she said. And the Dark Arts had never been her study, but she knew — "And certain Dark rituals. But none of those could be performed in Hogwarts without alarm."

The boy nodded, his eyes still directly addressing her. "Which of those

spells can be detected? Which would the Aurors try to detect?"

"The Confundus Charm would wear off in a few hours," she said, after a moment to gather her thoughts. "Miss Granger would remember the Imperius. Obliviation cannot be detected by any known means, but only a Professor could have cast that spell upon a student without alarm from the Hogwarts wards. Legilimency — can only be detected by another Legilimens, I think —"

"I requested that Miss Granger be examined by the court Legilimens," said Dumbledore. "The examination showed —"

"Do we trust him?" said Harry.

"Her," said Dumbledore. "Sophie McJorgenson, whom I remember as an honest student of Ravenclaw, and she is bound by the Unbreakable Vow to tell the truth of what she sees —"

"Could someone else be Polyjuiced as her?" Harry Potter interrupted again. "What did you *observe*, Headmaster?"

Albus said heavily, "A person who looked like Madam McJorgenson told us that a single Legilimens had lightly touched Miss Granger's mind some months ago. That is from January, Harry, when I communicated with Miss Granger about the matter of a certain Dementor. That was expected; but what I did not expect was the rest of what Sophie found." The old wizard turned to gaze into the Floo fire, letting the orange flames reflect on his face. "As you say, Harry, a False Memory Charm is one possibility; they are, when cast perfectly, indistinguishable from true memory —"

"That doesn't surprise me," Harry interrupted. "Studies show that human memories are more or less rewritten every time we remember them —"

"Harry," Minerva said softly, and the boy's mouth clamped shut.

The old wizard continued. "— but a False Memory Charm of such quality requires as much time to create as a true memory. Creating a detailed memory of ten minutes would be ten minutes' work. And according to the court Legilimens," Albus's face now seemed more tired and lined than before, "Miss Granger has been obsessing over Mr. Malfoy since the day that Severus... yelled at her. She has been thinking of how Mr. Malfoy might be in league with Professor Snape, how he might be planning to harm her and harm Harry—imagining it for hours every day—it would be impossible to create false memories for so much time."

"The appearance of insanity . . ." Severus murmured softly, as though he were speaking to himself. "Could it be natural? No, it is too disastrous to be

pure accident; too convenient for *someone*, I have no doubt. A Muggle drug, perhaps? But that would not be enough — Miss Granger's madness would have to be *guided* —"

"Ah!" Harry said suddenly. "I get it now. The *first* False Memory Charm was cast on Hermione after Professor Snape yelled at her, and showed, say, Draco and Professor Snape plotting to kill her. Then last night that False Memory was *removed* by Obliviation, leaving behind the memories of her obsessing about Draco for no apparent reason, at the same time she and Draco were given false memories of the duel."

Minerva blinked. It would have been a thousand years before she thought of that possibility.

The Potions Master was frowning thoughtfully, eyes intent. "The *reaction* to a False Memory Charm is hard to predict in advance, Mr. Potter, without Legilimency. The subjects do not always act as expected, when they first remember the false memories. It would have been a risky ploy. But I suppose that is one way Professor Quirrell could have done it."

"Professor Quirrell?" said Harry. "What motive does he have to -"

The Potions Master said dryly, "The Defense Professor is always a suspect, Mr. Potter. You will notice a trend, given time."

Albus raised up a hand, a silencing gesture, and their heads all turned to look at him. "But in this case there is another suspect," Albus said quietly. "Voldemort."

That deadliest of unspeakable words seemed to echo around the room, canceling all the heat from the orange flames of the fireplace.

"I do not know," the old wizard said slowly, "I know all too little, of the methods of Voldemort's immortality. He searched out those books before I did, I think. All I could find were ancient tales, scattered across too many volumes for him to remove. But to find truth among many stories is also a wizard's mastery, and this I have endeavored to do. There is a human sacrifice, a murder, of that I am certain; committed in coldest blood, the victim dying in horror. And old, old tales of wizards possessed, doing mad deeds, claiming the names of Dark Lords thought defeated; and there is usually a device, of that Dark Lord, which they wield..." Albus looked at Harry, the ancient eyes searching the younger. "I think, Harry — though you will call it only inference — that the act of murder splits the soul. That by ritual of blackest horror, the torn fragment of soul is chained to this world. To a material thing

of this world. Which must be, or which then becomes, a device of power."

Horcrux. The terrible name echoed in Minerva's mind, though it seemed that — for what reason she did not know — Albus would not speak that word in front of Harry.

"And therefore," the old wizard finished quietly, "the remainder of the soul is bound to its chained part, lingering here when its body is destroyed. A sad and painful existence, I think it would be; less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost..." The old wizard's eyes were locked on Harry, who gazed back with his eyes narrowed. "It would take time for that mutilated soul to regain a mockery of life. That is why we have had our ten-year reprieve, I believe; why Voldemort did not return at once. But in time... that revenant would become capable of rising again." The old wizard spoke with grim precision. "It is clear, from the stories, that the Dark Lords who return by possessing another's form, wield lesser magics than they once knew. I do not think Voldemort would be satisfied with that. He would take some other avenue to life. But Voldemort was more Slytherin than Salazar, grasping at every opportunity. He would use his pitiful state, use his power of possession, if he had reason. If he could benefit by another's... inexplicable fury." Albus's voice had fallen to almost a whisper. "That is what I suspect happened to Miss Granger."

Minerva's throat was very dry. "He's here," she gasped. "Here, in Hog-

Then she stopped, because the *reason* Voldemort had come to Hogwarts — The old wizard glanced at her only briefly, and said, still in that whisper, "I am sorry, Minerva, you were right."

Harry's voice was edged. "Right about what?"

"Voldemort's strongest avenue to life," Dumbledore said heavily. "The most desirable road for him, by which he would rise greater and more terrible than ever before. It is guarded here, within this castle —"

"Excuse me," Harry said politely. "Are you stupid?"

"Harry," she said, but there was no force in her voice.

"I mean, maybe you haven't noticed this, Headmaster Dumbledore, but this castle is full of *CHILDREN* —"

"I had no choice!" bellowed Dumbledore. The blue eyes were blazing now, beneath the half-moon spectacles. "I do not own it, that thing which Voldemort desires. It belongs to another, and is held here by his consent! I asked if it could be kept in the Department of Mysteries. But he would not permit that — he

said it must be within the wards of Hogwarts, in the place of the Founders' protection —" Dumbledore passed his hand across his forehead. "No," the old wizard said in a quieter voice. "I cannot pass this blame to him. He is right. There is too much power in that thing, too much that men desire. I agreed that the trap should be laid behind the wards of Hogwarts, in the place of my own power." The old wizard bowed his head. "I knew Voldemort would worm his way here somehow, and planned to trap him. I did not think — I did not dream — that he would tarry in an enemy fortress one minute longer than he must."

"But," said Severus in some puzzlement, "what would the Dark Lord possibly gain by killing Lucius's only heir?"

"Point of order," Harry Potter said, a hard edge in his voice. "The motives of whoever's behind this are not the primary issue. Our top priority at this point is that an innocent Hogwarts student is in *trouble!*"

The green eyes locked with the blue, as Albus Dumbledore gazed back at the Boy-Who-Lived —

"Quite right, Mr. Potter," Minerva said, she hadn't even thought about it, the words just seemed to pop out of her lips. "Albus, who is watching over Miss Granger now?"

"Professor Flitwick has gone to her," the Headmaster said.

"She needs a *lawyer*," Harry said. "Anyone who just blurts out 'I did it' to the police —"

"Unfortunately," Minerva said, her tone taking on some of Professor Mc-Gonagall's sternness without thinking, "I doubt an attorney will be any use to Miss Granger at this point, Mr. Potter. She is to face the judgment of the Wizengamot, and they would be exceedingly unlikely to free her on a technicality."

Harry was looking at her with an utterly incredulous expression, as though suggesting that Hermione Granger didn't need an attorney was akin to suggesting that she be set on fire.

"She is correct, Mr. Potter," Severus said quietly. "Few court processes in this country involve solicitors."

Harry lifted his glasses and rubbed his eyes, briefly. "Fine. How do we get Hermione off the hook, exactly? I suppose it's too much to hope that with all the lawyers gone, the judges understand the concept of 'common sense' and 'prior probability' well enough to realize that twelve-year-old girls basically never commit cold-blooded murders?"

"It is the Wizengamot that she faces," said Severus. "The oldest Noble Houses, and certain other wizards of influence." Severus's face twisted in something approaching his customary sarcasm. "As for them showing common sense — you might as well expect them to make you a bacon sandwich, Potter."

Harry nodded, his mouth set. "Exactly what sort of penalty is Hermione facing? Snapped wand and expulsion —"

"No," Severus said. "Nothing that light. Are you willfully misunderstanding, Potter? She is facing the *Wizengamot*. There is no set penalty. There is only the vote."

Harry Potter murmured, "The rule of law, in complex times, has proved itself deficient; we much prefer the rule of men, it's vastly more efficient... There's no constraining legal rules at all, then?"

Light glinted off the old wizard's half-moon glasses; he spoke carefully, and not without anger. "Legally, Harry, we are dealing with a blood debt from Hermione Granger to the House of Malfoy. The Lord of Malfoy proposes a repayment of that debt, and then the Wizengamot votes on his proposal. That is all."

"But..." Harry said slowly. "Lucius was Sorted into Slytherin, he's *got* to realize that Hermione was just a pawn. Not the one he should actually be angry at. Right?"

"No, Harry Potter," Albus Dumbledore said heavily. "That is how you wish Lucius Malfoy would think. Lucius Malfoy himself... will not share your desire that he think that way."

Harry gazed at the Headmaster, his eyes growing colder, at the same time that Minerva herself had to clamp down harder on her own emotions, stop her pacing and try to breathe. She'd been trying not to think about it, trying to turn her thoughts away from it, but she knew. She'd known since the instant she'd heard. She could see it in Albus's eyes —

"Is she facing capital punishment?" Harry said quietly, and chills went all the way down Minerva's spine at the undertones of that voice.

"No!" Albus said. "No, not the Kiss, not Azkaban, not for a first-year in Hogwarts. Our country is not so lost, not yet."

"But Lucius Malfoy," Severus said tonelessly, "certainly will not be satisfied with only snapping her wand."

"All right," Harry said commandingly. "As I see it, we've got two essential

lines of attack. Line one, find the real culprit. Line two, other leverage over Lucius. Professor Quirrell saved Draco's life, does that create a blood debt from House Malfoy to him that he could redeem to cancel Hermione's?"

Minerva blinked again.

"No," Dumbledore said. The old wizard shook his head. "It was a clever thought — but no, Harry, I'm afraid not. There is an exception when the Wizengamot suspects that the circumstances of a life-debt may have been created deliberately. And the Defense Professor is hardly above suspicion. Thus Lucius would argue."

Harry nodded once, face set. "Headmaster, I know I said I wouldn't — but under the circumstances — that time Draco cast that torture hex on me, is that debt enough —"

"No," the old wizard said (even as she blurted "What?" and Severus lifted an eyebrow). "It would not have been enough, and now it is no debt at all. You are an Occlumens and cannot testify under Veritaserum. Draco Malfoy could be Obliviated of his own memory before he could testify —" Albus hesitated. "Harry... whatever you have done with Draco, you must assume that Lucius Malfoy will soon know of it."

Harry's head sank into his hands. "He'll give Draco Veritaserum."

"Yes," Albus said quietly.

The Boy-Who-Lived didn't say anything, as he sat with his head in his hands.

The Potions Master looked genuinely shocked. "Draco really was trying to help Miss Granger," Severus said. "You — Potter, you actually —"

"Turned him?" Harry said from between his hands. "I was about threequarters done. Taught him the Patronus Charm and everything. I don't know what will happen now, though."

"Voldemort has struck a grave blow against us, this day," Albus said. The sound of old wizard's voice was like the look of the boy with his head in his hands. "He has taken two of our pieces, with one . . . No. I should have seen it earlier. He has taken two of *Harry's* pieces with one move. Voldemort has begun his game again, not against myself, but against *Harry*. Voldemort knows the prophecy, he knows who his last foe shall be. He is not waiting to face Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy at Harry's side when they are grown. He is striking at them *now*."

"Maybe it's You-Know-Who and maybe it isn't," Harry said, his voice

sounding a little unsteady. "Let's not narrow down the hypothesis space prematurely." Harry took a breath and lowered his hands. "The other thing we can try is to nail the real culprit before the trial — or at least find solid evidence that *someone* else did it."

"Mr. Potter," said Minerva, "Professor Quirrell told the Aurors that he knew of someone with a motive to harm Mr. Malfoy. Do *you* know who he was talking about?"

"Yes," Harry said, after a hesitation. "But I think I shall conduct that part of my investigation with the Defense Professor — just as I would not have Professor Quirrell in the room while we were discussing how to investigate him."

"He suspects me?" Severus said, then gave a short laugh. "Why, of course he does."

"My own plan," said Harry, "is to go look at the trophy room where the supposed duel took place and see if I can discover anything anomalous. If you can tell the investigating Aurors to let me through —"

"What investigating Aurors?" Severus said tonelessly.

Harry Potter took a deep breath, slowly let it out, and then spoke again. "In mystery books it usually takes longer than one day to solve a crime, but twenty-four hours is — no, *thirty* hours is eighteen hundred minutes. And I can think of at least one other important place to look for clues — though it'll have to be someone who can get into the Ravenclaw girls' dorm. Back when Hermione was fighting bullies, she was finding notes under her pillow each morning, telling her where to go —"

"Albus..." ground out Minerva.

"I did not send them," said the old wizard. His white eyebrows had lifted in surprise. "I knew nothing of this. You think she was being played, Harry?"

"It's a possibility," Harry said. "More so, because there's a part of this puzzle that you don't know about yet." Harry's voice lowered, grew more intense. "Headmaster, you already know that I got my father's invisibility cloak from someone who left a note under my pillow, saying it was an early Christmas present. I think we have to assume that's the same person who left notes for Hermione—"

"Harry," the old wizard said, and hesitated momentarily. "Returning your father's cloak to you, does not seem to me like the act of a villain —"

"Listen," Harry Potter said urgently. "The part you don't know is that after

Bellatrix Black escaped from Azkaban, I found another note under my pillow, signed 'Santa Claus', saying that they'd heard you were shutting me up inside Hogwarts, and that they were giving me an escape route to the Salem Witches' Institute in America. That note came with a deck of cards, in which the King of Hearts was supposedly a Portkey—"

"Mr. Potter!" cried Professor McGonagall, she hadn't even thought before she spoke. "That could well be a kidnapping attempt! You should have told —"

"Yes, Professor, I did the sensible thing," the boy said levelly. "As adapted to the circumstances, I did the sensible thing. I told Professor Quirrell. And according to Professor Quirrell, that Portkey goes to somewhere in London — it's definitely not strong enough to be an international Portkey. Now it's possible that the person who sent the note is honest, and that the point in London is just a way station." The boy reached into his robes and took out a deck of cards, along with a folded paper note. "I will trust you not to go in guns blazing — I mean wands blazing — just in case the sender is an ally of mine, if not yours. But if this is a trap, I say we spring it now. And whoever it is, take them alive so we can exhibit them before the Wizengamot, I cannot overemphasize that part."

Severus rose from his chair, his eyes now intent, and moved toward Harry. "I'll need a hair of yours for Polyjuice, Mr. Potter —"

"Let us not be hasty!" said Albus. "We have not yet examined the notes sent to Miss Granger; there may be no resemblance after all. Severus, would you enter her dorm room and see if you can find those?"

Harry Potter's eyebrows had raised, even as he stood to offer the Potions Master better access to his mess of hair. "You think two *different* people are running around Hogwarts leaving notes beneath pillows?"

Severus gave a brief sardonic laugh, as his hand moved forward and plucked a hair, which soon was being carefully wrapped in silk. "Quite possibly. If I have learned anything in my tenure as Head of Slytherin, I have learned what ridiculous messes arise when there is more than one plotter and more than one plan. But Headmaster — I think Mr. Potter is correct that I should follow this Portkey and see where it leads."

Albus hesitated, and then nodded reluctantly. "I will speak to you before you go, then."

Even as Harry Potter left the room for his own investigations, Severus spun on his heel and strode swiftly toward the jar of Floo powder, his cloak rising behind him with his speed. "I'll get some raw Polyjuice, add the hair, and go. Headmaster, will you stand by to —"

"Albus," Minerva said, surprised at how steady her own voice was, "did you leave those notes under Mr. Potter's pillow?"

Severus's hand halted an instant before casting Floo powder into the fire. Dumbledore nodded to her, though the accompanying smile seemed a bit hollow. "You know me far too well, my dear."

"And I suppose the Portkey goes to a friendly home where Mr. Potter would be kept safe and sound until you arrived to pick him up and return him to Hogwarts?" Her voice tight — it was sensible, she could not deny it was sensible, but somehow it seemed a little cruel.

"It would depend on the circumstances," the old wizard said quietly. "If Harry had gone so far — I might have let him make good his escape, for a time. Better to know where he was going, and ensure it was somewhere safe, with friends —"

"And to think," said Professor McGonagall, "that I had thought to reprimand Mr. Potter for not telling us about this important matter! Upbraid him for not having the sense to trust us!" Her voice had risen in volume. "I shall skip that lecture, I suppose!"

Severus was gazing at the Headmaster with narrowed eyes. "And the notes to Miss Granger —"

"The Defense Professor, very likely," the old wizard said. "Still — that is only a guess."

"I shall go look for them," Severus said. "And then, I suppose, start looking for You-Know-Who." A frown crossed the Potions Master's face. "A task at which I haven't the faintest idea of where to start. Do you know of any magics to find a soul, Headmaster?"

The Divination classroom was lit by the dim red light of a hundred small fires where burned a hundred kinds of incense, so that if you were to ask in one word what the room looked like, the answer would be 'smoke'. (Assuming you bothered to look at anything, when your nose was threatening to overload and

die.) If your gaze could pierce those dank mists, you would see a tiny, cluttered room in which forty stuffed armchairs, most of them unused, were crammed around a small open space in the center of the room, where a circular trapdoor waited on your escape.

"The grim!" Professor Trelawney said in a quavering voice, as she peered into George Weasley's teacup. "The grim! It is a sign of death! One whom you know, George — someone you know is to die! And soon — yes, it shall be quite soon, I think — unless of course it is later —"

It would have been a good deal scarier, thought Fred and George, if she hadn't said the same thing to every single other student in their Divination class. They were hardly even thinking about it at this point; all their thoughts were on today's disaster —

The trapdoor in the floor flew open with a bang that caused Professor Trelawney to shriek and spill George's tea all over his robes, and then an instant later Dumbledore was whooshing up out of the floor with a bird of fire upon his shoulder.

"Fred!" the old wizard said commandingly. His robes were the black of a moonless night, his eyes hard like blue diamonds. "George! With me, now!"

There was an collective gasp and by the time Fred and George were climbing down the ladder after the Headmaster, the entire class was already speculating what role they'd played in the attempted murder of Draco Malfoy.

The trapdoor had hardly slammed shut above them before all nearby sounds muted and the old wizard spun on them and held out a hand and commanded, "Give me the map!"

"M-map?" said Fred or George in total shock. They'd never even suspected that Dumbledore suspected. "Why, w-we don't know what you're —"

"Hermione Granger is in trouble," said the old wizard.

"The Map is in our dorm," George or Fred said immediately. "Just give us a few minutes to get it and we'll —"

The wizard's arms swept them up as if they were hugging-pillows, there was a piercing cry and a flash of fire and then the three of them were in the third-year Gryffindor's boys' dorm.

A few moments later, Fred and George were handing over the Map to the Headmaster, wincing only slightly at the sacrilege of giving their precious piece of the Hogwarts security system to the person who actually owned it, and the old wizard was frowning at the apparent blankness.

"You've got to say," they explained, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good—"

"I decline to lie," said the old wizard. He held the Map high and bellowed, "Hear me, Hogwarts! *Deligitor prodi!*" An instant later the Headmaster was wearing the Sorting Hat, which looked *scarily right* upon his head, as though Dumbledore had always been waiting for a patchwork pointed hat to complete his existence.

(Fred and George immediately memorized this phrase, just in case it would work for somebody besides the Headmaster, and began trying to think of pranks that would involve the Sorting Hat.)

The old wizard wasted not a moment before sweeping the Sorting Hat off his head and turning it upside-down — it was hard to tell with the Hat upside-down, but it looked a bit cross at the treatment — and then plunged in his hand and drew out a crystal rod. With this instrument he began tracing rune-like patterns on the Map, muttering strange incantations that sounded not quite like Latin and echoed in their ears in an unusually creepy fashion. In the midst of tracing one rune he looked up at both of them, fixing them with a sharp glare. "I will return this to you later, sons of Weasley. Go back to class."

"Yes, Headmaster," they said, and hesitated. "Ah — about Hermione Granger, is she really going to be bound to serve Draco Malfoy forever as his —"

"Go," said the old wizard.

They went.

When he was alone in the room, the old wizard looked down at the map, which had now written upon itself a fine line drawing of the Gryffindor dorms in which they stood, the small handwritten *Albus P. W.B. Dumbledore* the only name left therein.

The old wizard smoothed the map, bent over it, and whispered, "Find Tom Riddle."

The interrogation room at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was usually lit by a small orange light, so that the Auror interrogating you would be leaning toward your uncomfortable metal chair with most of their face in shadow, preventing you from reading their expression, even as they read yours.

As soon as Mr. Quirrell had entered the room, the small orange light had dimmed and begun flickering like a candle about to be blown out by the wind. The room was now lit by a sourceless ice-colored glow which illuminated all of Mr. Quirrell's pale skin like alabaster, except, somehow, his eyes, which stayed in darkness.

The Auror on duty outside had surreptitiously tried to dispel this effect four times without the slightest success, despite the fact that Mr. Quirrell had politely surrendered his wand upon being detained for interrogation, and had shown no sign of speaking any incantations nor exerting any other power.

"Quirinus... Quirrell," drawled the man now sitting across from where the Defense Professor had waited courteously. The interrogator had tawny hair that swept back like a lion's mane, with yellowish eyes set into the sternly lined face of a man late in his tenth decade. The man was, at this moment, leafing through a large folder of parchments that he had taken from a black and very solid-looking briefcase after he had limped into the room and sat down, seeming not to look at the face of the man he was interrogating. He had not introduced himself.

After some further leafing through parchments, carried out in silence, the Auror spoke again. "Born September 26th, 1955, to Quondia Quirrell, of an acknowledged tryst with Lirinus Lumblung..." intoned the Auror. "Sorted into Ravenclaw... O.W.L.s quite good... N.E.W.T.s in Charms, Transfiguration... an Outstanding in Muggle Studies, impressive... Ancient Runes, and ah yes, Defense. An Outstanding in that as well. Went on to become quite the tourist, visiting all sorts of places. Portkey visas for Transylvania, the Forbidden Empire, the City of Endless Night... my my, *Texas*." The man looked up from the portfolio, eyes narrowed. "What were you doing *there*, Mr. Quirrell?"

"Sightseeing, mostly in the Muggle areas," the Defense Professor said easily. "As you say, I am quite the tourist."

The man listened to this with a frown, then looked back down, then up again. "I also see that you visited Fuyuki City in 1983."

The Defense Professor lifted an eyebrow in mild puzzlement. "What of it?"

"What did you do in Fuyuki City?" The question snapped out razor-sharp. The Defense Professor frowned slightly. "Nothing of any account. I visited some better-known sights, some less-known sights, and aside from that, kept

to myself."

"Really?" the Auror said softly. "I find that reply rather interesting."

"How so?" said the Defense Professor.

"Because there was no visa listed for Fuyuki City." The man slammed the folder shut. "You're not Quirinus Quirrell. Who the *hell* are you?"

The Potions Master walked quietly into the Ravenclaw girls' dorm, the first-year dorm room, a festive place where bronze and blue competed to be the color of stuffed animals, scarves and dresses, small bits of inexpensive jewelry, and posters of famous people. Hermione Granger's bed was easy to identify; it was the one that had been attacked by a book monster.

Nobody else seemed to be around, at that time of day, and a number of spells verified this.

The Potions Master searched under Hermione Granger's pillow, and beneath her bed, and then began going through her trunk, sorting through mentionable and unmentionable items without change of expression, and finally succeeded in drawing forth a set of papers describing places and times where bullies would be found, all of the papers signed only with an elaborate 'S'.

A brief burst of fire later, the papers were gone, and the Potions Master left to report the failure of his mission.

The Defense Professor was sitting calmly with his hands still folded in his lap. "If you consult Headmaster Dumbledore," said the Defense Professor, "you will find that he is well aware of this matter, and that I agreed to teach his Defense class on the explicit condition that no inquiry be made into my —"

In a lightning motion, the interrogator whipped out his wand and spat "Polyfluis Reverso!" at the same time that the Defense Professor sneezed, which somehow caused the mirror-silvered ray to disrupt in a shower of white sparks.

"Pardon me," the Defense Professor said politely.

The smile that the Auror gave had absolutely no mirth in it. "So where's the real Quirinus Quirrell, eh? Under an Imperius in the bottom of a trunk

somewhere, while you take a hair now and then for your illegal Polyjuice?"

"You are making highly questionable assumptions," the Defense Professor said with an edged voice. "What makes you think I did not steal his body outright using incredibly Dark magic?"

This was followed by a certain pause.

"I suggest," the Auror said, "that you take this seriously, Mr. Whoever-You-Are."

"I'm sorry," said the Defense Professor, leaning back in his chair, "but I see little reason to humble myself on this particular occasion. What are you going to do, kill me?"

"I don't appreciate your humor," the Auror said softly.

"How unfortunate for you, Rufus Scrimgeour," said the Defense Professor. "You have my deepest sympathy." He tilted his head, seeming to study the interrogator; and even within the shadow of the ice-light, the eyes glinted.

Padma stared down at her plate.

"Hermione wouldn't just *do* that!" yelled Mandy Brocklehurst, who was practically in tears, in fact she *was* in tears, her voice would have been loud enough to silence the Great Hall if it hadn't been for all the other students also screaming at each other. "I — I bet Malfoy tried to — to *do* things to her —"

"Our General would *never* do that!" Kevin Entwhistle yelled even louder than Mandy.

"Of course he would!" shouted Anthony Goldstein. "Malfoy's the son of a Death Fater!"

Padma stared down at her plate.

Draco was the General of her army.

Hermione was the founder of S.P.H.E.W.

Draco had trusted her to be his second-in-command.

Hermione was her fellow Ravenclaw.

Both of them were her friends, maybe the two best friends she had.

Padma stared down at her plate. She was glad the Sorting Hat hadn't offered her Hufflepuff. If she'd been Sorted into Hufflepuff it would probably have been much more painful, trying to decide where her divided loyalties lay...

She blinked and realized that her vision had gotten blurry again, and raised

a trembling hand to wipe once more at her eyes.

Morag MacDougal snorted so loudly it was audible even amid the pandemonium of lunch, and said in a loud voice, "I bet Granger *cheated* in her battle yesterday, I bet that's why Malfoy challenged her —"

"All of you *SHUT UP!*" roared Harry Potter, as he hit the table with his fists so hard that plates rattled all the way along it.

At any other time it would have gotten Professors reprimanding him, this time it just got a few nearby students to look.

"I'd wanted to eat lunch," Harry Potter said, "and then get back to investigating, so I wasn't going to talk. But you're all being *silly*, and when the truth comes out you're going to regret what you said about innocent people. Draco didn't do anything, Hermione didn't do anything, they were both False-Memory-Charmed!" Harry Potter's voice had been rising on the last words. "How is that not BLOODY OBVIOUS?"

"You think we'll believe *that?*" Kevin Entwhistle yelled right back at him. "That's what everyone says! 'I didn't do it, it was all just a False Memory Charm!' You think we're *stupid?*"

And Morag nodded right along with him, with a condescending look.

The look that came over Harry Potter's face then made Padma flinch.

"I see," Harry Potter said, it wasn't a shout so Padma had to strain to hear it. "Professor Quirrell isn't here to explain to me how stupid people are, but I bet this time I can get it on my own. People do something dumb and get caught and are given Veritaserum. Not romantic master criminals, because *they* wouldn't get caught, *they* would have learned Occlumency. Sad, pathetic, incompetent criminals get caught, and confess under Veritaserum, and they're desperate to stay out of Azkaban so they say they were False-Memory-Charmed. Right? So your brain, by sheer Pavlovian association, links the idea of False Memory Charms to pathetic criminals with unbelievable excuses. You don't have to consider the specific details, your brain just *pattern-matches* the hypothesis into a bucket of things you don't believe, and you're done. Just like my father thought that magical hypotheses could never be believed, because he'd heard so many stupid people talking about magic. Believing a hypothesis that involves False Memory Charms is *low-status*."

"What are you *blithering* about?" said Morag, looking down her nose at the Boy-Who-Lived.

"You think we'd believe anything you say?" yelled a slightly older-looking

Ravenclaw witch who Padma didn't recognize. "When you turned Granger Dark?"

"And I'm not going to complain," Harry Potter said in an eerily calm voice, "about wizards not having any logic and believing the craziest things. Because I said that to Professor Quirrell once, and he just gave me this *look* and said that if I wasn't blinded by my upbringing I could think of a hundred more ridiculous things that lots of Muggles believe. What you're all doing is very human and very normal and doesn't make you *unusually* bad people, so I'm not going to complain." The Boy-Who-Lived rose up from his bench. "I'll see you all later."

And Harry Potter walked away from them, walked away from all of them. "You're not thinking he's *right*, are you?" said Su Li from beside her, in a tone which made it clear what *she* thought.

"I —" said Padma. Her words seemed to be caught in her throat, her thoughts seemed to be caught in her head. "I — I mean — I —"

If you think hard enough you can do the impossible.

(It had always been an article of faith with Harry. There'd been a time when he'd acknowledged the laws of physics as ultimate limitations, and now he suspected there were no true limits at all.)

If you think fast enough you can sometimes do the impossible quickly...

... sometimes.

Only sometimes.

Not always.

Not reliably.

The Boy-Who-Lived stared around the trophy room, surrounded by awards and cups and plates and shields and statues and medals kept behind thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of crystal glass displays. For as many centuries as Hogwarts had existed, this room had been accumulating details. A week, a month, maybe even a year, wouldn't have sufficed to take the 'examine' option on every item in the room. With Professor Flitwick gone, Harry had asked Professor Vector if there was any way to detect damage to the wards around the crystal cases, verify the residue that a real duel should have left behind. Harry had raced through the Hogwarts library looking for spells to tell the

difference between old fingerprints and new fingerprints, or to detect lingering exhalations in a room. And all those attempts at playing detective had failed.

There were no clues, none that he was smart enough to find.

Professor Snape had said that the Portkey led to an empty house in London, with no sign of anyone or anything else.

Professor Snape hadn't found any notes in Hermione's dorm.

Headmaster Dumbledore had said that Voldemort's spirit was probably hiding out in the Chamber of Secrets where the Hogwarts security system couldn't find him. Harry had snuck into the Slytherin dungeons under the Cloak of Invisibility and spent the rest of the afternoon looking through all the obvious places, but he hadn't found anything snaky that answered back when spoken to. The entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, it seemed, hadn't been meant to be found in a day.

Harry had talked to all of Hermione's friends that would still talk to him, and none of them had remembered Hermione saying anything specific about why she'd believed that Draco was plotting against her.

Professor Quirrell hadn't come back from the Ministry as of dinnertime. The older students seemed to think that this year's Defense Professor would probably end up being blamed for the incident, and fired for teaching Hogwarts students to be too violent. They'd talked about the Defense Professor as though he were already gone.

Harry had used up all six hours from his Time-Turner, and there were still no clues, and he had to go to sleep now if he wanted to be functional at Hermione's trial the next day.

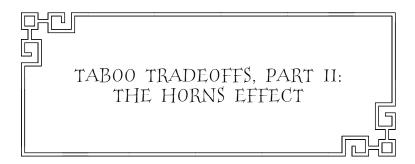
The Boy-Who-Destroyed-A-Dementor was standing in the middle of the Hogwarts trophy room, his wand dropped at his feet.

He was crying.

Sometimes you call your brain and it doesn't answer.

The trial of Hermione Granger started on schedule the next day.

## CHAPTER EIGHTY



he Most Ancient Hall of the Wizengamot is cool and dark, with concentric half-circles of stone rising up from the lowest center, and simple wooden benches set down upon those elevated half-circles. There is no source of light, but the chamber is well-lit, without any apparent cause or reason; it is simply a brute fact that the hall is well-lit. The walls like the floor are stone, dark stone, some elegant and mysterious conjugation of rock most fine to gaze upon, with a smooth texture that seems to flow and shift beneath its surface. This is the Most Ancient Hall, the oldest place of wizardry that has lasted into the modern day; every other place of power was destroyed in one war or another. This is the Hall of the Wizengamot, which is most ancient because the wars ended with the building of this place.

This is the Hall of the Wizengamot; there are older places, but they are hidden. Legend holds that the walls of dark stone were conjured, created, willed into existence by Merlin, when he gathered the most powerful wizards left in the world and awed them into accepting him as their chief. And when (the legend continues) the Seers continued to foretell that not enough had yet been done to prevent the end of the world and its magic, then (the story goes) Merlin sacrificed his life, and his wizardry, and his time, to lay in force the Interdict of Merlin. It was not an act without cost, for a place like this one could not

be raised again by any power still known to wizardkind. Nor yet destroyed, for those walls of dark stone would pass unharmed, and perhaps unwarmed, through the heart of a nuclear explosion. It is a pity that nobody knows how to make them anymore.

In the highest of the rising half-circles of the Wizengamot, on the topmost level of dark stone, there is a podium. At that podium stands an old man, with care-lined face and a silver beard that stretches down below his waist; this is Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. His right hand bears a wand of power, upon his shoulder perches a bird of fire. His left hand holds a short rod, thin and featureless and forged of the same dark stone as the walls, and this is the Line of Merlin Unbroken, the device of the Chief Warlock. Karen Dutton bequeathed the Line to Albus Dumbledore on the last day of her life, scant hours after he returned half-dead from his defeat of Grindelwald with a phoenix flaming brightly at his side. She in turn received the Line from the perfectionist Nicodemus Capernaum, each wizard passing it to their chosen successor, back and back in unbroken chain to the day Merlin laid down his life. That (if you were wondering) is how the country of magical Britain managed to elect Cornelius Fudge for its Minister, and yet end up with Albus Dumbledore for its Chief Warlock. Not by law (for written law can be rewritten) but by most ancient tradition, the Wizengamot does not choose who shall preside over its follies. Since the day of Merlin's sacrifice, the most important duty of any Chief Warlock has been to exercise the highest caution in their choice of people who are both good and able to discern good successors. You would expect that chain of light to miss a step, sometime down through the centuries; that it would go astray at least once, and then never return. But it has not. The Line of Merlin continues, unbroken.

(Or so say those of Dumbledore's faction. Lord Malfoy would tell you otherwise. And in Asia they tell other tales entirely, which may not make Britain's version wrong.)

Upon the bottommost platform of the Ancient Hall there is a high-backed chair, legged and armed and without cushions, of dark metal rather than dark stone, which Merlin did not place there.

The Ministry building that grew up around this place is wood-paneled and gold-washed, bright and fire-lit, filled with bustling foolishness. This place is different. It is the stone heart of magical Britain, and it is neither gold-washed nor wood-paneled, neither fire-lit nor bright.

Filing solemnly into this room are witches and wizards in plum-colored robes each embroidered with a silver W. They carry themselves with an air of seriousness showing that they are well aware that they are terribly, terribly important. They are meeting in the Most Ancient Hall, after all. They are the Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot, and they consider themselves the greatest folk of the world's greatest magical country. Lesser folk have fallen before them on bended knee in supplication; they are powerful, they are wealthy, they are noble; are they not great?

Albus Dumbledore knows everyone in this room by name. He has taught many of them, though too few have learned. Some are his allies, some his opponents, the rest he courts within the careful dance of their neutrality. All of them, to him, are people.

The current Defense Professor of Hogwarts, if you asked him for his opinion of the Lords and Ladies, would say that while many of them are ambitious, few have any ambition. He would observe that the Wizengamot is exactly where someone like that would end up — that it is exactly the sort of opportunity you would grasp, if you had nothing better to do. Such folk are rarely interesting, but they are often useful; pieces to be manipulated, points to be scored, by the true players of the game.

Not among the rising half-circles, but off to one side among a raised arc for the spectators, next to a witch in pointed hat whose face is lined with apprehension, there sits a boy dressed in the most formal black robes that he owns. His eyes are green ice and abstraction, and he hardly glances at the Lords and Ladies as they bustle in. To him they are just a collection of murmuring plum-colored robes to decorate the wooden benches, visual background for the scene of the Most Ancient Hall. If there is an enemy here, or something to be manipulated, it is merely "the Wizengamot". The wealthy elites of magical Britain have collective force, but not individual agency; their goals are too alien and trivial for them to have personal roles in the tale. As of now, this present time, the boy neither likes nor dislikes the plum-colored robes, because his brain does not assign them enough agenthood to be the subjects of moral judgment. He is a PC, and they are wallpaper.

This view is about to change.

∞∞∞∞

Harry gazed unseeing around the hall of the Wizengamot; it looked quite old and historic and there was no doubt that Hermione could have lectured him about the place for hours on end. The plum-colored robes had stopped arriving, and Harry's pocketwatch, advancing at the rate of three minutes every half-hour, said that the trial was almost due to start.

Professor McGonagall was sitting beside him, and her eyes never left him for more than twenty consecutive seconds.

Harry had read the *Daily Prophet* that morning. The headline had been "Mad Muggleborn Tries To End Ancient Line" and the rest of the paper had been the same. When Harry was nine years old the IRA had blown up a British barracks, and he'd watched on TV as all the politicians contested to see who could be the most loudly outraged. And the thought had occurred to Harry—even then, before he'd known much about psychology—that it looked like *everyone* was competing to see who could be most angry, and *nobody* would've been allowed to suggest that anyone was being *too* angry, even if they'd just proposed the saturation nuclear bombing of Ireland. He'd been struck, even then, by an essential emptiness in the indignation of politicians—though he hadn't had the words to describe it, at that age—a sense that they were trying to score cheap points by hitting at the same safe target as everyone else.

Harry had always possessed that sense of hollowness about political indignation, but it was strange how very much more obvious it seemed, when you were reading a dozen articles in the *Daily Prophet* beating on Hermione Granger.

The leading article, written by some name that Harry didn't recognize, had called for the minimum age for Azkaban to be lowered, just so that the twisted Mudblood who had defaced the honor of Scotland with her savage, unprovoked attack upon the last heir of a Most Ancient House within the sacred refuge of Hogwarts could be sent to the Dementors that were the only punishment commensurate with the severity of her unspeakable crime. Only this would be enough to discourage any other foreign, subhuman brutes who similarly believed in their twisted insanity that they could evade the majesty of the Wizengamot's inevitable and merciless scourging of all that threatened the honorable nobility of etcetera etcetera.

The next article had said the same thing in less eloquent words.

Earlier, Albus Dumbledore had told him,

"I will not try to keep you from this trial." The old wizard's voice quiet and

unyielding. "I can well foresee how that would go. But I would have you treat me with equal courtesy in return. The politics of the Wizengamot are delicate, and of them you know nothing. Dare any folly and it shall be to Hermione Granger's cost; and you will remember that folly for the rest of your days, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres."

"I understand," Harry said. "I know. Just — if you're planning to pull a rabbit out of your hat and save the day at the last minute when everything seems lost, please tell me now instead of letting me sit and worry—"

"I would not do that to you," the old wizard said, a terrible weariness seeming to suffuse him as he turned to go. "Still less to Hermione. But I have no rabbits in my hat, Harry. We can only see what Lucius Malfoy wants."

There was a small sharp rap, a single brief sound that somehow silenced the entire room and caused Harry's head to jerk around and upward. High above, Dumbledore had just tapped his podium with the dark rod he held in his left hand.

"The ninetieth session of the two-hundred-and-eighth Wizengamot is convened at the request of Lord Lucius Malfoy," the old wizard said tonelessly.

At once, far to the side of the podium but also in the highest circle, rose a tall man with a mane of long white spilling down from his head over the shoulders of his plum-colored robes. "I present a witness for questioning under Veritaserum," Lucius Malfoy said, his cool tone clear throughout the room, smoothly controlled with only a slight undertone of righteous fury. "Let Hermione, the first Granger, be brought forth."

"I ask you all to remember that she is a first-year of Hogwarts," Dumbledore said. "I will brook no abuse of this witness —"

Someone in the benches quite audibly said "Pfah!" and there was a spread of disgusted snorts, even one or two jeers.

Harry stared at the plum-colored robes, his eyes narrowing.

And with the growing anger came something else, a rising sense of disquiet, of something horribly skewed, like reality itself was being disrupted. Harry knew that, somehow, but he couldn't figure out what was awry, or why his mind thought it was getting worse...

"Order!" Dumbledore bellowed. He rapped the stone rod twice against the podium, producing two more small clicks that overrode all noise. "I will have order here!"

The door through which the witness was brought forth was set directly

beneath Harry's own seat, so it wasn't until the entire group had emerged fully into the stone hall that Harry saw —

- an Auror trio -
- Hermione's back was to Harry as she was brought out, he couldn't see
   her face
  - followed by a shining silver sparrow and a running moonlit squirrel —
- and the source of the horrible wrongness, half-hidden beneath a tattered cloak.

Harry shot to his feet before he could even think, it was only Professor McGonagall's sudden frantic grab on his wrist that stopped his hand going for his wand; and the Transfiguration Professor whispered desperately, "Harry it's all right there's a Patronus—"

It took a few seconds for Harry to remember himself. For the part of himself that understood that Hermione hadn't been directly exposed to a Dementor, to argue his other parts into something like sanity —

But animal Patronuses aren't perfect, said another voice inside his mind. Or Dumbledore wouldn't see the form of a naked man painful to look upon. You felt it approaching, animal Patronus or no...

Slowly, Harry Potter sat back down again as Professor McGonagall pulled down with her grip on his wrist.

But by then he'd already declared war on the country of magical Britain, and the idea of other people calling him a Dark Lord no longer seemed important one way or another.

Hermione's face became visible to him, as she sat down in the chair. She wasn't upright and defiant like she'd been in front of Snape, she wasn't crying like she'd been when the Aurors arrested her. She just sat there with a look of vacant horror as dark metal chains snaked out from the chair and bound her arms and legs.

Harry couldn't take it. Without even thinking he was trying to flee inside himself, flee into his dark side, pull the cold rage over himself like a shield. It took too long, he hadn't tried to go fully into his dark side since Azkaban. And then when his blood was something like cold, he looked up again, and saw Hermione in the chair again, and discovered that his dark side knew nothing about how to deal with this type of pain, it pierced through the coldness like a knife and didn't hurt less in the slightest.

"Why, if it isn't Harry Potter!" came a high, light female voice, sickly sweet

and indulgent.

Slowly, Harry turned his head away from the chair and saw a smiling woman wearing so much makeup that her skin looked almost pink, sitting next to a man that Harry recognized from photographs as Minister Cornelius Fudge.

"Did you have something to say, Mr. Potter?" inquired the woman, as cheerfully as if this wasn't a trial.

Other people were also looking at him now.

Harry couldn't speak, all the words in his mind would have been stupid to speak aloud. He couldn't find anything to say that Neville could also have said. Dumbledore had warned Harry that if anyone *else* wanted the Boy-Who-Lived to speak, he must *pretend to be his age* —

"The Headmaster said I shouldn't ought to talk," the boy said, not quite able to keep the edge out of his voice.

"Oh, but you have *our* permission to talk!" the woman said brightly. "I'm sure the Wizengamot is always happy to hear from the Boy-Who-Lived!" Beside her, Minister Cornelius Fudge was nodding.

The woman's face was puffy and overweight, visibly pale beneath the makeup. Almost inevitably, a certain word came to mind, and that word was *toad*. Which, said Harry's logical part, shouldn't correlate to morality in any way. Only in Disney movies were ugly people more likely to be evil and vice versa; and those movies were probably scripted by writers who'd never been ugly. He'd give her a chance, everyone in this room deserved one chance...

"Because I got rid of the Dark Lord?" the boy said, and pointed at the Dementor where it was hovering behind Hermione's chair. "There's something in this room that's Darker."

The woman's face narrowed, growing a little stern. "I realize a young boy like yourself may be scared by them, Mr. Potter, but the Dementors are quite obedient to the Ministry of Magic. And they would, of course, be necessary to guard —"

"A twelve-year-old girl?" the boy yelled. "Those are the Darkest creatures in the whole world, I could feel it coming here even through the Patronus — the *wrongness* coming nearer — it's horribly evil and it — it'd eat everyone in this room, if it could! It shouldn't be let near any child, ever! Not me, not her, not anyone! You ought to vote to send it away!"

"We'll *certainly* have no such vote —" the toad-woman snapped.

"That's enough, Madam Umbridge, Mr. Potter," came Dumbledore's stern voice from high above. And then after a short pause, the old wizard went on, "Although, of course, the boy is correct on every count."

Some of the members of the Wizengamot were looking abashed at the Boy-Who-Lived's admonition, and a few others were nodding violently to the old wizard's words. But they were too few. Harry could see it. They were too few.

The Veritaserum was brought in then, and Hermione looked for a brief moment like she *was* about to sob, she was looking at Harry — no, at Professor McGonagall — and Professor McGonagall was mouthing words that Harry couldn't make out from his angle. Then Hermione swallowed three drops of Veritaserum and her face grew slack.

"Gawain Robards," said the smooth voice of Lucius Malfoy. "Your probity is known to all of us. If you would do the honors?"

One of the three Aurors stepped forward.

After the first few questions Harry looked away and stared off to one side with his fingers in his ears, as Hermione's brain played back the contents of the False Memory Charm. He couldn't handle the drug-dulled anguish in Hermione's voice as she recounted the false memories, and his dark side couldn't handle it either, and he'd already heard the contents summarized.

Harry's mind flashed back to another day of horror, and even though Harry had been on the verge of writing off Lord Voldemort's continued existence as the senility of an old wizard, it suddenly seemed horribly and uniquely plausible that the entity who'd Memory-Charmed Hermione was the very same mind that had — made use of — Bellatrix Black. The two events had a certain signature in common. To choose that this should happen, plan for this to happen — it would take more than evil, it would take emptiness.

Harry looked up for a moment, then, and saw that the plum-colored robes were watching, just watching.

Some time later, after all the stars in the night sky had gone cold and dark and the last light in the Universe had sputtered down to embers and gone black, the questioning of Hermione ended.

"If it pleases my Lords," said the voice of Lord Malfoy, "I should like to have the testimony of my son Draco, witnessed under two drops of Veritaserum, read aloud at this time."

Until she went after me in that battle, I wasn't plotting anything against

Granger. But after that day I really was feeling insulted, I'd helped her all those times —

The sound that came from Hermione's throat was like she'd just been crushed under a falling stone, so huge that she couldn't cry or breathe, just a small sad gasp.

"Pardon me," said one witch from what seemed to be the Malfoy-aligned side of the room. "But Lord Malfoy, why would your son *help* this Mudblood girl?"

"My son," Lucius Malfoy said in a heavy voice, "seems to have been listening to certain misguided ideas. He is young — and he has learned, now, we have all seen as a country, what such folly brings in repayment."

A few steps down along the visitor's benches, a man wearing a newsman's cap and a badge identifying him as belonging to the *Daily Prophet* was avidly scribbling with a long quill.

The few people who'd nodded along to Dumbledore earlier had rather sick looks on their faces. One witch in plum-colored robes quite deliberately stood up from what had seemed like Dumbledore's side of the room, and made her way over toward the Malfoy side.

The Auror went on reading, his voice monotone.

"I'd been so tired from casting all those locking wards, I was weak when I cast the last one. I thought I was stronger than Granger but I wasn't certain, so I tested it empirically by challenging her to a duel, that's why I d-d-did it and also because if I'd won I was planning to beat her again the next day where everyone could see. Stupid Veritaserum. But she didn't know about that when she tried to kill me! And I really was insulted by what she'd done, I really had helped her before and I hadn't been planning anything against her then, only she went after me in front of everyone!"

When all the witness testimony was done, the deliberations of the Wizengamot began.

If you could call them that.

It seemed that many members of the Wizengamot were of the strong opinion that murder was bad.

The plum-colored robes on Dumbledore's side of the room were silent, the supposed forces of good saving their political capital for more winnable battles. And Harry could hear, as though Professor Quirrell were standing next to him, a dry voice in his mind; explaining to him that it would hardly

have been to the politicians' own advantage to speak, just then.

But there was one wizard in the room whose status was high enough that he had, it seemed, transcended his caution against losing face; one wizard alone whose status was high enough that he could speak a word of sanity and escape unscathed. He alone spoke to defend Hermione, the man with a phoenix flaming bright upon his shoulder.

Only Albus Dumbledore spoke.

The Chief Warlock didn't raise the possibility that Hermione Granger was entirely innocent. That, the Headmaster had explained to Harry, would not be believed, would only make it worse.

But Albus Dumbledore said, in one gentle reminder after another, that the perpetrator was a first-year girl in Hogwarts; that many had done foolish things during their youth; that a first-year in Hogwarts was simply too young to comprehend the consequences of her acts. He himself (the Chief Warlock said quietly) had attempted certain foolish things during his childhood, when he was well older than she.

Albus Dumbledore said that Hermione Granger had been beloved of all the Hogwarts faculty, and helped four Hufflepuff girls with their Charms homework, and had scored one hundred and three points for Ravenclaw over the course of the school year.

Albus Dumbledore said that nobody who knew Hermione Granger would be anything but shocked by these events. That they had, all of them, heard the horror in her voice as she recounted her testimony. And if some unusual madness had temporarily possessed her, then — his voice rising in stern command — she deserved nothing from them except sympathy and a healer's attentions.

And at the last, Albus Dumbledore reminded the Wizengamot, over cries of protest, that the charge was *attempted* murder and not murder. Albus Dumbledore said, over a rising storm of objections, that no lasting harm had come to anyone. And Albus Dumbledore begged them not to do worse themselves than anything that had yet been done —

"Enough!" bellowed Lucius Malfoy, and a show of hands ended the deliberations. The white-maned man stood tall and terrible, his silver cane held high in one hand like a gavel about to fall. "For what this mad woman has tried to do to my son — for the blood debt that she owes for trying to end the line of a Noble and Most Ancient House — I say that she will —"

"Azkaban!" roared a man with a scarred face, seated at Lord Malfoy's right

hand. "Send the mad Mudblood to Azkaban!"

"Azkaban!" cried another plum-colored robe, and then another, and another —

A click from the rod in Dumbledore's hand silenced the room. "You are out of order," the old wizard said sternly. "And your proposal is barbaric, beneath the dignity of this assembly. There are things we do not do. Lord Malfoy?"

Lucius Malfoy had listened to this with an impassive face. "Well," Lord Malfoy said after a few moments. A cold gleam lit his eyes. "I had not planned to ask it. But if that is the will of the Wizengamot — then let her pay as any in her place would pay. Let it be Azkaban."

A great cheer of rage went up —

"Are you all *lost?*" cried Albus Dumbledore. "She is too young! Her mind would not withstand it! Not in three centuries has such a thing been done in Britain!"

"What will the other countries think of us?" said the sharp voice of a woman that Harry recognized as Neville's grandmother.

"Will you guard Azkaban after she goes there, Lord Malfoy?" said a stern old witch that Harry didn't know. "For my Aurors may decline to guard it, I fear, if small children are kept within."

"The deliberations are ended," Lucius Malfoy said coldly. "But if you are incapable of finding Aurors who can obey the vote of the Wizengamot, Madam Bones, you may relinquish the position; we can easily find another to serve in your place. The will of this Hall is clear. For the monstrosity of her crimes, the girl is to be tried as an adult and punished accordingly; ten years in Azkaban, the justice for attempted murder."

When the old wizard spoke again, his voice was lower. "Is there no alternative to this, Lucius? We may retire to my chambers to discuss it, if need be."

The tall man of the long white hair turned, then, to regard where the old wizard stood at the podium; and the two stared at each other for a long moment.

When Lucius Malfoy spoke again his voice seemed to tremble ever so slightly, as though the stern control on it was failing. "Blood calls for repayment, the blood of my family. Not for any price will I sell the blood debt owed my son. You would not understand that, who never had love or child of your own.

Still, there is more than one debt owed to House Malfoy, and I think that my son, if he stood among us, would rather be repaid for his mother's blood than for his own. Confess your own crime to the Wizengamot, as you confessed it to me, and I shall —"

"Don't even think about it, Albus," said the stern old witch who had spoken before.

The old wizard stood at the podium.

The old wizard stood at the podium, his face twisting, untwisting —

"Stop it," said the old witch. "You know the answer you must give, Albus. It will not change for agonizing over it."

The old wizard spoke.

"No," said Albus Dumbledore.

"And you, Malfoy," continued the stern old witch, "I suppose all you really wanted this whole time was to ruin —"

"Hardly," said Lucius Malfoy, his lips now twisting into a bitter smile. "No, I have no purpose here but my son's vengeance. I only wished to show the Wizengamot the truth behind this old man's pretended heroism and his praise of that girl — that he would hardly think of sacrificing himself to save her."

"Cruelty worthy of a Death Eater indeed," said Augusta Longbottom. "Not that I'm implying anything, of course."

"Cruelty?" said Lucius Malfoy, the bitter smile still on his face. "I think not. I knew what his answer would be. I have ever warned you that he only plays his pretended part. If you believe in his hesitation, the more fool you. Remember that his answer was the same." The man raised his voice. "Let us vote, my friends. I think a show of hands will suffice for it. I do not imagine there will be many who choose to align themselves with murderers." The voice went cold, on the last note, the promise in it very clear.

"Look at the girl," said Albus Dumbledore. "See her, see the horror you are committing! She is —" The old wizard's voice broke. "She is afraid —"

The Veritaserum must have been wearing off, because Hermione Granger's face was twisting beneath the slackness, her limbs trembling visibly beneath the chains, as though she were trying to run, run from that chair, but was pressed down by weights larger than the enchanted metal links that bound her. Then there was a convulsive effort and Hermione's neck moved, her head twisted, enough to bring her eyes into line —

She looked at Harry Potter and though she didn't speak, it was absolutely

clear what she was saying.

Harry help me please –

And in the Most Ancient Hall of the Wizengamot an icy voice rang out, speech the color of liquid nitrogen, pitched too high for that it came from too young a throat, and that voice said, "Lucius Malfoy."

In the ancient and hallowed halls of the Wizengamot, people looked around and it took their eyes too long to find what they sought. It might have been high in pitch, it might have been under-loud for the words being spoken; and yet even so, you wouldn't have expected to hear that voice from a child.

It wasn't until Lord Malfoy spoke in return that people even realized where they should be looking.

"Harry Potter," said Lucius Malfoy. He did not incline his head.

Heads spun, eyes moved, and people focused on the messy-haired young boy standing near the weeping older witch. The boy stood merely chest-high with his shoes on, dressed in short robes of formal black. Though unless your eyes were keen indeed, you couldn't have seen, from all the way across the Hall, that famous and deadly scar beneath his messy hair.

"This folly does not become you, Lucius," said the boy. "Twelve-year-old girls do not go around committing murders. You are a Slytherin and an intelligent one. You know this is a plot. Hermione Granger was placed on this gameboard by force, by whatever hand lies behind that plot. *You* were surely intended to act just as you are acting now — except that Draco Malfoy was meant to be dead, and you were meant to be beyond all reason. But he is alive and you are sane. Why are you cooperating with your intended role, in a plot meant to take the life of your son?"

A storm seemed to be raging inside Lucius, the face beneath the flowing white hair threatening to crack open and spill something unguessable. The Lord of Malfoy seemed to almost speak once and then twice again, swallowing three unheard sentences before his lips parted for true. "A plot, you say?" Lord Malfoy said at last. His face was twitching, hardly controlled. "And whose plot would that be, then?"

"If I knew," said the boy, "I would have said so a good deal earlier. But anyone who had ever been Hermione Granger's classmate could tell you that she is a most unlikely murderess. She does, in fact, help Hufflepuffs with their homework. This was not a natural event, Lord Malfoy."

"Plot — or no plot —" Lucius's voice was trembling. "This Mudblood filth has touched my son and for that I will end her. You should know that full well, *Harry Potter.*"

"It is questionable," the boy said, "to put it mildly, whether Hermione Granger actually cast that Blood-Cooling Charm. I do not know the exact circumstances or what spells were involved, but simple trickery would not have sufficed to make her do it. She did not act of her own will, and perhaps did not act at all. Your vengeance is being misdirected, Lord Malfoy, and deliberately so. It is not a twelve-year-old girl who deserves your ire."

"And what do *you* care for her fate?" Lucius Malfoy's voice was rising. "What is *your* stake in this?"

"She is my friend," the boy said, "as Draco is my friend. It is possible that this blow was aimed at me, and not at House Malfoy at all."

Again the muscles jumped in Lucius's face. "And now you are lying to me — as you lied to my son!"

"Believe it or not," the boy said quietly, "I never willed anything but that Draco should know the truth —"

"Enough!" cried the Lord Malfoy. "Enough of your lies! Enough of your games! You do not understand — you would never understand — what it means that he is my son! I will not be denied this vengeance! No more! Never again! For the blood this girl owes House Malfoy, she shall go to Azkaban. And if I ever find another hand at work — even if it is your own — that hand shall be cut off as well!" Lucius Malfoy raised his deadly silver cane as though in command, his teeth clenched and his lips drawn back in a snarl, like a wolf facing a dragon. "And if you have nothing better to say than that — be silent, Harry Potter!"

Harry's blood was hammering even beneath the ice of his dark side, the fear for Hermione, the part of him that wanted to lash out at Lucius and destroy him where he stood for his insolence and his *stupidity* — but Harry didn't

have the *power*, he didn't even have a single vote in the Wizengamot —

Draco had said that Lucius was scared of him, for some unknown reason. And Harry could see it in the rictus that Lord Malfoy's face had become, drawn and tight, that it was taking all his courage for him to tell Harry to shut up.

So Harry said, his voice cool and deadly, hoping to hell that it meant something, "You will earn my enmity if you do this thing, Lucius..."

Someone in the lower rows of what was evidently the blood-purist side of the Wizengamot, who was looking down at the young boy rather than up at Lord Malfoy, laughed in outright incredulity. Other plum-colored robes began to laugh as well.

Lord Malfoy gazed at him with hard dignity, as that laughter spread. "If you want the enmity of the House of Malfoy, you shall have it, *child*."

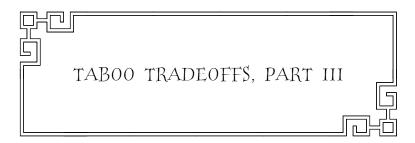
"Now really," said the woman in too much pink makeup, "I think this has gone on quite long enough, wouldn't you say, Lord Malfoy? The boy will miss his classes."

"Indeed he will," said Lucius Malfoy, and then raised his voice again. "I call the vote! By show of hands, let the Wizengamot acknowledge the blood debt owed to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy, for the attempted murder of its last scion and ending of its line, by Hermione, the first Granger!"

Hands shot up one after another, and the secretary who sat in the bottom circle began to make marks on parchment to tally them, but it was obvious which way the majority had gone.

And Harry screamed inside his mind, a frantic call for help to any part of himself that would offer a way out, a strategy, an idea. But there was nothing, there was nothing, he'd played his last cards and lost. And then with a last convulsive desperation Harry plunged himself into his dark side, pushed himself into his dark side, seizing at its deadly clarity, offering his dark side anything if it would only solve this problem for him; and at last the lethal calm came over him, the true ice finally answering his call. Beyond all panic and despair his mind began to search through every fact in its possession, recall everything it knew about Lucius Malfoy, about the Wizengamot, about the laws of magical Britain; his eyes looked at the rows of chairs, at every person and every thing within range of his vision, searching for any opportunity it could grasp —

## CHAPTER EIGHTY-ONE



n rising half-circles of dark stone, a great sea of upraised hands.

The Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot, in plum-colored robes marked with a silver 'W', stared down in stern rebuke at a young girl trembling in chains. If they had, in any particular ethical system, damned themselves, they clearly thought quite highly of themselves for having done so.

Harry's breath was trembling in his chest. His dark side had come up with a plan — and then rotated itself back out again because speaking too icily would not be to Hermione's advantage; a fact which the only-half-cold Harry had somehow not realized...

"The vote carries, in favor," intoned the secretary, when all the tallying was done, and the upraised hands fell back down. "The Wizengamot recognizes the blood debt owed by Hermione Granger to House Malfoy for the attempted murder of its scion and ending of its line."

Lucius Malfoy was smiling in grim satisfaction. "And now," said the white-maned wizard, "I say that her debt shall be paid —"

Harry clenched his fists beneath the bench and shouted, "By the debt owed from House Malfoy to House Potter!"

"Silence!" snapped the woman in too much pink makeup sitting next to Minister Fudge. "You've disrupted these proceedings quite enough already! Aurors, escort him out!" "Wait," said Augusta Longbottom from the top tier of seats. "What debt is this?"

Lucius's hands whitened on his cane. "House Malfoy owes no debt to you!" It wasn't the world's most solid hope, it was based on one newspaper article from a woman who'd been False-Memory-Charmed, but Rita Skeeter had seemed to find it plausible, that Mr. Weasley had allegedly owed James Potter a debt because . . .

"I'm surprised you've forgotten," Harry said evenly. "Surely it was a cruel and painful period of your life, laboring under the Imperius curse of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, until you were freed of it by the efforts of House Potter. By my mother, Lily Potter, who died for it, and by my father, James Potter, who died for it, and by me, of course."

There was a brief silence within the Most Ancient Hall.

"Why, what an excellent point, Mr. Potter," said the old witch who'd been identified as Madam Bones. "I, too, am quite surprised that Lord Malfoy would forget such a significant event. It must have been such a happy day for him."

"Yes," said Augusta Longbottom. "He must have been so grateful."

Madam Bones nodded. "House Malfoy could not possibly deny that debt — unless, perhaps, Lord Malfoy is to tell us that he has misremembered something? I should take quite a professional interest in that. We are always trying to improve our picture of those dark days."

Lucius Malfoy's hands gripped the silver snake-handle of his cane like he was about to strike with it, unleash whatever power it kept —

Then the Lord Malfoy seemed to relax, and a chill smile came over his face. "Of course," he said easily. "I do confess I had not understood, but the child is quite correct. But I do not quite think the two debts cancel — House Potter was only trying to save itself, after all —"

"Not so," Dumbledore said from above.

"— and therefore," intoned Lucius Malfoy, "I demand monetary compensation as well, for the redemption of the blood debt owed my son. That, too, is the law."

Harry felt a strange inward flinch. That had also been in the newspaper article, Mr. Weasley had demanded an additional ten thousand Galleons —

"How much?" said the Boy-Who-Lived.

Lucius was still wearing the cold smile. "One hundred thousand Galleons. If you have not that much in your vault, I suppose I must accept a promissory

note for the remainder."

A roar of protest went up from Dumbledore's side of the room, even some of the plum-colored robes in the middle looked shocked.

"Shall we put it to vote of the Wizengamot?" said Lucius Malfoy. "I think few of us would like to see the little murderess go free. By a show of hands, that additional compensation of one hundred thousand Galleons would be required to cancel the debt!"

The clerk began tallying, but that vote was also clear.

Harry stood there, breathing deeply.

You'd better not even have to think about this, Harry's inner Gryffindor said threateningly.

It's a major purchase, observed Ravenclaw. We ought to spend a lot of time thinking about it.

It shouldn't have been hard. It *shouldn't* have. Two million pounds was only money, and money was only worth what it could buy...

It was strange how much psychological attachment you could have to 'only money', or how painful it could be to imagine losing a bank vault full of gold that you hadn't even imagined existed just one year earlier.

Kimball Kinnison wouldn't hesitate, said Gryffindor. Seriously. Like, snap decision. What sort of hero are you? I already hate you just for having to think about it for longer than 50 milliseconds.

This is real life, said Ravenclaw. Losing all your money is a lot more painful for real people in real life than in heroic books.

What? demanded Gryffindor. Whose side are you on?

I wasn't advocating for a particular answer, said Ravenclaw, I was just saying it because it was true.

Could a hundred thousand Galleons be used to save more than one life if spent some other way? said Slytherin. We have research to do, battles to fight, the difference between being 40,000 Galleons rich and being 60,000 Galleons in debt is not trivial —

So we'll just use one of our ways to make money fast and earn it all back, said Hufflepuff.

It's not certain those will work, said Slytherin, and a lot of them require starting cash —

Personally, said Gryffindor, I vote that we save Hermione and then gang up and kill our inner Slytherin.

The clerk's voice said that the tally had been recorded and the vote had passed...

Harry's lips opened.

"I accept your offer," said Harry's lips, without any hesitation, without any decision having been made; just as if the internal debate had been pretense and illusion, the true controller of the voice having been no part of it.

Lucius Malfoy's mask of calm shattered, his eyes widened, he stared at Harry in sheer blank astonishment. His mouth had opened slightly, though he wasn't speaking, and if he was making any peculiar noises it couldn't be heard over the roar of simultaneous gasps from the Wizengamot —

A tap of stone silenced the crowd.

"No," said the voice of Dumbledore.

Harry's head jerked around to stare at the ancient wizard.

Dumbledore's lined face was pale, the silver beard was visibly trembling, he looked like he was in the final throes of a terminal illness. "I'm — sorry, Harry — but this choice is not yours — for I am still the guardian of your vault."

"What?" said Harry, too shocked to compose his reply.

"I cannot let you go into debt to Lucius Malfoy, Harry! I cannot! You do not know — you do not realize —"

DIF.

Harry didn't even know which part of himself had spoken, it might have been a unanimous vote, the pure rage and fury pouring through him. For an instant he thought that the sheer force of the anger might take magical wing and fly out to strike the Headmaster, send him tumbling back dead from the podium —

But when that mental voice had spoken, the old wizard was still standing there, gazing at Harry, long dark wand in his right hand, short black rod in his left.

And Harry's eyes also went to the red-golden bird with its claws resting on the shoulder of Dumbledore's black robes, silent when no phoenix should have been silent. "Fawkes," Harry said, his voice sounding strange in his own ears, "can you scream at him for me?"

The fiery bird on the old wizard's shoulder didn't scream. Maybe the Wizengamot had demanded that a spell of silence be put on the creature, otherwise it probably would have been screaming the whole time. But Fawkes

hit his master, one golden wing buffeting the old wizard's head.

"I cannot, Harry!" the old wizard said, the agony clear in his voice. "I am doing as I must do!"

And Harry knew, then, as he looked at the red-golden bird, what he had to do as well. It should have been obvious from the beginning, that solution.

"Then I too will do what I must," Harry said up to Dumbledore, as though the two of them stood alone in the room. "You do realize that, don't you?"

The old wizard shook his trembling head. "You will change your mind when you are older —"

"I'm not talking about that," Harry said, his voice still strange in his own ears. "I mean that I will not allow Hermione Granger to be eaten by Dementors under any circumstances. Period. Regardless of what any law says, and no matter what I have to do to stop it. Do I still need to spell it out?"

A strange male voice spoke from somewhere far away, "Be sure that the girl is taken directly to Azkaban, and put under extra guard."

Harry waited, staring at the old wizard, and then spoke again. "I will go to Azkaban," Harry said to the old wizard, as though they stood alone in the world, "before Hermione can be taken there, and start snapping my fingers. It may cost me my life, but by the time she gets there, there won't be an Azkaban anymore."

Some members of the Wizengamot gasped in surprise.

Then a greater number started laughing.

"How would you even get there, little boy?" someone said, from among those who were laughing.

"I have my ways of going places," said the boy's distant voice. Harry kept his eyes on Dumbledore, on the old wizard staring at him in shock. Harry didn't look directly at Fawkes, didn't give his plan away; but in his mind he prepared to summon the phoenix to transport him, prepared to fill his mind with light and fury, to call for the fire-bird with all his might, he might have to do it upon the instant if Dumbledore pointed his wand —

"Would you truly?" the old wizard said to Harry, also as if the two of them stood alone in the room.

The room went silent again as everyone stared in shock at the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, who seemed to be taking the mad threat completely seriously.

The old wizard's eyes were locked only on Harry. "Would you risk every-

thing — everything — only for her?"

"Yes," Harry said back in reply.

That's the wrong answer, you know, said Slytherin. Seriously.

But it's the true answer.

"You will not see reason?" said the old wizard.

"Apparently not," Harry said back.

The gazes stayed locked.

"This is terrible folly," said the old wizard.

"I am aware of this," answered the hero. "Now get out of my way."

Strange light glinted in the ancient blue eyes. "As you will, Harry Potter, but know that this is not over."

The rest of the world faded back into existence.

"I withdraw my objection," said the old wizard, "Harry Potter may do as he wishes," and the Wizengamot exploded in a roar of shock, only to be silenced by a final tap of the stone rod.

Harry turned his head back to look at Lord Malfoy, who looked like he'd seen a cat turn into a person and start eating other cats. To call the look confused did not begin to describe it.

"You would truly . . ." Lucius Malfoy said slowly. "You would truly pay a hundred thousand Galleons, to save one Mudblood girl."

"I think there's about forty thousand in my Gringotts vault," Harry said. It was strange how that was *still* causing more internal pain than the thought of taking an over-fifty-percent risk to his life to destroy Azkaban. "As for the other sixty thousand — what are the rules, exactly?"

"It comes due when you graduate Hogwarts," the old wizard said from high above. "But Lord Malfoy has certain rights over you before then, I fear."

Lucius Malfoy stood motionless, frowning down at Harry. "Who is she to you, then? What is she to you, that you would pay so much to keep her from harm?"

"My friend," the boy said quietly.

Lucius Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "By the report I received, you cannot cast the Patronus Charm, and Dumbledore knows this. The power of a single Dementor nearly killed you. You would not dare venture near Azkaban in your own person—"

"That was in January," said Harry. "This is April."

Lucius Malfoy's eyes remained cool and calculating. "You pretend you can

destroy Azkaban, and Dumbledore pretends to believe it."

Harry did not reply.

The white-haired man turned slightly, toward the center of the half-circle, as though to address the greater Wizengamot. "I withdraw my offer!" shouted the Lord of Malfoy. "I will not accept the debt to House Potter in payment, not even for a hundred thousand Galleons! The girl's blood debt to House Malfoy stands!"

Again the roar of many voices. "Dishonorable!" someone cried. "You acknowledge the debt to House Potter, and yet you would —" and then that voice cut off.

"I acknowledge the debt, but the law does not strictly oblige me to accept it in cancellation," said Lord Malfoy with a grim smile. "The girl is no part of House Potter; the debt I owe House Potter is no debt to her. As for the *dishonor*—" Lucius Malfoy paused. "As for the grave shame I feel at my ingratitude toward the Potters, who have done so much for me—" Lucius Malfoy bowed his head. "May my ancestors forgive me."

"Well, boy?" called the scarred man sitting at Lord Malfoy's right hand. "Go and destroy Azkaban, then!"

"I'd like to see that," said another voice. "Will you be selling tickets?"

It went without saying that Harry didn't pick this particular moment to give up.

The girl is no part of House Potter —

He had, in fact, seen the obvious way out of the dilemma almost instantly.

It might have taken him longer if he hadn't recently overheard a number of conversations between older Ravenclaw girls, and read a certain number of Quibbler stories.

He was, nonetheless, having trouble accepting it.

This is ridiculous, said a part of Harry which had just dubbed itself the Internal Consistency Checker. Our actions here are completely incoherent. First you feel less emotional reluctance to risk your bloody LIFE and probably DIE for Hermione, than to part with a stupid heap of gold. And now you're balking just at getting married?

SYSTEM ERROR.

You know what? said Internal Consistency Checker. You're stupid.

I didn't say no, thought Harry. I was just saying SYSTEM ERROR.

I vote for destroying Azkaban, said Gryffindor. It needs to be done anyway.

Really, really stupid, said Internal Consistency Checker. Oh, screw this, I'm assuming control of our body.

The boy took a deep breath, and opened his mouth —

By this point Harry Potter had entirely forgotten the existence of Professor McGonagall, who had been sitting there this whole time undergoing a number of interesting changes of facial expression which Harry had not been looking at because he was distracted. It would have been overly harsh to say that Harry had forgotten her because he did not consider her a PC. It could be more kindly said that Professor McGonagall was not visibly a solution to any of his current problems, and therefore she was not part of the universe.

So Harry, who at this point had a fair amount of adrenaline in his bloodstream, startled and jumped quite visibly when Professor McGonagall, her eyes now blazing with impossible hope and the tears on her cheek half-dried, leapt to her feet and cried, "With me, Mr. Potter!" and, without waiting for a reply, tore down the stairs that led to the bottom platform where waited a chair of dark metal.

It took a moment, but Harry ran after; though it took him longer to reach the bottom, after Professor McGonagall vaulted half the stairs with a strange catlike motion and landed with the astonished-looking Auror trio already pointing their wands at her.

"Miss Granger!" cried Professor McGonagall. "Can you speak yet?"

Much as with Professor McGonagall, there was a certain sense in which it could be said that Harry had forgotten about the existence of Hermione Granger, because Harry had been tilting his neck back to look upward rather than downward, and because he hadn't considered her a solution to any of his current problems. Though it was hardly certain, in fact it wasn't at all probable, that Harry remembering to look at Hermione or think about what she must be feeling, would have helped anything in the slightest.

Harry reached the bottom of the stairs and saw Hermione Granger full on —

Without thinking, without being able to help himself, Harry shut his eyes, but he'd seen.

Her school robes around her neck, soaked all the way through with tears. The way she'd been looking away from *him*.

And the eye of memory and sympathy, which could not be shut, which could not look away, knew that Hermione had recounted the worst shame of her life in front of the nobility of magical Britain and Professor McGonagall and Dumbledore and Harry; and then been sentenced to Azkaban where she would be exposed to darkness and cold and all her worst memories until she went mad and died; and then she'd heard that Harry was going to give away all his money and go into debt to save her, and maybe even sacrifice his life

and with the Dementor standing only a few paces behind her she hadn't said anything...

"Y-yes," whispered the voice of Hermione Granger. "I c-can talk."

Harry opened his eyes again and saw her face, now looking at him. It didn't say anything like what he thought Hermione was feeling, faces couldn't say anything that complicated, all facial muscles could do was contort themselves into knots.

"H-H-Harry, I-I'm so, I'm so —"

"Shut up," Harry suggested.

"s-s-sorry —"

"If you'd never met me on the train you wouldn't be in any trouble right now. So shut up," said Harry Potter.

"Both of you stop being silly," Professor McGonagall said in her firm Scottish accent (it was strange how much that helped). "Mr. Potter, hold out your wand so that Miss Granger's fingers can touch it. Miss Granger, repeat after me. Upon my life and magic —"

Harry did as he was bid, thrusting his wand forward to touch Hermione's fingers; and then Hermione's faltering voice said, "Upon my life and magic —"

"I swear service to the House of Potter —" said Professor McGonagall.

And Hermione, without waiting for any further instructions, said, the words spilling out of her in a rush, "I swear service to the House of Potter, to obey its Master or Mistress, and stand at their right hand, and fight at their command, and follow where they go, until the day I die."

All those words had been blurted out in a desperate gasp before Harry could have thought or said anything, if he'd been mad enough to interrupt.

"Mr. Potter, repeat these words," said Professor McGonagall. "I, Harry, heir and last scion of the Potters, accept your service, until the end of the world and its magic."

Harry took a breath and said, "I, Harry, heir and last scion of the Potters, accept your service, until the end of the world and its magic."

"That's it," said Professor McGonagall. "Well done."

Harry looked up, and saw that the entire Wizengamot, whose existence he'd forgotten, was staring at them.

And then Minerva McGonagall, who was Head of House Gryffindor even if she didn't always act like it, looked up high above at where Lucius Malfoy stood; and she said to him before the entire Wizengamot, "I regret every point I ever gave you in Transfiguration, you vile little worm."

Whatever Lucius was about to say in reply was silenced by a tap of the short rod in Dumbledore's hand. "Ahem!" said the old wizard from his podium of dark stone. "This session has carried on quite considerably, and if it is not dismissed soon, some of us may miss their entire luncheon. The law of this matter is clear. You have already voted on the terms of the bargain, and Lord Malfoy cannot legally decline it. As we have far exceeded our allotted time, I now, in accordance with the last decision of the survivors of the eighty-eighth Wizengamot, adjourn this session."

The old wizard tapped the rod of dark stone three times.

"You fools!" shouted Lucius Malfoy. The white hair was shaking as though in a wind, the face beneath was pale with fury. "Do you think you'll get away with what you've done today? Do you think that girl can try to murder my son and escape unscathed?"

The toad-like pink-makeup woman, whose name Harry could no longer remember, was standing up from her seat. "Why, of course not," she said with a sickening smile. "After all, the girl is still a murderess, and I think the Ministry shall be watching her affairs quite closely — it hardly seems wise that she should be allowed to wander the streets, after all —"

Harry was fed up at this point.

Without waiting to listen, Harry turned on his heel and strode forward in long steps toward —

The horror only he could truly see, the absence of color and space, the wound in the world, above which floated a tattered cloak; most imperfectly guarded by a running moonlit squirrel and fluttering silver sparrow.

His dark side had also noticed, when it was looking through the entire room for anything that could possibly be used as a weapon, that the enemy had been foolish enough to bring a Dementor into Harry's presence. That was a powerful weapon indeed, and one that Harry might wield better than its supposed masters. There had been a time in Azkaban when Harry had told twelve Dementors to turn and go, and they had gone.

The Dementors are Death, and the Patronus Charm works by thinking about happy thoughts instead of Death.

If Harry's theory was correct, that one sentence would be all it took to pop the Aurors' Patronus Charms like a soap bubble, and ensure that nobody within reach of his voice could cast another one.

I am going to cancel the Patronus Charms and prevent any more Patronuses from being cast. And then my Dementor, flying faster than any broomstick, is going to Kiss everyone here who voted to send a twelve-year-old girl to Azkaban.

Say that, to set up the if-then expectation, and wait for people to understand and laugh. Then speak the fatal truth; and when the Aurors' Patronuses winked out to prove the point, either people's *anticipations* of the mindless void, or Harry's threat of its destruction, would make the Dementor obey. Those who had sought to compromise with the darkness would be consumed by it.

It was the other solution his dark side had devised.

Ignoring the gasps rising from behind him, Harry crossed the radius of the Patronuses, strode to a single pace from Death. Its unhindered fear burst around him like a whirlpool, like stepping next to the sucking drain of some huge bathtub emptying out its water; but with the false Patronuses no longer obscuring the level on which they interacted, Harry could reach the Dementor even as it could reach him. Harry looked straight into the pulling vacuum and —

the Earth among the stars

all his triumph at saving Hermione

someday the reality of which you are a shadow will cease to exist

Harry took all the silver emotion that fueled his Patronus Charm and *shoved* it at the Dementor; and expected Death's shadow to flee from him —

— and as Harry did that, he flung his hands up and shouted "BOO!"

The void retreated sharply away from Harry until it came up against the dark stone behind.

In the hall there was a deathly silence.

Harry turned his back on the empty void, and looked up at where the toad-woman stood. She was pale beneath the pink makeup, her mouth opening and closing like a fish.

"I make you this one offer," said the Boy-Who-Lived. "I never learn that you've been interfering with me or any of mine. And you never find out why the unkillable soul-eating monster is scared of me. Now sit down and shut up."

The toad-woman fell back down to her bench without a word.

Harry looked further up.

"A riddle, Lord Malfoy!" the Boy-Who-Lived shouted across the Most Ancient Hall. "I know you weren't in Ravenclaw, but try to answer this one anyway! What destroys Dark Lords, frightens Dementors, and owes you sixty thousand Galleons?"

For an instant Lord Malfoy stood there with eyes slightly widened; then his face fell back into calm scorn, and his voice spoke coolly in reply. "Are you openly threatening me, Mr. Potter?"

"I'm not threatening you," said the Boy-Who-Lived. "I'm scaring you. There's a difference."

"Enough, Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall. "We shall be late for afternoon Transfiguration as it is. And do come back here, you're still terrifying that poor Dementor." She turned to the Aurors. "Mr. Kleiner, if you would!"

Harry strode back to them, as the Auror addressed moved forward and pressed a short rod of dark metal to the dark metal chair, muttering an inaudible word of dismissal.

The chains slithered back as smoothly as they had come forth; and Hermione pushed herself out of the chair as fast as she could, and half-ran and half-staggered forward a few steps.

Harry held out his arms —

— and Hermione half-jumped half-fell into Professor McGonagall's arms, beginning to sob hysterically.

Hmpfh, said a voice inside Harry. I kind of thought we'd earned that one ourselves.

Oh, shut up.

Professor McGonagall was holding Hermione so firmly that you might have thought it was a mother holding her daughter, or maybe granddaughter. After a few moments Hermione's sobs slowed, and then stopped. Professor McGonagall suddenly shifted her stance and grabbed onto her more tightly; the girl's hands were dangling limply, now, and her eyes were closed —

"She'll be fine, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said softly in Harry's direction, without looking at him. "She just needs a few hours in one of Madam Pomfrey's beds."

"All right, then," Harry said. "Let's get her to Madam Pomfrey's."

"Yes," said Dumbledore, as he descended to the bottom of the dark stone

stairs. "Let us all go home, indeed." His blue eyes were locked on Harry, as hard as sapphires.

The Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot are departing their wooden benches, leaving as they came, looking rather nervous.

The vast majority are thinking 'The Dementor was frightened of the Boy-Who-Lived!'

Some of the shrewder ones are already wondering how this will affect the delicate power balance of the Wizengamot — if a new piece has appeared upon the gameboard.

Almost none are thinking anything along the lines of 'I wonder how he did that.'

This is the truth of the Wizengamot: Many are nobles, many are wealthy magnates of business, a few came by their status in other ways. Some of them are stupid. Most are shrewd in the realms of business and politics, but their shrewdness is circumscribed. Almost none have walked the path of a powerful wizard. They have not read through ancient books, scrutinized old scrolls, searching for truths too powerful to walk openly and disguised in conundrums, hunting for true magic among a hundred fantastic fairy tales. When they are not looking at a contract of debt, they abandon what shrewdness they possess and relax with some comfortable nonsense. They believe in the Deathly Hallows, but they also believe that Merlin fought the dread Totoro and imprisoned the Ree. They know (because that too is part of the standard legend) that a powerful wizard must learn to distinguish the truth among a hundred plausible lies. But it has not occurred to them that they might do the same.

(Why not? Why, indeed, would wizards with enough status and wealth to turn their hands to almost any endeavor, choose to spend their lives fighting over lucrative monopolies on ink importation? The Headmaster of Hogwarts would hardly see the question; of course most people should not be powerful wizards, just as most people should not be heroes. The Defense Professor could explain at great and cynical length why their ambitions are so trivial; to him, too, there is no puzzle. Only Harry Potter, for all the books he has read, is unable to understand; to the Boy-Who-Lived the life choices of the Lords and Ladies seem incomprehensible — not what a good person would do, nor yet

an evil person either. Now which of the three is most wise?)

For whatever reason, then, most of the Wizengamot has never walked the path that leads to powerful wizardry; they do not seek out what is hidden. For them, there is no *why*. There is no explanation. There is no causality. The Boy-Who-Lived, who was already halfway into the magisterium of legend, has now been promoted all the way there; and it is a brute fact, simple and unexplained, that the Boy-Who-Lived frightens Dementors. Ten years earlier they were told that a one-year-old boy defeated the most terrible Dark Lord of their generation, perhaps the most evil Dark Lord ever to live; and they just accepted that too.

You are not meant to question that sort of thing (they know in some unspoken way). If the most terrible Dark Lord in history, confronts an innocent baby — why, how could he *not* be vanquished? The rhythm of the play demands it. You are supposed to applaud, not stand up from your seat in the audience and say 'Why?' It is just the story's conceit, that in the end the Dark Lord is brought down by a little child; and if you are going to question that, you might as well not attend the play in the first place.

It does not occur to them to second-guess the application of such reasoning to the events they have seen with their own eyes in the Most Ancient Hall. Indeed, they are not consciously aware that they are using story-reasoning on real life. As for scrutinizing the Boy-Who-Lived with the same careful logic they would use on a political alliance or a business arrangement — what brain would associate to *that*, when a part of the legendary magisterium is at hand?

But there are a very few, seated on those wooden benches, who do *not* think like this.

There are a certain few of the Wizengamot who have read through half-disintegrated scrolls and listened to tales of things that happened to someone's brother's cousin, not for entertainment, but as part of a quest for power and truth. They have already marked the Night of Godric's Hollow, as reported by Albus Dumbledore, as an anomalous and potentially important event. They have wondered why it happened, if it did happen; or if not, why Dumbledore is lying.

And when an eleven-year-old boy rises up and says "Lucius Malfoy" in that cold adult voice, and goes on to speak words one simply would not expect to hear from a first-year in Hogwarts, they do not allow the fact to slip into the lawless blurs of legends and the premises of plays.

## TABOO TRADEOFFS III

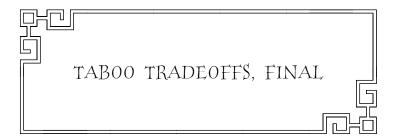
They mark it as a clue.

They add it to the list.

This list is beginning to look somewhat alarming.

It doesn't particularly help when the boy yells "BOO!" at a Dementor and the decaying corpse presses itself flat against the opposite wall and its horrible ear-hurting voice rasps, "Make him go away."

## CHAPTER EIGHTY-TWO



hoenix travel was a sensation entirely unlike Apparition or Portkeys. You caught on fire — you definitely felt yourself catching on fire, even though there was no pain — and instead of burning to ashes, the fire burned all the way through you and you *became* fire, and then you went out in one place and blazed up in another. It didn't sicken the stomach like Portkeys or Apparition, but it was a rather unnerving experience nonetheless. If the underlying truth of phoenix travel really was becoming a specific instantiation of a more general Fire, then that seemed to hint you could potentially burn *anywhere* — even in the distant past, or in another universe, or in two places at once. You might go out in one place and blaze up in a hundred others, and the you who arrived at Hogwarts would never know the difference. Though Harry had read what he could about phoenixes, trying to figure out how to get one of his own, and there'd been no hint of anything remotely like *that* capability.

Harry caught fire and went out and blazed up somewhere else; and just like that he, and the Headmaster, and the unconscious form of Hermione Granger held in the Headmaster's arms, were occupying another place; with Fawkes above them all. A calm, warm room of bright stone columns, skylit on all four sides, populated by white beds in long rows, four of which had silencing veils drawn around them, and the rest empty.

In one corner of Harry's vision, a surprised-looking Madam Pomfrey was turning toward them. Dumbledore seemed to pay the senior healer no heed, as he carefully laid down Hermione on an unoccupied white bed.

From a distant corner there was a flash of green, and from out of a fireplace strode Professor McGonagall, brushing herself off slightly from the Floo ashes.

The old wizard turned from the bed and reached one of his arms around Harry again; and then the Boy-Who-Lived and his wizard vanished in another burst of fire.

When Harry had fully lit up again he was standing in the Headmaster's office, amid the noises of dozens of inexplicable gidgets.

The young boy took a step away from the old wizard and then turned on him, emerald and sapphire eyes meeting.

The two of them did not speak for a time, looking at each other; as though all they had to speak could be said only by stares, and not said in any other way.

In time the boy enunciated words slowly and precisely.

"I cannot believe that a phoenix is still upon your shoulder."

"The phoenix chooses but once," said the old wizard. "They might perhaps leave a master who chooses evil over good; they will not leave a master forced to choose between one good and another. Phoenixes are not arrogant. They know the limits of their own wisdom." Stern indeed, that ancient gaze. "Unlike you, Harry."

"Choose between one good and another," Harry echoed flatly. "Like Hermione Granger's life, versus a hundred thousand Galleons." The rage and indignation Harry wanted to put into his voice wasn't quite there, for some reason, maybe because —

"You are hardly in a position to speak to me of that, Harry Potter." The Headmaster's voice was deceptively soft. "Or what was that look of reluctance that I saw upon your face, there in the Most Ancient Hall?"

The sense of inward hollowness grew worse. "I was looking for other alternatives," Harry bit out. "Some way to save her that *didn't* lose the money."

Wow, said Ravenclaw. You just told an outright lie. Not only that, I think you actually believed it for the seconds it took to say it. That's kinda scary.

"Is that what you were thinking, Harry?" The blue eyes were keen, and there was a terrifying moment when Harry wondered if the world's most powerful wizard could see right past his Occlumency barriers.

"Yes," Harry said, "I flinched away from the pain of losing all the money in my vault. But I did it! That's what counts! And you —" The indignation that had faltered out of Harry's voice returned. "You actually put a price on Hermione Granger's life, and you put it below a hundred thousand Galleons!"

"Oh?" the old wizard said softly. "And what price do you put on her life, then? A million Galleons?"

"Are you familiar with the economic concept of 'replacement value'?" The words were spilling from Harry's lips almost faster than he could consider them. "Hermione's replacement value is *infinite!* There's nowhere I can go to buy another one!"

Now you're just talking mathematical nonsense, said Slytherin. Ravenclaw, back me up here?

"Is Minerva's life also of infinite worth?" the old wizard said harshly. "Would you sacrifice Minerva to save Hermione?"

"Yes and yes," Harry snapped. "That's part of Professor McGonagall's job and she knows it."

"Then Minerva's value is not infinite," said the old wizard, "for all that she is loved. There can only be one king upon a chessboard, Harry Potter, only one piece that you will sacrifice any other piece to save. And Hermione Granger is not that piece. Make no mistake, Harry Potter, this day you may well have lost your war."

And if the old wizard's words hadn't hit quite so hard, and quite so close to home, Harry might not have said what he said then.

"Lucius was right," Harry ground out. "You never had a wife, you never had a daughter, you've never had anything but war —"

The old wizard's left hand closed hard upon Harry's wrist, bony fingers digging into the still-developing muscle of Harry's arm, and for a moment Harry was paralyzed with the shock of it, he had forgotten what it meant that adults were stronger.

Albus Dumbledore did not seem to notice. He only turned, dragging Harry with him, and moved forward in hard steps toward the wall of the room.

"Phoenix's price."

Harry was pulled up along the black stairs.

"Phoenix's fate."

The room of black pedestals, silver light falling on shattered wands.

"You think," yelled Harry, after his lips unlocked, "that you can win any argument, just by standing here?"

The old wizard ignored him, dragging Harry across the room. His right hand, no longer holding his wand, grabbed up a vial of silver fluid —

Harry blinked in shock; the vial of silver fluid had been standing next to a picture of *Dumbledore*, or so it had appeared to Harry in the brief moment before he was dragged past.

Past the end of all the pedestals, at the farthest part of the room, rose a great stone basin with runes carved into it that Harry didn't recognize. The center was a shallow depression filled with transparent liquid, and into this the old wizard dumped the canister of silver fluid, which at once began to spread out, to swirl, to set the entire basin glowing eerie white.

The old wizard's hand let go of Harry's arm and gestured to the glowing basin, commanding harshly, "Look!"

As requested, Harry stared at the glowing water.

"Put your head into the Pensieve, Harry Potter." The old wizard's voice was stern.

Harry had heard that word before, but he couldn't remember where . "What — does this do —"

"Memories," the old wizard said. "You will see my memory. My oath that it is safe. Now look into the Pensieve, Ravenclaw, if you still care anything at all for your precious truth!"

That was a request that Harry could not deny, and he stepped forward and thrust his head into the glowing water.

Harry was sitting behind the desk in the Headmaster's office of Hogwarts, and his wrinkled hands that clutched at his head were spotted with age and white hairs.

"He is all that I have!" wept a voice, very strange was Dumbledore's voice as Dumbledore himself remembered it, from the inside it seemed far less stern and wise. "The last of my family! All that I have left!"

No emotion had been allowed to pass through the Pensieve, only the physical sensation of seeming to speak the words. Harry heard the utter desolation in Dum-

bledore's words, the sounds that seemed to come from Harry's own throat, but Harry did not feel it beyond the hearing.

"You've got no choice," said a harsh voice.

The eyes moved, the field of vision jumped to a man that Harry didn't recognize, in clothing tinged with Auror crimson but made of solid leather with many pockets.

His right eye was overlarge, with an electric-blue pupil that constantly darted and moved.

"You cannot ask this of me, Alastor!" Dumbledore's voice was wild. "Not this! Anything but this!"

"I'm not asking," growled the man. "Voldie's the one who's asking, and you're going to tell him no."

"For money, Alastor?" Dumbledore's voice was begging. "Only for money?"

"You ransom Aberforth, you lose the war," the man said sharply. "That simple. One hundred thousand Galleons is nearly all we've got in the war-chest, and if you use it like this, it won't be refilled. What'll you do, try to convince the Potters to empty their vault like the Longbottoms already did? Voldie's just going to kidnap someone else and make another demand. Alice, Minerva, anyone you care about, they'll all be targets if you pay off the Death Eaters. That's not the lesson you should be trying to teach them."

"If I do this I will have no one. No one." Dumbledore's voice broke, the world tilted as the outlooking head fell down into the ancient hands, and awful sounds came from not-Harry's throat as he began to sob like a child.

"Shall I tell Voldie's messenger no?" said Alastor's voice, now strangely gentle. "You don't have to do it yourself, old friend."

"No -I will say it myself -I must -"

The memory ended with a shock and Harry ripped his head out of the glowing water, gasping as though he'd been deprived of air.

The transition between scenes, between decade-old reality and present moment, was another jolt to Harry's mind; in some fashion his immersion in the past had unanchored him. The broken old man sobbing in his office had been another person in another era, Harry had understood that much; someone softer —

Before it had all vanished like dissipating smoke, returning the now, the

present day.

Terrible and stern stood the ancient wizard, like he was carven from stone; beard woven of thread like iron, half-moon glasses like mirrors, and the pupils behind as sharp and unyielding as black diamond.

"Do you also wish to see my brother as he died under the Cruciatus?" said Albus Dumbledore. "Voldemort sent me that memory as well!"

"And that —" Harry was having trouble producing a voice, for the growing sickness in his chest. "*That* was when —" The words seemed to burn in his throat, as the awful knowledge dawned on him, the horrible understanding. "That was when you burned Narcissa Malfoy alive in her own bedroom."

Albus Dumbledore's gaze was cold as he answered. "To that question only a fool would say yea or nay. What matters is that the Death Eaters believe I killed her, and that belief kept safe the families of all who served the Order of the Phoenix — until this day. Now do you understand what you have done? What you have done to your *friends*, Harry Potter, and to any that stand with you?" The old wizard seemed to grow still taller and more terrible, as his voice rose louder. "You have made them all targets, and targets they will remain! Until you prove, the only way it can be proven, that you are no longer willing to pay such prices!"

"And is it true?" Harry said. There was a buzzing sensation filling him, his body growing more distant. "What Draco said, that Narcissa Malfoy never got her hands dirty, that she was only Lucius's wife? She was an enabler, I get that, but I can't back that deserving being *burned alive*."

"Nothing less would have convinced them that I was done with hesitation." The old wizard's voice brooked no question and no refusal. "Always I was too reluctant to do as I must, always it was others who paid the cost of my mercy. So Alastor told me from the beginning, but I did not listen to him. You, I expect, shall prove better at such decisions than I."

"I'm surprised," Harry said, amazed that his voice was almost steady. "I would have expected the Death Eaters to go after another Light family and start a cycle of escalating retaliation, if you didn't get them all with your first strike."

"If my opponent had been Lucius, perhaps." Dumbledore's eyes were like stones. "I am told that Voldemort laughed at the news, and proclaimed to his Death Eaters that I had finally grown, and was at last a worthy opponent. Perhaps he was right. After the day I condemned my brother to his death, I began to weigh those who followed me, balancing them one against another, asking who I would risk, and who I would sacrifice, to what end. It was strange how many fewer pieces I lost, once I knew what they were worth."

Harry's jaw seemed locked, like it took a massive effort to make his lips move. "But then it's not like Lucius was deliberately taking Hermione for ransom," Harry's voice said thinly. "From Lucius's perspective, someone else broke the truce first. So with that in mind, how many Galleons was Hermione worth, exactly? Leaving aside the Danegeld thing, if it was just some ordinary threat to her life, how much should I have paid to save her? Ten thousand Galleons? Five thousand?"

The old wizard did not answer.

"It's a funny thing," Harry said, his voice wavering like something seen through water. "Do you know, the day I went in front of the Dementor, what my worst memory was? It was my parents dying. I heard their voices and everything."

The old wizard's eyes widened behind the half-moon glasses.

"And here's the thing," Harry said, "here's the thing I've been thinking about over and over. The Dark Lord gave Lily Potter the chance to walk away. He said that she could flee. He *told* her that dying in front of the crib wouldn't save her baby. 'Step aside, foolish woman, if you have any sense in you at all—" An awful chill came over Harry as he spoke those words from his own lips, but he shook it off and continued. "And afterward I kept thinking, I couldn't seem to stop myself from thinking, wasn't the Dark Lord *right?* If only Mother had stepped away. She tried to curse the Dark Lord but it was suicide, she had to have *known* that it was suicide. Her choice wasn't between her life and mine, her choice was for herself to live or for both of us to die! If she'd only done the logical thing and walked away, I mean, I love Mum too, but Lily Potter would be alive right now and she would be my mother!" Tears were blurring Harry's eyes. "Only now I understand, I know what Mother must have felt. She *couldn't* step aside from the crib. She couldn't! Love doesn't walk away!"

It was like the old wizard had been struck, struck by a chisel that shattered him straight down the middle.

"What have I said?" the old wizard whispered. "What have I said to you?" "I don't know!" shouted Harry. "I wasn't listening either!"

"I — I'm sorry, Harry — I —" The old wizard pressed his hands to his face, and Harry saw that Albus Dumbledore was weeping. "I should not have said,

such things to you — I should not, have resented, your innocence —"

Harry stared at the wizard for another second, and then Harry turned and marched out of the black room, down the stairs, through the office —

"I really don't know why you're still on his shoulder," Harry said to Fawkes.

— out the oaken door and into the endlessly turning spiral.

Harry had arrived in the Transfiguration classroom before anyone else, before even Professor McGonagall. There was Charms class earlier, for his year, but that he hadn't even bothered trying to attend. Whether Professor McGonagall would make today's class he didn't know. There was something ominous about all the empty desks beside him, the absence at the board. As if he stood alone in Hogwarts, with all his friends departed.

According to the class schedule, today's lesson was on sustained Transfigurations, all the rules of which Harry had learned by heart back when he was Transfiguring a huge rock into the small diamond that shone on his pinky finger. It would be a theoretical subject, rather than practical, for the rest of the class; which was a pity, because he could have used a dose of Transfiguration's trance.

Harry noted distantly that his hand was trembling, to the point where he had trouble undoing the pouch's drawstring as he drew forth the Transfiguration textbook.

You were monstrously unfair to Dumbledore, said the voice Harry had been calling Slytherin, only now it also seemed to be the Voice of Economic Sensibility and maybe also Conscience.

Harry's eyes dropped down to his textbook, but the section was so familiar it might as well have been a blank parchment.

Dumbledore fought a war against a Dark Lord who deliberately set out to break him in the cruelest possible way. He had to choose between losing his war and his brother. Albus Dumbledore knows, he learned in the worst possible way, that there are limits to the value of one life; and it almost broke his sanity to admit it. But you, Harry Potter — you already knew better.

"Shut up," the boy whispered to the empty Transfiguration classroom, though there was nobody there to hear it.

You'd already read about Philip Tetlock's experiments on people asked to trade

off a sacred value against a secular one, like a hospital administrator who has to choose between spending a million dollars on a liver to save a five-year-old, and spending the million dollars to buy other hospital equipment or pay physician salaries. And the subjects in the experiment became indignant and wanted to punish the hospital administrator for even thinking about the choice. Do you remember reading about that, Harry Potter? Do you remember thinking how very stupid that was, since if hospital equipment and doctor salaries didn't also save lives, there would be no point in having hospitals or doctors? Should the hospital administrator have paid a billion pounds for that liver, even if it meant the hospital going bankrupt the next day?

"Shut up!" the boy whispered.

Every time you spend money in order to save a life with some probability, you establish a lower bound on the monetary value of a life. Every time you refuse to spend money to save a life with some probability, you establish an upper bound on the monetary value of life. If your upper bounds and lower bounds are inconsistent, it means you could move money from one place to another, and save more lives at the same cost. So if you want to use a bounded amount of money to save as many lives as possible, your choices must be consistent with some monetary value assigned to a human life; if not then you could reshuffle the same money and do better. How very sad, how very hollow the indignation, of those who refuse to say that money and life can ever be compared, when all they're doing is forbidding the strategy that saves the most people, for the sake of pretentious moral grandstanding...

You knew that, and you still said what you did to Dumbledore.

You deliberately tried to hurt Dumbledore's feelings.

He's never tried to hurt you, Harry Potter, not once.

Harry's head dropped into his hands.

Why had Harry said what he'd said, to a sad old ancient wizard who'd fought hard and endured more than anyone should ever have to endure? Even if the old wizard was wrong, did he deserve to be hurt for it, after all that had happened to him? Why was there a part of him that seemed to get angry at the old wizard beyond reason, lashing out at him harder than Harry had ever hit anyone, without thought of moderation once the rage had been raised, only to quiet as soon as Harry left his presence?

Is it because you know Dumbledore won't fight back? That no matter what you say to him, however unfair, he'll never use his own power against you, he'll never treat you the way you treat him? Is this the way you treat people when you know

they won't hit back? James Potter's bullying genes, manifesting at last?

Harry closed his eyes.

Like the Sorting Hat speaking inside his head —

What is the real reason for your anger?

What do you fear?

A whirlwind of images seemed to flash through Harry's mind, then, the past Dumbledore weeping into his hands; the present form of the old wizard, standing tall and terrible; a vision of Hermione screaming in her chains, in the metal chair, as Harry abandoned her to the Dementors; and an imagination of a woman with long white hair (had she looked like her husband?) falling amid the flames of her bedroom, as a wand was held upon her and orange light reflected from half-moon glasses.

Albus Dumbledore had seemed to think that Harry would be better at that sort of thing than him.

And Harry knew that he probably would be. He knew the math, after all. But it was understood, somehow it was understood, that utilitarian ethicists didn't *actually* rob banks so they could give the money to the poor. The end result of throwing away all ethical constraint wouldn't *actually* be sunshine and roses and happiness for all. The prescription of consequentialism was to take the action that led to the best net consequences, not actions that had one positive consequence and wrecked everything else along the way. Expected utility maximizers were allowed to take common sense into account, when they were calculating their expectations.

Somehow Harry had understood that, even before anyone else had warned him he'd understood. Before he'd read about Vladimir Lenin or the history of the French Revolution, he'd known. It might have been his earliest science fiction books warning him about people with good intentions, or maybe Harry had just seen the logic for himself. Somehow he'd known from the very beginning, that if he stepped outside his ethics *whenever there was a reason*, the end result wouldn't be good.

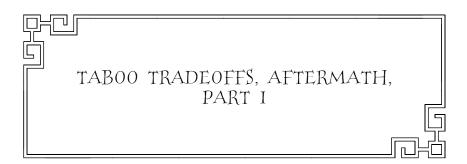
A final image came to him, then: Lily Potter standing in front of her baby's crib and measuring the intervals between outcomes: the final outcome if she stayed and tried to curse her enemy (dead Lily, dead Harry), the final outcome if she walked away (live Lily, dead Harry), weighing the expected utilities, and making the only sensible choice.

She would've been Harry's mother if she had.

## TABOO TRADEOFFS, FINAL

"But human beings can't live like that," the boy's lips whispered to the empty classroom. "Human beings can't live like that."

## CHAPTER EIGHTY-THREE



hen Padma entered the Transfiguration classroom, she saw that half the class had beaten her there, a strange, deathly silence pervading the room. Harry Potter sat alone in one corner, staring off into some unknown distance, his eyes half-lidded, nearly closed.

Rumor said that the Aurors had discovered that the Defense Professor had Polyjuiced as Granger to fool Malfoy.

Rumor said that Hermione had been bound by the Unbreakable Vow to be Draco Malfoy's slave.

Rumor said that Hermione had gotten the Dementor's Kiss.

But if *that* were true, Harry Potter wouldn't be sitting there, he would be —

Padma didn't know what General Potter would do. Her mind went blank, trying to think about it.

Even when Professor McGonagall got there, the silence hadn't broken. The Transfiguration Professor walked up to the board without a pause, erased it with a sweep of her hand, and then began to write.

"Today, children," began the calm professional voice of the Transfiguration Professor, just as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened that week, "we shall learn how much effort it takes to sustain a Transfiguration, and why, at your age, you should not even try. The original Form is not gone, only suppressed; and to maintain that suppression —"

"Excuse me," said Padma Patil. She knew her voice was shaking, she knew that she was trembling visibly, but she had to ask. "Excuse me, Professor, what happened with Miss Granger?"

The Transfiguration Professor paused at the board, and turned to look at Padma. The Professor should have looked stern, having been interrupted without a hand being raised, but instead her face was kindly. "You don't already know, Miss Patil? I expected that rumor would have spread."

"There's too many rumors," said Padma. "I don't know what's true."

Morag MacDougal raised her hand, then said without waiting to be called, "I told you, Padma, what's *true* is that the Wizengamot found Granger guilty and ordered her to get the Dementor's Kiss and they brought in the Dementor and Harry Potter glued it to the ceiling and wouldn't let it down until —"

"Oh, dear Merlin," said Professor McGonagall, her expression growing sharp, but then she visibly calmed herself. "The affair was utterly ridiculous and I shan't go into detail. Let it stand that Miss Granger is resting with Madam Pomfrey for now, and coming back to classes tomorrow. And if I catch anyone bothering her, I shall turn them into glass vases and drop them."

The entire class gasped at this; it wasn't so much that the threat was fatal, as that it broke the safety rules for Transfiguration.

Professor McGonagall turned back to her board —

From a corner of the classroom, another voice rose up. "What about Professor Quirrell?" said Terry Boot. "Has he been arrested?"

"The Aurors are only detaining him," said the Transfiguration Professor without turning around. "If they have not given back our Defense Professor by tomorrow, I shall ask the Headmaster to go fetch him. Though I may as well tell you now that the Board of Governors has scheduled a vote on whether Professor Quirrell's battles shall be allowed to continue."

Kevin Entwhistle spoke. "And General Malfoy? When's he getting back from St. Mungo's?"

The Transfiguration Professor paused in her drawing.

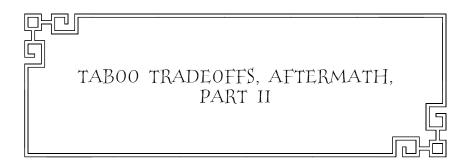
She turned around again, more slowly, this time.

"I am sorry, Mr. Entwhistle," said Professor McGonagall. Her face looked a little more lined than when she had entered the room. "Mr. Malfoy's health is in no danger, I am given to understand. Unfortunately, I have received an

## TABOO TRADEOFFS, AFTERMATH I

owl from Mr. Malfoy's father withdrawing him from Hogwarts. I am afraid he is not coming back."

## CHAPTER EIGHTY-FOUR



hen Hermione Granger woke, she found herself lying in a soft, comfortable bed of the Hogwarts infirmary, with a square of setting sunlight falling on her midriff, warm through the thin blanket. Memory said that there would be a screen-sheet above her, either drawn around her bed or open, and that the rest of Madam Pomfrey's domain would lie beyond: the other beds, occupied or unoccupied, and bright windows set in the curvily-carven stone of Hogwarts.

When Hermione opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was the face of Professor McGonagall, sitting on the left side of her bed. Professor Flitwick wasn't there, but that was understandable, he'd stayed by her side all morning in the detention cell, his silver raven standing extra guard against the Dementor and his stern little face always turned outward toward the Aurors. The Head of Ravenclaw had surely spent way too much time on her, and probably had to get back to teaching his classes, instead of keeping watch on a convicted attempted-murderess.

She felt horribly, horribly sick and she didn't think it was because of any potions. Hermione would've started crying again, only her throat hurt, her eyes still burned, and her mind just felt tired. She couldn't have borne to weep again, couldn't find the strength for tears.

"Where are my parents?" Hermione whispered to the Head of House Gryffindor. Somehow it seemed like the worst thing in the world to face them, even worse than everything else; and yet she still wanted to see them.

The gentle look on Professor McGonagall's face Transfigured into something sadder. "I'm sorry, Miss Granger. Though it was not always so, we have found in recent years that it is wiser not to tell the parents of Muggleborns about any danger their child has faced. I should advise you also to remain silent, if you wish to stay at Hogwarts without trouble from them."

"I'm not being expelled?" the girl whispered. "For what I did?"

"No," said Professor McGonagall. "Miss Granger... surely you heard... I hope you heard Mr. Potter, when he said that you were innocent?"

"He was just saying that," she said dully. "To get me free, I mean."

The older witch shook her head firmly. "No, Miss Granger. Mr. Potter believes you were Memory-Charmed, that the whole duel never happened. The Headmaster suspects even Darker magics may have been involved — that your own hand might have cast the spell, but not your own will. Even Professor Snape finds the affair completely unbelievable, though he may not be able to say so publicly. He was wondering if Muggle drugs might have been used on you."

Hermione's eyes went on staring distantly at the Transfiguration Professor; she knew that she'd just been told something significant, but she couldn't find the energy to propagate any changes through her mind.

"Surely *you* don't believe it?" said Professor McGonagall. "Miss Granger, you cannot believe of yourself that you would turn to murder!"

"But I —" Her excellent memory helpfully replayed it for the thousandth time, Draco Malfoy telling her with a sneer that she'd never beat him when he wasn't tired, and then proceeding to prove just that, dancing like a duelist between the warded trophies while she frantically scrambled, and dealing the ending blow with a hex that sent her crashing against the wall and drew blood from her cheek — and then — then she'd —

"But you remember doing it," said the older witch, who was watching over her with kindly understanding. "Miss Granger, there is no need for a twelve-year-old girl to bear such dreadful memories. Say the word and I shall be happy to lock them away for you."

It was like a glass of warm water thrown into her face. "What?" Professor McGonagall took out her wand, a gesture so practiced and quick

that it seemed like pointing a finger. "I can't offer to rid you of the memories entirely, Miss Granger," the Transfiguration Professor said with her customary precision. "There may be important facts buried there. But there is a form of the Memory Charm which is reversible, and I shall be happy to cast that on you."

Hermione stared at the wand, feeling the stirrings of hope for the first time in almost two days.

*Make it didn't happen*... she'd wished that over and over again, for the hands of time to turn back and erase the horrible choice that could never, ever be undone. And if erasing the memory wasn't that, it was still a kind of release...

She looked back at Professor McGonagall's kindly face.

"You really don't think I did it?" Hermione said, her voice trembling.

"I am quite certain you would never do such a thing of your own will."

Beneath her blankets, Hermione's hands clutched at the sheets. "Harry doesn't think I did it?"

"Mr. Potter is of the opinion that your memories are entire fabrications. I can rather see his point."

Then Hermione's clutching fingers let go of the sheet, and she slumped back into the bed, from which she'd partially risen.

No.

She hadn't said anything.

She'd woken up and remembered what had happened last night, and it had been like — like — she couldn't find words even in her own thoughts for what it had been like. But she'd known that Draco Malfoy was already dead, and she hadn't said anything, hadn't gone to Professor Flitwick and confessed. She'd just dressed herself and gone down to breakfast and *tried to act normal* so that nobody would ever know, and she'd known it was wrong and Wrong and horribly horribly WRONG but she'd been so, so scared —

Even if Harry Potter was right, even if the duel with Draco Malfoy was a lie, she'd made *that* choice all by herself. She didn't deserve to forget that, or be forgiven for it.

And if she *had* done the right thing, gone straight to Professor Flitwick, maybe that would've — helped, somehow, maybe everyone would've seen then that she regretted it, and Harry wouldn't have had to give away all his money to save her —

Hermione shut her eyes, squeezed them shut really tight, she couldn't bear to start crying again. "I'm a horrible person," she said in a wavering voice. "I'm awful, I'm not heroic at all —"

Professor McGonagall's voice was very sharp, like Hermione had just made some dreadful mistake on her Transfiguration homework. "Stop being foolish, Miss Granger! *Horrible* is whoever did this to you. And as for being heroic — well, Miss Granger, you have already heard my opinion about young girls trying to involve themselves in such things before they are even fourteen, so I shall not lecture you on it again. I shall say only that you have just had an absolutely dreadful experience, which you survived as well as any witch in your year possibly could. Today you are allowed to cry as much as you like. Tomorrow you are going back to class."

That was when Hermione knew that Professor McGonagall couldn't help her. She needed someone to scold her, she couldn't be absolved if she couldn't be blamed, and Professor McGonagall would never do that for her, would never ask so much of a little Ravenclaw girl.

It was something Harry Potter wouldn't help her with either.

Hermione turned over in the infirmary bed, huddling into herself, away from Professor McGonagall. "Please," she whispered. "I want to talk — to the Headmaster —"

"Hermione."

When Hermione Granger opened her eyes a second time, she saw the care-lined face of Albus Dumbledore leaning over her bedside, looking almost as though *he'd* been crying, though that was impossible; and Hermione felt another stabbing pang of guilt for having bothered him so.

"Minerva said you wished to speak with me," the old wizard said.

"I—" Suddenly Hermione didn't know at all what to say. Her throat locked up, and all she could do was stammer, "I—I'm—"

Somehow her tone must have communicated the other word, the one she couldn't even say anymore.

"Sorry?" said Dumbledore. "Why, for what should you be sorry?"

She had to force the words out of her throat. "You were telling Harry — that he shouldn't pay — so *I* shouldn't — have done what Professor McGonagall

said, I shouldn't have touched his wand —"

"My dear," said Dumbledore, "had you not pledged yourself to the House of Potter, Harry would have attacked Azkaban singlehandedly, and quite possibly won. That boy may choose his words carefully, but I have never yet known him to lie; and in the Boy-Who-Lived there is power that the Dark Lord never knew. He would indeed have tried to break Azkaban, even at cost of his life." The old wizard's voice grew gentler, and kinder. "No, Hermione, you have nothing at all for which to blame yourself."

"I could have made him not do it."

In Dumbledore's eyes a small twinkle appeared before it was lost to weariness. "Really, Miss Granger? Perhaps you should be Headmistress in my place, for I myself have no such power over stubborn children."

"Harry promised —" Her voice stopped. The awful truth was very hard to speak. "Harry Potter promised me — that he would never help me — if I told him not to."

There was a pause. The distant noises of the infirmary that had accompanied Professor McGonagall had ceased, Hermione realized, when Dumbledore had awoken her. From where she lay in bed she could see only the ceiling, and the top of one wall's windows, but nothing in her range of vision moved, and if there were sounds, she could not hear them.

"Ah," said Dumbledore. The old wizard sighed heavily. "I suppose it *is* possible that the boy would have kept his promise."

"I should — I should've —"

"Gone to Azkaban of your own will?" Dumbledore said. "Miss Granger, that is more than I would ever ask anyone to take upon themselves."

"But —" Hermione swallowed. She couldn't help but notice the loophole, anyone who wanted to get through the portrait-door to the Ravenclaw dorm quickly learned to pay attention to exact wordings. "But it's not more than you'd take on *yourself*."

"Hermione —" the old wizard began.

"Why?" said Hermione's voice, it seemed to be running on without her mind, now. "Why couldn't I be braver? I was going to run in front of the Dementor — for Harry — before, I mean, in January — so why — why couldn't I —" Why had the thought of being sent to Azkaban just completely *unglued* her, why had she forgotten everything about being Good —

"My dear girl," Dumbledore said. The blue eyes behind the half-moon

glasses showed a complete understanding of her guilt. "I would have done no better myself, in my first year in Hogwarts. As you would be kind to others, be kinder to yourself as well."

"So I *did* do the wrong thing." Somehow she needed to say that, to be told that, even though she already knew.

There was a pause.

"Listen, young Ravenclaw," the old wizard said, "hear me well, for I shall speak to you a truth. Most ill-doers do not think of themselves as evil; indeed, most conceive themselves the heroes of the stories they tell. I once thought that the greatest evil in this world was done in the name of the greater good. I was wrong. Terribly wrong. There is evil in this world which knows itself for evil, and hates the good with all its strength. All fair things does it desire to destroy."

Hermione shivered in her bed, somehow it seemed very real, when Dumbledore said it.

The old wizard continued speaking. "You are one of the fair things of this world, Hermione Granger, and so that evil hates you as well. If you had stayed firm through even this trial, it would have struck you harder and yet harder, until you shattered. Do not think that heroes cannot be broken! We are only more difficult to break, Hermione." The old wizard's eyes had grown sterner than she had ever seen. "When you have been exhausted for many hours, when pain and death is not a passing fear but a certainty, then it is harder to be a hero. If I must speak the truth — then today, yes, I would not waver in the face of Azkaban. But when I was a first-year in Hogwarts — I would have fled from the Dementor that you confronted, for my father had died in Azkaban, and I feared them. Know this! The evil that struck at you could have broken anyone, even myself. Only Harry Potter has it within him to face that horror, when he has come fully into his power."

Hermione's neck couldn't stare at the old wizard any longer; she let her head fall back, back to the pillow, where she stared up at the ceiling, absorbing what she could.

"Why?" Her voice trembled again. "Why would anyone be that evil? I don't understand."

"I, too, have wondered," said Dumbledore's voice, a deep sadness in it. "For thrice ten years I wondered, and I still do not understand. You and I will never understand, Hermione Granger. But at least I know now what true evil would say for itself, if we could speak to it and ask why it was evil. It would say, Why not?"

A brief flare of indignation inside her. "There's got to be a *million* reasons why not!"

"Indeed," said Dumbledore's voice. "A million reasons and more. We will always know those reasons, you and I. If you insist on putting it that way — then yes, Hermione, this day's trial broke you. But what happens *after* you break — that, too, is part of being a hero. Which you are, Hermione Granger, and will always be."

She raised her head again, staring at him.

The old wizard got up from beside her bed. His silver beard dipped down, as Dumbledore bowed to her gravely, and left.

She went on looking at where the old wizard had gone.

It should have meant something to her, should have touched her. Should have made her felt better inside, that Dumbledore, who had seemed so reluctant before, had now acknowledged her as a hero.

She felt nothing.

Hermione let her head fall back to the bed, as Madam Pomfrey came and made her drink something that seared her lips like the afterburn of spicy food, and smelled even hotter, and didn't taste like anything at all. It meant nothing to her. She went on staring up at the distant stone tiles of the ceiling.

Minerva was waiting, doing her best not to hover, beside the double doors to the Hogwarts infirmary, she'd always thought of those doors as "the ominous gates" as a child in Hogwarts, and couldn't help but remember that now. Too much bad news had been spoken here —

Albus stepped out. The old wizard did not pause on the way out of the infirmary, only kept walking toward Professor Flitwick's office; and Minerva followed him.

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat. "Is it done, Albus?"

The old wizard nodded in affirmation. "If any hostile magic is cast on her, or any spirit touches her, I shall know, and come."

"I spoke to Mr. Potter after Transfiguration class," said Professor McGonagall. "He was of the opinion that Miss Granger should go to Beauxbatons,

rather than Hogwarts, from now on."

The old wizard shook his head. "No. If Voldemort truly desires to strike at Miss Granger — he is tenacious beyond measure. His servants are returning to him, he could not have retrieved Bellatrix alone. Azkaban itself is not safe from his malice, and as for Beauxbatons — no, Minerva. I do not think Voldemort can essay such possessions often, or against stronger targets, or this year would have gone quite differently. And Harry Potter is here, whom Voldemort must fear whether he admits it or no. Now that I have warded her, Miss Granger will be safer within Hogwarts than without."

"Mr. Potter seemed to doubt that," Minerva said. She couldn't quite keep the edge from her voice; there was a part of her that agreed rather strongly. "He seemed to feel that common sense said Miss Granger should continue her education anywhere but Hogwarts."

The old wizard sighed. "I fear the boy has spent too much time among the Muggles. Always they reach for safety; always they imagine that safety can be reached. If Miss Granger is not safe within the center of our fortress, she shall be no safer for leaving it."

"Not everyone seems to think so," said Professor McGonagall. It had been almost the first letter she'd seen when she'd taken a quick look at her desk; an envelope of the finest sheepskin, sealed in greenish-silver wax, pressed into the image of a snake that rose and hissed at her. "I have received Lord Malfoy's owl withdrawing his son from Hogwarts."

The old wizard nodded, but did not break stride. "Does Harry know?"

"Yes." Her voice faltered, for a moment, remembering Harry's expression. "After class, Mr. Potter complimented Lord Malfoy's excellent good sense, and said that he would be writing Madam Longbottom advising her to do the same with her grandson, in case he was the next target. In the event that Mr. Longbottom's guardian was so negligent as to keep him in Hogwarts, Mr. Potter wanted him to have a Time-Turner, an invisibility cloak, a broomstick, and a pouch in which to carry them; also a toe-ring with an emergency Portkey to a safe location, in case someone kidnaps Mr. Longbottom and takes him outside Hogwarts's wards. I told Mr. Potter that I did not think the Ministry would consent to such use of our Time-Turners, and he said that we should not ask. I expect he will want Miss Granger to receive the same, if she stays. And for himself Mr. Potter wants a three-person broomstick to carry in his pouch." She wasn't awed by the list of precautions. Impressed with the cleverness, but not

awed; she was a Transfiguration Mistress, after all. But it still sent shivers of disquiet through her, that Harry Potter now thought Hogwarts as dangerous as spell research.

"The Department of Mysteries is not lightly defied," said Albus. "But for the rest —" The old wizard seemed to slump in on himself slightly. "We may as well give the boy what he wishes. And I will ward Neville also, and write Augusta to say that he should stay here over holiday."

"And finally," she said, "Mr. Potter says — this is a direct quote, Albus — whatever kind of Dark Wizard attractant the Headmaster is keeping here, he needs to get it out of this school, *now*." She couldn't stop the edge in her own voice, that time.

"I asked as much of Flamel," Albus said, the pain clear in his voice. "But Master Flamel has said — that even *he* can no longer keep safe the Stone — that he believes Voldemort has means of finding it wherever it is hidden — and that he does not consent for it to be guarded anywhere but Hogwarts. Minerva, I am sorry, but it must be done — *must!*"

"Very well," said Professor McGonagall. "But for myself, I think that Mr. Potter is right on every single count."

The old wizard glanced at her, and his voice caught as he said, "Minerva, you have known me long, and as well as any soul still living — tell me, have I lost myself to darkness already?"

"What?" said Professor McGonagall in genuine surprise. Then, "Oh, Albus, no!"

The old wizard's lips pressed together tightly before he spoke. "For the greater good. I have sacrificed so many, for the greater good. Today I almost condemned Hermione Granger to Azkaban for the greater good. And I find myself — today, I found myself — beginning to resent the innocence that is no longer mine —" The old wizard's voice halted. "Evil done in the name of good. Evil done in the name of evil. Which *is* worse?"

"You are being silly, Albus."

The old wizard glanced at her again, before turning his eyes back to their way. "Tell me, Minerva — did you pause to weigh the consequences, before you told Miss Granger how to bind herself to the Potter family?"

She took an involuntary breath as she understood what she had done —

"So you did not." Albus's eyes were saddened. "No, Minerva, you must not apologize. It is well. For what you have seen of me this day — if your first

loyalty is now to Harry Potter, and not to me, then that is right and proper." She opened her lips to protest, but Albus went on before she could say a word. "Indeed — indeed — that will be necessary and more than necessary, if the Dark Lord that Harry must defeat to come into his power is not Voldemort after all —"

"Not *this* again!" Minerva said. "Albus, it was You-Know-Who, not you, who marked Harry as his equal. There is no *possible* way that the prophecy could be talking about you!"

The old wizard nodded, but his eyes still seemed distant, fixed only on the road ahead.

The holding cell, well to the center of Magical Law Enforcement, was luxuriously appointed; more a remark on what adult wizards took for granted, than any special feeling toward prisoners. There was a self-reclining, self-rocking chair with plush, richly textured, self-warming cushions. There was a bookcase containing random books rescued from a bargain bin, and a full shelf of ancient magazines, including one from 1883. As for toiletries, well, it wasn't exactly luxurious, but there was a spell on the room which put all that business on hold; you weren't to go anywhere that the watching Auror couldn't see you. But aside from that, it was quite a pleasant little cell. The Defense Professor of Hogwarts was being detained, not arrested, not even intimidated. There was no evidence to indict him... except that a terrible and unusual crime had been committed at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and going by previous occasions the odds were five to one that the current Defense Professor was tangled up in it somehow. To this must be added the fact that nobody in the D.M.L.E. even knew who the Defense Professor was, and that the man had literally *sneezed* at all attempts to uncover his true identity. Why, no, they hadn't released 'Quirinus Quirrell' back to Hogwarts just yet.

Let us repeat this for emphasis:

The Defense Professor.

Was being detained.

In a cell.

The Defense Professor was staring at the watching Auror and humming. The Defense Professor has not spoken a single word since he arrived in this particular cell. He has only been humming.

The humming started as a simple children's lullaby, the one that in Muggle Britain begins, *Lullaby*, *and goodnight*...

This tune was hummed, without variation, over and over, for seven minutes, to establish the underlying pattern.

Then began the elaborations upon the theme. Phrases hummed too slow, with long pauses in between, so that the listener's mind helplessly waits and waits for the next note, the next phrase. And then, when that next phrase comes, it is so out of key, so unbelievably awfully out of key, not just out of key for the previous phrases but sung at a pitch which does not correspond to any key, that you would have to believe this person had spent hours deliberately practicing their humming just to acquire such perfect anti-pitch.

It bears the same semblance to music as the awful dead voice of a Dementor bears to human speech.

And this horrible, horrible humming is *impossible* to ignore. It is similar to a known lullaby, but it departs from that pattern unpredictably. It sets up expectations and then violates them, never in any constant pattern that would permit the humming to fade into the background. The listener's brain cannot prevent itself from expecting the anti-musical phrases to complete, nor prevent itself from noticing the surprises.

The only possible explanation for how this mode of humming came to exist is that it was deliberately designed by some unspeakably cruel genius who woke up one day, feeling bored with ordinary torture, who decided to handicap himself and find out whether he could break someone's sanity *just by humming at them*.

The Auror has been listening to this unimaginably dreadful humming for four hours, while being stared at by a huge, cold, lethal presence that feels equally horrible whether he looks at it directly or lets it hover at the corner of his vision —

The humming stopped.

There was a long wait. Time enough for false hope to rise, and be squashed down by the memory of previous disappointments. And then, as the interval lengthened, and lengthened, that hope rose again unstoppably —

The humming began once more.

The Auror cracked.

From his belt, the Auror took a mirror, tapped it once, and then said, "This

is Junior Auror Arjun Altunay, I'm calling in code RJ-L20 on cell three."

"Code RJ-L20?" the mirror said in surprised tones. There was a sound of pages being flipped, then, "You want to be relieved because a prisoner is attempting psychological warfare and succeeding?"

(Amelia Bones really is quite intelligent.)

"What'd the prisoner say to you?" said the mirror.

(This question is *not* part of procedure RJ-L20, but unfortunately Amelia Bones has failed to include an explicit instruction that the commanding officer should not ask.)

"He's —" said the Auror, and glanced back at the cell. The Defense Professor was now leaning in back in his chair, looking quite relaxed. "He was *staring* at me! And *humming!*"

There was a pause.

The mirror spoke again. "And you're calling in an RJ-L20 over that? You're sure you're not just trying to get out of watching him?"

(Amelia Bones is surrounded by idiots.)

"You don't understand!" yelled Auror Altunay. "It's really awful humming!"

The mirror transmitted a sound of muffled laughter in the background, sounding like it was coming from more than one person. Then speech again. "Mr. Altunay, if you don't want to be busted to Junior Auror Second Class, I suggest you buckle down and get back to work —"

"Strike that," a crisp voice said, sounding slightly remote due to its distance from the mirror.

(Which is why Amelia Bones often sits in on a coordination center of the D.M.L.E. while doing her Ministry-required paperwork.)

"Auror Altunay," said the crisp voice, seeming to approach closer to the mirror, "you will be relieved shortly. Auror Ben Gutierrez, the procedure for RJ-L20 does *not* say that you ask why. It says that you relieve the Auror who calls it in. *If* I find that Aurors seem to be abusing it, *I* will modify the procedure to prevent its abuse —" The mirror cut off abruptly.

The Auror turned back to look triumphantly at where the current Defense Professor of Hogwarts was leaning back in his cushioned chair.

That man then spoke the first words that had left his lips since he entered the cell.

"Goodbye, Mr. Altunay," said the Defense Professor.

A few minutes later, the door to the detention cell opened, and in walked a

grey-haired woman, dressed in the crimson-tinged robes of an Auror without any sign of rank or other ornamentation, carrying a black leather folder under her left arm. "You're relieved," the old woman said abruptly.

There was a brief delay while Auror Altunay tried to explain what had been happening. This was cut short by a nod and a stark, simple finger pointing out the door.

"Good evening, Madam Director," said the Defense Professor.

Amelia Bones did not acknowledge this statement, but sat down abruptly in the vacated chair. The old witch opened the black folder and her gaze moved down to the parchments therein. "Possible hints to the identity of the current Hogwarts Defense Professor, as compiled by Auror Robards." The title parchment was turned, flipped aside. "The Defense Professor said that he was Sorted into Slytherin. Claimed that his family was killed by Voldemort. Said he had studied at a martial arts center in Muggle Asia which was destroyed by Voldemort. A request filed with the Department of International Magical Cooperation identifies this incident as the Oni Affair of 1969." Another parchment was flipped aside. "It also seems this Defense Professor gave a most stirring speech to his students, just before last Yule, castigating the previous generation for their disunity against the Death Eaters." The old witch looked up from the leather folder. "Madam Longbottom was rather taken with it, and insisted that I read the entire thing. The argument struck me as familiar, though I could not place it at the time. But then, of course, I had thought you dead."

The chief law enforcement officer of Magical Britain was now gazing sharply at the current Defense Professor of Hogwarts, across the pane of spell-reinforced glass separating them. The man in the cell returned the gaze equably, without apparent alarm.

"I shall not name any names," said the old witch. "But I shall tell a story, and see if it sounds familiar." Amelia Bones looked back down, turning to the next parchment. "Born 1927, entered Hogwarts in 1938, sorted into Slytherin, graduated 1945. Went on a graduation tour abroad and disappeared while visiting Albania. Presumed dead until 1970, when he returned to magical Britain just as suddenly, without any explanation for the missing twenty-five years. He remained estranged from his family and friends, living in isolation. In 1971, while visiting Diagon Alley, he fended off an attempt by Bellatrix Black to kidnap the daughter of the Minister of Magic, and used the Killing

Curse to slay two of the three Death Eaters accompanying her. Beyond this all Britain knows the story; need I continue it?" The old witch looked up from her folder again. "Very well. There was a trial in the Wizengamot, during which this young man was exonerated for his use of the Killing Curse, not least due to the efforts of his grandmother, the Lady of his House. He was reconciled with his family, and they held a House gathering to welcome his return. The guest of honor arrived at that gathering to find his entire family slain by Death Eaters, even to the house elves; and that he himself, of cadet line, was now the last remaining scion of a Most Ancient House."

The Defense Professor had not reacted at all to any of this, except that his eyes had half-closed, as though in weariness.

"The young man took up his family's seat in the Wizengamot, becoming among the most steadfast voices against You-Know-Who. Several times he led forces against the Death Eaters, fighting with skillful tactics and extraordinary power. People began to speak of him as the next Dumbledore, it was thought that he might become Minister of Magic after the Dark Lord fell. On July 3rd, 1973, he failed to appear at a key Wizengamot vote, and was never heard from again. We assumed You-Know-Who had killed him. It was a grave blow to all of us, and matters went much the worse from that day on." The old witch's gaze was questioning. "I mourned you myself. What happened?"

The Defense Professor's shoulders moved lightly, a small shrug. "You make many assumptions," the Defense Professor said softly. "For myself, I would believe that man died years ago. But if that man is nonetheless alive — then it is clear he does not wish the fact announced, and has reasons enough for silence. That man was once of some help to you, it seems." The Defense Professor's lips curved in a cynical smile. "But I am no longer surprised when gratitude is fleeting. Is there yet more that you would demand from him?"

The old witch leaned back in her Auror's monitoring-chair, looking rather startled, maybe even hurt. "No —" she said after a moment. Her fingers tapped the leather folder; *nervously*, you might have thought, if you had believed that Amelia Bones could ever be nervous. "But your *House* — there are not many Ancient Houses remaining —"

"It shall matter little to this country whether eight Ancient Houses remain, or seven."

The old witch sighed. "What does Dumbledore think of this?"

The man in the detention cell shook his head. "He does not know who I

am, and promised not to inquire."

The old witch's eyebrows rose. "How did he identify you to the Hogwarts wards, then?"

A slight smile. "The Headmaster drew a circle, and told Hogwarts that he who stood within was the Defense Professor. Speaking of which —" The tone went lower, flatter. "I am missing my classes, Director Bones."

"You seem to — *rest*, sometimes, in a peculiar manner. This has also been reported. And you seem to be *resting* more and more frequently, as time goes on." The old witch's fingers tapped the leather folder again. "I cannot recall reading of such a symptom, but when one hears of such a thing, one imagines... Dark Wizards fought, and terrible curses received..."

The Defense Professor remained expressionless.

"Do you require a healer's help?" said Amelia Bones. Her own mask had slipped, clearly showing the pain in her eyes. "Is there anything at all that can be done for you?"

"I agreed to teach Defense at Hogwarts," the man in the cell said flatly. "Draw your own conclusions, Madam. And I am missing my classes, of which there are not many left. I would return to Hogwarts, now."

When Hermione woke the third time (though it felt like she'd only closed her eyes for a moment) the Sun was even lower in the sky, almost fully set. She felt a little more alive and, strangely, even more exhausted. This time it was Professor Flitwick who was standing next to her bed and shaking her shoulder, a tray of steaming food floating next to him. For some reason she'd thought Harry Potter ought to be leaning over her bedside, but he wasn't there. Had she dreamed that? She couldn't remember dreaming.

It developed (according to Professor Flitwick) that Hermione had missed dinner in the Great Hall, and was being woken to eat. And then she could go back to the Ravenclaw dorm, and her own bed, to sleep the rest of the night.

She ate in silence. There was a part of her that wanted to ask Professor Flitwick whether *he* thought she'd been Memory-Charmed or she'd tried to kill Draco Malfoy of her own will —

- like she remembered doing —
- but most of her was afraid to find out. Afraid to find out was a warning

sign, according to Harry Potter and his books; but her mind felt tired, *bruised*, and she couldn't muster the strength to override it.

When she and Professor Flitwick left the infirmary they found Harry Potter sitting cross-legged outside the door, quietly reading a psychology textbook.

"I'll take her from here," said the Boy-Who-Lived. "Professor McGonagall said it would be all right."

Professor Flitwick seemed to accept this, and departed after a stern look at both of them. She couldn't imagine what the stern look was supposed to say, unless it was *don't try to kill any more students*.

The footsteps of Professor Flitwick faded, and the two of them stood alone outside the doors of the infirmary.

She looked at the green eyes of the Boy-Who-Lived, the mess of hair that didn't quite obscure the scar on his forehead; she looked upon the face of the boy who'd given all his money to save her without a second thought. There were feelings inside her — guilt, shame, embarrassment, other things as well — but no words. There was nothing she knew how to say.

"So," Harry said abruptly, "I did a quick skim through my psychology books to see what they said about post-traumatic stress disorder. The old books said you should talk about the experience immediately afterward with a counselor. The newer research says that when they actually ran experiments, it turned out that talking about it immediately afterward made it worse. Apparently what you really ought to do is run with your mind's natural impulse to repress the memories and just not think about it for a while."

It was so *normal* for the way she and Harry usually talked that she felt a sudden burning in her throat.

We don't have to talk about it. That was what Harry had just said, more or less. It felt like cheating, maybe even like a lie. Nothing was normal. Everything wrong was still horribly wrong, everything left unsaid still needed to be said...

"Okay," said Hermione, because there wasn't anything else to say, anything else at all.

"I'm sorry I wasn't waiting when you woke up," Harry said, as they started to walk. "Madam Pomfrey wouldn't let me in, so I just stayed out here." He gave a small, sad-looking shrug. "I suppose I should be out there trying to run damage control on public relations, but... honestly I've never been good at that, I just end up speaking sharply at people."

"How bad is it?" She thought her voice should have come out in a whisper,

a croak, but it didn't.

"Well—" Harry said with obvious hesitation. "The thing you've got to understand, Hermione, is that you had a lot of defenders at breakfast-time today, but everyone on your side was... making stuff up. Draco tried to kill you first, things like that. It was Granger versus Malfoy, that's how people saw it, like a seesaw where pushing his side down meant pushing your side up. I told them you were probably both innocent, that you'd both been Memory-Charmed. They didn't listen, both sides treated me like a traitor trying to play the middle. And then people heard that Draco had testified under Veritaserum that he'd been trying to help you before the battle—stop making that expression, Hermione, you didn't actually do anything to him. Anyway, all people understood was that the pro-Malfoy faction had been right and the pro-Granger faction had been wrong." Harry gave a small sigh. "I told them that when the truth came out later they'd be embarrassed..."

"How bad is it?" she said again. This time her voice did come out weaker. "Remember Asch's conformity experiment?" Harry said, turning his head to give her a serious look.

Her mind was *slow to remember* for a few seconds, which frightened her, but then the reference came back. In 1951, Solomon Asch had taken some experimental subjects, and each one had been put among a row of other people who looked like them, seeming like other experimental subjects, but actually confederates of the experimenter. They'd shown a reference line on a screen, labeled X, next to three other lines, labeled A, B, and C. The experimenter had asked which line X was the same length as. The correct answer had obviously been C. The other 'subjects', the confederates, had one after another said that X was the same length as B. The real subject had been put second-to-last in the order, so as not to arouse suspicion by being last. The test had been to see whether the real subject would 'conform' to the standard wrong answer of B, or voice the obviously correct answer of C.

75% of the subjects had 'conformed' at least once. A third of the subjects had conformed more than half the time. Some had reported afterward actually believing that X was the same length as B. And that had been in a case where the subjects hadn't known any of the confederates. If you put people around others who belonged to the same group as them, like someone in a wheelchair next to other people in a wheelchair, the conformity effect got even stronger...

Hermione had a sickening feeling where this was going. "I remember," she

whispered.

"I gave the Chaos Legion anti-conformity training, you know. I had each Legionnaire stand in the middle and say 'Twice two is four!' or 'Grass is green!' while everyone else in the Chaos Legion called them idiots or sneered at them — Allen Flint did really good sneers — or even just gave them blank looks and then walked away. The thing you've got to remember is, *only* the Chaos Legion has ever practiced anything like that. Nobody else in Hogwarts even knows what conformity *is*."

"Harry!" Her voice was wobbling. "How bad is it?"

Harry gave another sad-looking shrug. "Everyone in the second year and above, since they don't know you. Everyone in Dragon Army. All of Slytherin, of course. And, well, most of the rest of magical Britain too, I think. Remember, Lucius Malfoy controls the *Daily Prophet*."

"Everyone?" she whispered. Her limbs had started to feel cold, like she'd just gotten out of an unheated swimming pool.

"What people really believe doesn't feel like a *belief*, it feels like the way the world *is*. You and I are standing in a private little bubble of the universe where Hermione Granger got Memory-Charmed. Everyone else is living in the world where Hermione Granger tried to murder Draco Malfoy. If Ernie Macmillian —"

Her breath caught in her throat. Captain Macmillian -

"— thinks he's ethically prohibited from being your friend now, well, he's trying to do the right thing as he understands it, in the world he thinks he lives in." Harry's eyes were very serious. "Hermione, you've told me a lot of times that I look down too much on other people. But if I expected too much of them — if I expected people to get things *right* — I really would hate them, then. Idealism aside, Hogwarts students don't *actually* know enough cognitive science to take responsibility for how their own minds work. It's not their fault they're crazy." Harry's voice was strangely gentle, almost like an adult's. "I know it's going to be harder on you than it would be on me. But remember, eventually the real culprit gets nailed. The truth comes out, everyone who was confidently wrong gets embarrassed."

"And if the real culprit doesn't get caught?" she said in a trembling voice.

... or if it turns out to be me after all?

"Then you can leave Hogwarts and go to the Salem Witches' Institute in America."

"Leave Hogwarts?" She'd never even thought of that possibility except as an ultimate punishment.

"I... Hermione, I think you might want to do that anyway. Hogwarts isn't a castle, it's insanity with walls. You *have* got other options."

"I'll..." she stammered. "I'll have... to think about it..."

Harry nodded. "At least nobody's going to try hexing you, not after what the Headmaster said at dinner tonight. Oh, and Ron Weasley came up to me, looking very serious, and told me that if I saw you first, I should tell you that he's sorry for having thought badly of you, and he'll never speak ill of you again."

"Ron believes I'm innocent?" said Hermione.

"Well... he doesn't think you're innocent, per se..."

The whole Ravenclaw dorm went silent as the two of them walked in.

Staring at them.

Staring at her.

(She'd had nightmares like this.)

And then, one by one, people looked away from her.

Penelope Clearwater, the 5th-year prefect in charge of first-years, looked away slowly and deliberately, turning her head to face in another direction.

Su Li and Lisa Turpin and Michael Corner, all sitting at a table together, all of whom she'd helped with their homework at one time or another, all looked away, their faces suddenly nervous, the moment she tried to catch their eyes.

A third-year witch named Latisha Randle, whom S.P.H.E.W. had twice saved from Slytherin bullies, quickly bent back over her desk and started doing homework again.

Mandy Brocklehurst looked away from her.

If Hermione didn't burst into tears, then, it was only because she'd expected it, had played it out in her mind over and over again. At least people weren't screaming at her or shoving her or hexing her. They were just looking away —

Hermione walked very straight up to the staircase that led toward the firstyear girl's dorms. (She didn't see Padma Patil or Anthony Goldstein looking at her, those two lone heads turning to track her as she left.) From behind her, she heard Harry Potter saying in a very calm tone, "Now eventually the truth's going to come out, you all. So if you're all that confident she's guilty, can I ask you all to sign this paper right here, saying that if she later turns out to be innocent, she gets to say 'I told you so' and then hold it over you for the rest of your lives? Step on up, one and all, don't be cowards, if you really believe you shouldn't be afraid to bet —"

She was halfway up the stairs when she realized that there would be other girls inside her dorm room, too.

The stars hadn't quite come out yet, only one or two of the brightest ones visible through the reddish-purple haze of the horizon, though the sun had fully sunk.

Hermione's hands dug into the harsh stone of the parapet guarding the small balcony, where she'd ducked out of the stairwell after realizing that —

- she couldn't just go back to bed -
- the words echoed in her mind like 'You can't go home again' ought to sound.

She stared out at the empty grounds, the fading sunset, the sprouting grass so far below.

Tired, she was tired, she couldn't think now, she needed to sleep. Professor Flitwick had told her that she needed to sleep, and there'd been yet another potion with her dinner. Maybe that was how wizarding society treated horrible traumas to innocent young girls, just made them sleep a lot afterward.

She should go to her room and sleep, but she was afraid to go someplace where other people were. Afraid of how they might look at her, or look away.

Fragments of thought chased themselves around a mind too exhausted to finish or connect them, as the night fully set in.

Why —

Why did all this happen —

Everything was fine a week ago —

Why —

From behind her came the creaky sound of an opening door.

She turned her head and looked.

Professor Quirrell was leaning against the doorway she'd walked through, silhouetted like a cardboard cutout by the light of the Hogwarts torches lit

behind him, in the open door. She couldn't see his expression, though the doorway behind him was bright; his eyes, his face, everything she could see from here lay within night's shadow.

The Defense Professor of Hogwarts, number one on the list of people who might've done this. She hadn't even realized she *had* a suspect list until that moment.

The man stood within that doorway, saying nothing; and she couldn't see his eyes. What was he even *doing* there in the first place —

"Are you here to kill me?" said Hermione Granger.

Professor Quirrell's head tilted at that.

Then the Defense Professor started toward her, the dark silhouette raising one hand slowly and deliberately, as though to push her off the Ravenclaw tower —

"Stupefy!"

The burst of adrenaline overrode everything, she drew her wand without thinking, her lips formed the word of their own accord, the stunbolt leapt out of her wand and —

— *slowed to a stop* in front of Professor Quirrell's raised hand, rippling in midair like it was still trying to fly and making a slight hissing sound.

The red glow illuminated Professor Quirrell's face for the first time, showing a strange fond smile.

"Better," said Professor Quirrell. "Miss Granger, you are still a student in my Defense class. As such, if you consider me a threat, I do not expect you to just look at me sadly and ask if I am there to kill you. Minus two Quirrell points."

She was entirely unable to form words.

The Defense Professor flicked his forefinger casually at the suspended stunbolt, sending the hex shooting back over her head, far into the night, so that they stood again in darkness. Then Professor Quirrell walked out of the doorway, which swung shut behind him; and a soft white light sprung up around the two of them, so that she could see his face once more, still with that strange fond smile.

"What are you — what are you doing here?"

A few more steps took Professor Quirrell to a higher part of the balcony's ramparts, where he put his elbows down on the stone, and leaned over heavily, looking up into the night.

"I came here straight upon being released by the Aurors, the moment I finished reporting to the Headmaster," said Professor Quirrell in a quiet voice, "because I am your teacher, and you are my student, and I am responsible for you."

Hermione understood, then; remembering what Professor Quirrell had said to Harry in the second Defense lesson of the year, about controlling his anger. She felt the flush of shame all the way down her chest. It took a moment after that for knowledge to override mortification, for her to force out the words —

"I —" said Hermione. "Harry thinks — that I *didn't* — lose my temper, I mean —"

"So I heard," said Professor Quirrell in rather dry tones. He shook his head, as though at the stars themselves. "The boy is fortunate that I have crossed the line from annoyance with his self-destructiveness, into sheer curiosity as to what he shall do next. But I agree with Mr. Potter's assessment of the facts. This murder was well-planned to evade detection both by the wards of Hogwarts and the Headmaster's timely eye. Naturally, in such a thoughtful murder, some innocent would be placed to take the blame." A brief, wry smile crossed the Defense Professor's lips, though he wasn't looking at her. "As for the notion that you did it yourself — I consider myself a talented teacher, but even I could not teach such murderous intent to a student as obstinate and untalented as Hermione Granger."

The part of her brain that said *What?* in indignation wasn't anywhere near loud enough to reach her lips.

"No..." said Professor Quirrell. "That is not why I am here. You have made no effort to hide your dislike for me, Miss Granger. I thank you for that lack of pretense, for I much prefer true hate to false love. But you are still my student, and I have a word to say to you, if you will hear it."

Hermione looked at him, still fighting down the aftereffects of the adrenaline from before. The Defense Professor seemed to be just staring up at the dark sky, in which the stars were becoming visible.

"I was going to be a hero, once," said Professor Quirrell, still looking upward. "Can you believe that, Miss Granger?"

"No."

"Thank you again, Miss Granger. It is true nonetheless. Long ago, long before your time or Harry Potter's, there was a man who was hailed as a savior.

The destined scion, such a one as anyone would recognize from tales, wielding justice and vengeance like twin wands against his dreadful nemesis." Professor Quirrell gave a soft, bitter laugh, looking up at the night sky. "Do you know, Miss Granger, at that time I thought myself already cynical, and yet... well."

The silence stretched, in the cold and the night.

"In all honesty," said Professor Quirrell, looking up at the stars, "I still don't understand it. They should have known that their lives depended on that man's success. And yet it was as if they tried to do everything they could to make his life unpleasant. To throw every possible obstacle into his way. I was not naive, Miss Granger, I did not expect the power-holders to align themselves with me so quickly — not without something in it for themselves. But their power, too, was threatened; and so I was shocked how they seemed content to step back, and leave to that man all burdens of responsibility. They sneered at his performance, remarking among themselves how they would do better in his place, though they did not condescend to step forward." Professor Quirrell shook his head as though in bemusement. "And it was the strangest thing the Dark Wizard, that man's dread nemesis — why, those who served him leapt eagerly to their tasks. The Dark Wizard grew crueler toward his followers, and they followed him all the more. Men fought for the chance to serve him, even as those whose lives depended on that other man made free to render his life difficult . . . I could not understand it, Miss Granger." Professor Quirrell's face was in shadow, as he looked upward. "Perhaps, by taking on himself the curse of action, that man removed it from all others? Was that why they felt free to hinder his battle against the Dark Wizard who would have enslaved them all? Believing men would act in their own interest was not cynicism, it turned out, but sheerest optimism; in reality men do not meet so high a standard. And so in time that one realized he might do better fighting the Dark Wizard alone, than with such followers at his back."

"So —" Hermione's voice sounded strange in the night. "You left your friends behind where they'd be safe, and tried to attack the Dark Wizard all by yourself?"

"Why, no," said Professor Quirrell. "I stopped trying to be a hero, and went off to do something else I found more pleasant."

"What?" said Hermione without thinking at all. "That's horrible!"

The Defense Professor turned his head down from the sky to regard her; and she saw, in the light of the doorway, that he was smiling — or at least half

his face was smiling. "Are you going to tell me, Miss Granger, that I am an awful person? Well, perhaps I am. But then are people who never even try to be heroes still worse? If I had never done anything at all, like them, would you have thought better of me?"

Hermione opened her mouth and then found that, once again, she didn't have anything to say. It wasn't right to walk away from being a hero, you couldn't just *do* that, but she didn't *want* to say that everyone who wasn't a hero was nothing, that was Quirrell-thinking...

The smile, or half-smile, had disappeared. "You were foolish," the Defense Professor said quietly, "to expect any lasting gratitude from those you tried to protect, once you named yourself a heroine. Just as you expected that man to go on being a hero, and called him horrible for stopping, when a thousand others never lifted a finger. It was only *expected* that you should fight bullies. It was a tax you owed, and they accepted it like princes, with a sneer for the lateness of your payment. And you have already witnessed, I wager, that their fondness vanished like dust in the wind once it was no longer in their interest to associate with you..."

The Defense Professor slowly straightened off the balcony, standing almost straight, turning to regard her fully.

"But you don't have to be a hero, Miss Granger," said Professor Quirrell. "You can stop anytime you please."

That idea...

... had occurred to her before, several times over the last two days.

People become who they are meant to be, by doing what is right, Headmaster Dumbledore had told her. The trouble was that there seemed to be two different right things to do. There was the part of her which said that right was to go on being a heroine, and stay at Hogwarts, she didn't know what was going on but a heroine wouldn't just run away.

And there was also the voice of common sense saying that young children shouldn't ever stay around danger, that was what adults were for; the voice of every school poster that said not to take candy from strangers. That was also right.

Hermione Granger stood there on that balcony, looking at Professor Quirrell silhouetted by the emerging stars, and she didn't understand; she didn't understand how the Defense Professor could be gazing at her with his face showing concern; she didn't understand the notes of pain in the Defense Professor's voice that caught at her; she didn't understand *why* she was being told all this.

"You don't even like me, Professor," said Hermione.

A small smile flickered on Professor Quirrell's face. "I suppose I could go on about how I am angered that this affair has taken up my valuable time and disrupted my Defense classes. But mostly, Miss Granger, you are my student, and whatever other professions I may have once held, I think I have been a good teacher at Hogwarts, have I not?" Suddenly Professor Quirrell's eyes seemed very tired. "As your teacher, then, I am advising you that you have other career options. I should not like to see anyone else going down my path."

Hermione swallowed. It was a side of Professor Quirrell she'd never seen or imagined, and it was eating away at her preconceptions.

Professor Quirrell watched her for a moment, and then looked away from her again, back up at the stars. When he spoke this time his voice was quieter. "Someone here is targeting you, Miss Granger, and I cannot ward you as I warded Mr. Malfoy. The Headmaster has prevented it, for what he claims to be good reasons. It is easy to become fond of Hogwarts, I know, for I am fond of it as well. But in France they take a different view of the Ancient Houses than in Britain; and Beauxbatons would not mistreat you, I think. Whatever else you imagine of me, I swear that if you asked me to see you safely in Beauxbatons, I would do all in my power to convey you there."

"I can't just —" Hermione said.

"But you can, Miss Granger." Now the pale blue eyes watched her intently. "Whatever you wish to make of your life, you cannot attain it at Hogwarts, not anymore. This place is ruined for you now, even leaving aside all other threats. Simply ask Harry Potter to command you to go to Beauxbatons and live out your life in peace. If you stay here, he is your master in the eyes of Britain and its laws!"

She hadn't even been thinking about that, it paled so much in comparison to being eaten by Dementors; it had been important to her before, but now it all seemed childish, unimportant, pointless, so why were her eyes burning?

"And if that fails to move you, Miss Granger, consider also that Mr. Potter has, just today at lunchtime, threatened Lucius Malfoy, Albus Dumbledore, and the entire Wizengamot because he cannot think sensibly when something threatens to take you from him. Are you not frightened of what he will do next?"

It made sense. Terrible sense. Dreadful awful sense.

It made too much sense —

She couldn't have described it in words, what triggered the realization, unless it was the sheer *pressure* that the Defense Professor was exerting on her.

That if the Defense Professor was behind this whole thing — then Professor Quirrell had done it all *just to get her out of the way of his plans for Harry*.

Without any conscious decision, she shifted her weight to the other foot, her body moving away from the Defense Professor —

"So you think I am the one responsible?" said Professor Quirrell. His voice sounded a little sad as he said it, and her own heart almost stopped from hearing it. "I suppose I cannot blame you. I am the Defense Professor of Hogwarts, after all. But Miss Granger, even assuming that I am your enemy, common sense should still tell you to get away from me very quickly. You cannot use the Killing Curse, so the correct tactic is to Apparate away. I do not mind being the villain of your imagination if it makes matters clearer. Leave Hogwarts, and leave me to those who can handle me. I will arrange for the transportation to be through some family of good repute, and Mr. Potter will know to blame me if you do not arrive safely."

"I—" She was feeling cold, the night air chilling her skin, or maybe being chilled by it. "I've got to think about it—"

Professor Quirrell shook his head. "No, Miss Granger. Your departure will take time for me to arrange, and I have less time left than you may think. This decision may be painful for you, but it should not be ambiguous; much weighs in the balance of these scales, but not evenly. I must know tonight whether you intend to go."

And if not —

Was the Defense Professor warning her deliberately? That if she didn't run, he would strike again?

Why would it matter so much, what did Professor Quirrell want to do with Harry?

Hermione Granger, I shall be less subtle than is usual for a mysterious old wizard, and tell you outright that you cannot imagine how badly things could go if the events surrounding Harry Potter turn to ill.

The most powerful wizard in the world had told her that, when he was talking about how important it was that she *not* stop being Harry's friend.

Hermione swallowed, she swayed a little where she stood, on the stone bal-

cony of a magical castle. Suddenly the whole deadly absurdity of the situation seemed to rise up and grab her by the throat, that twelve-year-old girls *shouldn't* be in danger, *shouldn't* be thinking about such things, that Mum would want her to RUN AWAY and her father would have a heart attack if he even knew she was being faced with the question.

And she knew, then, as Harry and Dumbledore had both tried to warn her, that everything she'd ever thought about being a heroine had been mistaken. That there wasn't really any such thing as heroes, outside of stories. There was just horrible danger, and being arrested by Aurors and put in cells next to Dementors, pain and fear and —

"Miss Granger?" said the Defense Professor.

She said nothing. All the words were blocked in her throat.

"I need a decision, Miss Granger."

She kept her jaw locked, didn't let any words come out.

Finally the Defense Professor sighed. Slowly the white light failed, and slowly the door behind him swung open, so that he was once again a black silhouette against the opening. "Good night, Miss Granger," he said, and turned his back to her, and walked away into Hogwarts.

It took a while for her breathing to slow down again. Whatever had happened here tonight, it didn't feel anything like victory. She'd fought so hard just to stop herself from saying *Yes* in the face of the Defense Professor's pressure, and now she didn't even know if she'd done the right thing.

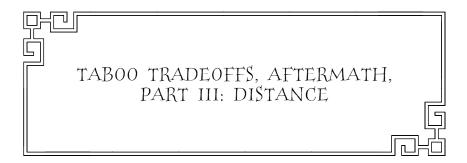
When she walked back into the light herself (after exhaustion had overtaken everything and sleep was once more a possibility), she thought she heard it as she was within the doorway, from behind her and above her, a distant cawing cry.

But it wasn't meant for her, she knew, so she started climbing up the stairs toward her dorm room.

The other girls were probably asleep by now, and wouldn't look at her, or look away —

She felt the tears start, and this time she didn't stop them.

## CHAPTER EIGHTY-FIVE



low and hard, the long stairway that led to the peak of Ravenclaw. From the inside, the stairway seemed like a straight upward slope, though from the outside you could see that it logically had to be a spiral. You could only get to the top of the Ravenclaw tower by making that long climb without shortcuts, stone step by stone step; passing beneath Harry's shoes, pushed down by his wearying legs.

Harry had seen Hermione safely off to bed.

He had lingered in the Ravenclaw common room long enough to collect a few signatures that might be useful to Hermione later. Not many students had signed; wizards hadn't been trained to think in the put-up-or-shut-up, stick-your-neck-out-and-make-a-prediction-or-stop-pretending-to-believe-in-your- theory rules of Muggle science. Most of them hadn't seen anything *incongruent* about being too nervous to sign an agreement saying that Hermione got to hold it over them for the rest of their lives if they were wrong, while acting outwardly confident that she was guilty. But just having demanded the signatures would make the point after the truth came out, if anyone ever again suspected Hermione of anything Dark. She wouldn't have to go through this *twice*, at least.

After that Harry had left the common room quickly, because all the kindly forgiving sentiments he'd reasoned out were getting harder and harder to

remember. Sometimes Harry thought the deepest split in his personality wasn't anything to do with his dark side; rather it was the divide between the altruistic and forgiving Abstract Reasoning Harry, versus the frustrated and angry Harry In The Moment.

The circular platform at the top of the Ravenclaw tower wasn't the tallest place in Hogwarts, but the Ravenclaw tower jutted out from the main body of the castle, so you couldn't see down into the top platform from the Astronomy tower. A quiet place to think, if you had an awful lot to think about. A place where few other students ever came — there were easier niches of privacy, if privacy was all you wanted.

The night-lit torches of Hogwarts were far below. The platform itself offered few obstructions; the stairs emerged from an uncovered gap in the floor, rather than an upright door. From this place, then, the stars were as visible as they ever were on Earth.

The boy lay down in the center of the platform, heedless of his robes that might be dirtied, dropping his head to rest upon the rock-tiled floor; so that, except for a few half-seen crenellations of stone at vision's edge, and a sliver of crescent moon, reality became starlight.

The pinpoints of light in dark velvet twinkled, wavering and returning, a different kind of beauty from their steady brilliance in the Silent Night.

Harry gazed out abstractly, his mind on other things.

This day your war against Voldemort has begun...

Dumbledore had said that, after the Incident with Rescuing Bellatrix from Azkaban. That had been a false alarm, but the phrase expressed the sentiment well.

Two nights ago his war had begun, and Harry didn't know with who.

Dumbledore thought it was Lord Voldemort, returned from the dead, making his first move against the boy who had defeated him last time.

Professor Quirrell had put detection wards on Draco, fearing that Hogwarts's mad Headmaster would try to frame Harry for the death of Lucius's son.

Or Professor Quirrell had set up the entire thing, and *that* was how he'd known where to find Draco. Severus Snape thought the Hogwarts Defense Professor was an obvious suspect, even *the* obvious suspect.

And Severus Snape himself might or might not be even remotely trustworthy.

Someone had declared war against Harry, their first strike had been meant to take out Draco and Hermione both, and it was only by the barest of margins that Harry had saved Hermione.

You couldn't call it victory. Draco had been removed from Hogwarts, and if that wasn't death, it wasn't clear how it could be undone, or what shape Draco might be in when he got back. The country of magical Britain now thought Hermione an attempted-murderer, which might or might not make her decide to do the sane thing and leave. Harry had sacrificed his entire fortune to undo his loss, and that card could only be played once.

Some unknown power had struck at him, and if that blow had been partially deflected, it had still hit *really hard*.

At least his dark side hadn't asked anything of him in exchange for saving Hermione. Maybe because his dark side *wasn't* an imaginary voice like Hufflepuff; Harry might *imagine* his Hufflepuff part as wanting different things from himself, but his dark side wasn't like that. His "dark side", so far as Harry could tell, was a different way that Harry sometimes *was*. Right now, Harry wasn't angry; and trying to ask what "dark Harry" wanted was a phone ringing unanswered. The thought even seemed a little strange; could you owe something to a different way you sometimes were?

Harry stared up at the random stars, the scattered twinkling lights that human brains couldn't help but pattern-match into imaginary constellations.

And then there was that promise Harry had sworn.

Draco to help Harry reform Slytherin House. And Harry to take as an enemy whomever Harry believed, in his best judgment as a rationalist, to have killed Narcissa Malfoy. If Narcissa had never gotten her own hands dirty, if indeed she'd been burned alive, if the killer hadn't been tricked — those were all the conditions Harry could remember making. He probably should've written it down, or better yet, never made a promise requiring that many caveats in the first place.

There were plausible outs, for the sort of person who'd let themselves rationalize an out. Dumbledore hadn't *actually* confessed. He hadn't come right out and said he'd done it. There were plausible reasons for an actually-guilty Dumbledore to behave that way. But it was *also* what you'd expect to see, if someone else had burned Narcissa, and Dumbledore had taken credit.

Harry shook his head, flattening one side of his hair and then another against the stone-tiled floor. There was still a final out, Draco could still release

him from the oath at any time. He could, at least, describe the situation to Draco, and talk about options with him, when they met again. It didn't seem like a very likely prospect for release — but the idea of talking something over honestly was enough to satisfy the part of himself that demanded adherence to oaths. Even if it only meant delaying, it was better than taking a good man as an enemy.

But is Dumbledore a good man? asked the voice of Hufflepuff. If Dumbledore burned someone alive — wasn't the whole point that good people may kill, but never kill with suffering?

Maybe he killed her instantly, said Slytherin, and then lied to Lucius about the burning-alive part. But... if there was any possibility of the Death Eaters magically verifying how Narcissa died... and if being caught in a lie would've endangered Light-side families...

Be careful what we cleverly rationalize, warned Gryffindor.

You have to expect reputational effects on how other people treat you, said Hufflepuff. If you decide there's sufficient reason to burn a woman alive, one of the predictable side effects is that good people decide you've crossed the line and have to be stopped. Dumbledore should've expected that. He's got no right to complain.

Or maybe he expects us to be smarter, said Slytherin. Now that we know this much of the truth — no matter the exact details of the full story — can we really believe that Dumbledore is a terrible, terrible person who ought to be our enemy? In the middle of a horrible bloody war, Dumbledore set one enemy civilian on fire? That's only bad by the standards of comic books, not by any sort of realistic historical standard.

Harry stared up at the night sky, remembering history.

In real life, in real wars...

During World War II, there had been a project to sabotage the Nazi nuclear weapons program. Years earlier, Leo Szilard, the first person to realize the possibility of a fission chain reaction, had convinced Fermi not to publish the discovery that purified graphite was a cheap and effective neutron moderator. Fermi had wanted to publish, for the sake of the great international project of science, which was above nationalism. But Szilard had persuaded Rabi, and Fermi had abided by the majority vote of their tiny three-person conspiracy. And so, years later, the only neutron moderator the Nazis had known about was deuterium.

The only deuterium source under Nazi control had been a captured facility

in occupied Norway, which had been knocked out by bombs and sabotage, causing a total of twenty-four civilian deaths.

The Nazis had tried to ship the deuterium already refined to Germany, aboard a civilian Norwegian ferry, the *SS Hydro*.

Knut Haukelid and his assistants had been discovered by the night watchman of the civilian ferry while they were sneaking on board to sabotage it. Haukelid had told the watchman that they were escaping the Gestapo, and the watchman had let them go. Haukelid had considered warning the night watchman, but that would have endangered the mission, so Haukelid had only shaken his hand. And the civilian ship had sunk in the deepest part of the lake, with eight dead Germans, seven dead crew, and three dead civilian bystanders. Some of the Norwegian rescuers of the ship had thought the German soldiers present should be left to drown, but this view had not prevailed, and the German survivors had been rescued. And that had been the end of the Nazi nuclear weapons program.

Which was to say that Knut Haukelid had killed innocent people. One of whom, the night watchman of the ship, had been a *good* person. Someone who'd gone out of his way to help Haukelid, at risk to himself; from the kindness of his heart, for the highest moral reasons; and been sent to drown in turn. Afterward, in the cold light of history, it had looked like the Nazis had never been close to getting nuclear weapons after all.

And Harry had never read anything suggesting that Haukelid had acted wrongly.

That was war in real life. In terms of total damage and who'd gotten hit, what Haukelid had done was considerably *worse* than what Dumbledore might have done to Narcissa Malfoy, or what Dumbledore had possibly done to leak the prophecy to Lord Voldemort to get him to attack Harry's parents.

If Haukelid had been a comic-book superhero, he'd have somehow gotten all the civilians off the ferry, he would've attacked the German soldiers directly . . .

- ... rather than let a single innocent person die ...
- ... but Knut Haukelid hadn't been a superhero.

And neither had been Albus Dumbledore.

Harry closed his eyes, swallowing hard a few times against the sudden choking sensation. It was abruptly very clear that while Harry was going around trying to live the ideals of the Enlightenment, Dumbledore was the one who'd actually *fought in a war*. Nonviolent ideals were cheap to hold if

you were a scientist, living inside the *Protego* bubble cast by the police officers and soldiers whose actions you had the luxury to question. Albus Dumbledore seemed to have started out with ideals at least as strong as Harry's own, if not stronger; and Dumbledore hadn't gotten through his war without killing enemies and sacrificing friends.

Are you so much better than Haukelid and Dumbledore, Harry Potter, that you'll be able to fight without a single casualty? Even in the world of comic books, the only reason a superhero like Batman even looks successful is that the comicbook readers only notice when Important Named Characters die, not when the Joker shoots some random nameless bystander to show off his villainy. Batman is a murderer no less than the Joker, for all the lives the Joker took that Batman could've saved by killing him. That's what the man named Alastor was trying to tell Dumbledore, and afterward Dumbledore regretted having taken so long to change his mind. Are you really going to try to follow the path of the superhero, and never sacrifice a single piece or kill a single enemy?

Fatigued, Harry turned his attention away from the dilemma for a moment, opened his eyes again to regard the hemisphere of night, which required no decisions from him.

Near the edge of his vision, the pale white crescent of the Moon, the light from which had left one-and-a-quarter seconds ago, around 375,000 kilometers of distance in Earth's space of simultaneity.

Above and to the side, Polaris, the North Star; the first star Harry had learned to identify in the sky, by following the edge of the Big Dipper. That was actually a five-star system with a brilliant central supergiant, 434 light-years from Earth. It was the first 'star' whose name Harry had ever learned from his father, so long ago that he couldn't have guessed how old he'd been.

The dim fog that was the Milky Way, so many billions of distant stars that they became an indistinct river, the plane of a galaxy that stretched 100,000 light-years across. If Harry had experienced any sense of wonder when he'd *first* been told that, he'd been too young for him to remember now that first time, across a few years' distance.

In the center of the constellation Andromeda, the star Andromeda, which was really the Andromeda Galaxy. The nearest galaxy to the Milky Way, 2.4 million light-years away, containing an estimated trillion stars.

Numbers like those made 'infinity' pale by comparison, because 'infinity' was just featureless and blank. Thinking that the stars were 'infinitely' dis-

tant was a lot less scary than trying to work out what 2.4 million light-years amounted to in meters. 2.4 million light-years, times 31 million seconds in a year, times a photon moving at 300,000,000 meters per second...

It was strange to think that such distances might *not* be unreachably far away. Magic was loose in the universe, things like Time-Turners and broomsticks. Had any wizard ever tried to measure the speed of a Portkey, or a phoenix?

And the human understanding of magic couldn't possibly be anywhere *near* the underlying laws. What would you be able to do with magic if you *really* understood it?

A year ago, Dad had gone to the Australian National University in Canberra for a conference where he'd been an invited speaker, and he'd taken Mum and Harry along. And they'd all visited the National Museum of Australia, because, it had turned out, there was basically nothing else to do in Canberra. The glass display cases had shown rock-throwers crafted by the Australian aborigines — like giant wooden shoehorns, they'd looked, but smoothed and carved and ornamented with painstaking care. In the 40,000 years since anatomically modern humans had migrated to Australia from Asia, nobody had invented the bow-and-arrow. It really made you appreciate how *non-obvious* was the idea of Progress. Why would you even think of Invention as something important, if all your history's heroic tales were of great warriors and defenders instead of Thomas Edison? How could anyone have suspected, while carving a rock-thrower with painstaking care, that someday human beings would invent rocket ships and nuclear energy?

Could you have looked up into the sky, at the brilliant light of the Sun, and deduced that the universe contained greater sources of power than mere fire? Would you have realized that if the fundamental physical laws permitted it, someday humans would tap the same energies as the Sun? Even if nothing you could imagine doing with rock-throwers or woven pouches — no pattern of running across the savannah and nothing you could obtain by hunting animals — would accomplish that even in imagination?

It wasn't like modern-day Muggles had gotten anywhere near the limits of what Muggle physics said was possible. And yet like hunter-gatherers conceptually bound to their rock-throwers, most Muggles lived in a world defined by the limits of what you could do with cars and telephones. Even though Muggle physics explicitly permitted possibilities like molecular nanotechnology or the Penrose process for extracting energy from black holes, most people filed

that away in the same section of their brain that stored fairy tales and history books, well away from their personal realities: Long ago and far away, ever so long ago. No surprise, then, that the wizarding world lived in a conceptual universe bounded — not by fundamental laws of magic that nobody even knew — but just by the surface rules of known Charms and enchantments. You couldn't observe the way magic was practiced nowadays and not be reminded of the National Museum of Australia, once you realized what you were seeing. Even if Harry's first guess had been mistaken, one way or another it was still inconceivable that the fundamental laws of the universe contained a special case for human lips shaping the phrase 'Wingardium Leviosa'. And yet even that fumbling grasp of magic was enough to do things that Muggle physics said should be forever impossible: the Time-Turner, water conjured out of nothingness by Aguamenti. What were the ultimate possibilities of invention, if the underlying laws of the universe permitted an eleven-year-old with a stick to violate almost every constraint in the Muggle version of physics?

Like a hunter-gatherer trying to look up at the Sun, and guess that the universe had to be shaped in a way that allowed for nuclear energy...

It made you wonder if maybe twenty thousand million million million meters wasn't so much distance, after all.

There was a step beyond Abstract Reasoning Harry which he could take, given time enough to compose himself and the right surroundings; something beyond Abstract Reasoning Harry, as that was beyond Harry In The Moment. Looking up at the stars, you could try to imagine what the distant descendants of humanity would think of your dilemma — in a hundred million years, when the stars would have spun through great galactic movements into entirely new positions, every constellation scattered. It was an elementary theorem of probability that if you knew what your answer would be after updating on future evidence, you ought to adopt that answer right now. If you *knew* your destination, you were already there. And by analogy, if not quite by theorem, if you could guess what the descendants of humanity would think of something, you ought to go ahead and take that as your own best guess.

From that vantage point the idea of killing off two-thirds of the Wizengamot seemed a lot less appealing than it had a few hours earlier. Even if you had to do it, even if you knew for a solid fact that it would be the best thing for magical Britain and that the complete Story of Time would look worse if you didn't do it... even as a necessity, the deaths of sentient beings would still be a

tragedy. One more element of the sorrows of Earth; the Most Ancient Earth from which everything had begun, long ago and far away, ever so long ago.

He is not like Grindelwald. There is nothing human left in him. Him you must destroy. Save your fury for that, and that alone —

Harry shook his head slightly, tilting the stars a little in his vision, as he lay on the stone floor looking upward and outward and forward in time. Even if Dumbledore was right, and the true enemy was utterly mad and evil... in a hundred million years the organic lifeform known as Lord Voldemort probably wouldn't seem much different from all the other bewildered children of Ancient Earth. Whatever Lord Voldemort had done to himself, whatever Dark rituals seemed so horribly irrevocable on a merely human scale, it wouldn't be beyond curing with the technology of a hundred million years. Killing him, even if you *had* to do it to save the lives of others, would be just one more death for future sentient beings to be sad about. How could you look up at the stars, and believe anything else?

Harry stared up at the twinkling lights of Eternity and wondered what the children's children's children would think of what Dumbledore had maybedone to Narcissa.

But even if you tried framing the question that way, asking what humanity's descendants would think, it still drew only on your own knowledge, not theirs. The answer still came from inside yourself, and it could still be mistaken. If you didn't know the hundredth decimal digit of pi yourself, then you didn't know how the children's children would calculate it, for all that the fact was trivial.

Slowly — he'd been lying there, looking at the stars, for longer than he'd planned — Harry sat up from the ground. Pushing himself to his feet, the muscles protesting, he walked over to the edge of the stone platform at the height of the Ravenclaw tower. The stone crenellations surrounding the edge of the tower weren't high, not high enough to be safe. They were markers, clearly, rather than railings. Harry didn't approach too close to the edge; there was no point in taking chances. Looking down at the Hogwarts grounds below, he was predictably feeling a sense of dizziness, the wobbly affliction called vertigo. His brain was alarmed, it seemed, because the ground below was so

distant. It might have been fully 50 meters away.

The lesson, it seemed, was that things had to be *incredibly* close by before your brain could comprehend them well enough to feel fear.

It was a rare brain that could feel strongly about anything, if it wasn't close in space, close in time, near at hand, within easy reach...

Before, Harry had imagined that going to Azkaban would require planning and cooperation from a grownup confederate. Portkeys, broomsticks, invisibility spells. Some way of getting to the bottom levels without the Aurors noticing, so he could carve his way into the central pit where the shadows of Death waited.

And that had been enough to put the prospect away, into the future, safely apart from the *now*.

He hadn't realized until today that it might be as simple as finding Fawkes and telling the phoenix that it was time.

Memories were rising up again, memories that Harry could never manage to forget for long. Though the stones beneath his feet were not smooth like metal, though the moonlit sky stretched all around him, somehow it was very easy to imagine himself trapped in a long metal corridor lit by dim orange light.

The night was quiet, quiet enough for memories to be clearly audible.

No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!

No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!

Don't take it away, don't don't don't –

The world blurred, and Harry wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

If *Hermione* had been the one behind that door —

If Hermione had been put in Azkaban, Harry would have called the phoenix and gone there and burned away every last Dementor and it wouldn't have made a single difference how crazy it was or what else he'd wanted to do with his life. That was just — that was — that was just how it was.

And the woman who was behind that door — wasn't there someone, somewhere, to whom she too was precious? Wasn't it only Harry's distance from her life that was preventing his brain from being driven to Azkaban to save her no matter what? What would it have taken to compel him? Would he have needed to know her face? Her name? Her favorite color? Would he have been driven to Azkaban to save Tracey Davis? Would he have been compelled there to save Professor McGonagall? Mum and Dad — there wasn't even any

question. And that woman had said she was someone's mother. How many people had wished for the power to break Azkaban? How many prisoners of Azkaban dreamed nightly of such a miraculous rescue?

None. It's a happy thought.

Maybe he *should* harrow Azkaban. All he had to do was find Fawkes and tell him it was time. Visualize the center of the Dementor's pit as he'd seen it from the broomstick, and let the phoenix take him there. Cast the True Patronus Charm at point-blank range and to hell with what came after.

All he had to do was go find Fawkes.

It might be as simple as thinking of the flame, calling for the fire-bird in his heart —

A star flashed in the night.

By the time Harry's eyes had jumped with a reflex action trained on meteor showers, another part of him was surprised that the astronomical phenomenon was still there; a faint star whose brightness was slowly visibly waxing. There was a startled moment when Harry wondered whether he was seeing, not a meteor, but a nova or supernova — could you *see* them getting brighter like that? Was the first stage of a nova supposed to be that yellow-orange color?

Then the new star moved again, and seemed to grow as well as brightening. It looked *closer* suddenly, no longer so far away that distance became moot. Like what you thought was a star, turning out to be an airplane, a lighted form whose shape you could actually see . . .

... no, not a plane ...

The realization seemed to spread out from Harry's chest in a wave of prickling, sweat preparing to break out.

... a bird.

A piercing cry split the night, echoing from the rooftops of Hogwarts.

The approaching creature trailed fire as it flew, shedding golden flames like sparks from its feathers as the mighty wings beat and beat again. Even as it swooped up in a great curve to hover a few paces away from Harry, even as the flames surrounding its passage diminished, the creature seemed no dimmer, no less bright; as though some unseen Sun shone upon it and illuminated it.

Great shining wings red like a sunset, and eyes like incandescent pearls, blazing with golden fire and determination.

The phoenix's beak opened, and let out a great caw that Harry understood as though it had been a spoken word:

## COME!

Not even realizing, the boy stumbled back from the edge of the rooftop, eyes still locked on the phoenix, his whole body trembling and tensed, his fists clutching and releasing at his side; stepping back, stepping away.

The phoenix cawed again, a desperate, pleading, sound. It didn't come through in words, this time, but it came through in feelings, an echo of everything that Harry had ever felt about Azkaban and every temptation to *action*, to just *do* something about it, the desperate need to do something *now* and not delay any longer, all spoken in the cry of a bird.

Let's go. It's time. The voice that spoke came from inside Harry, not from the phoenix; from so deep inside it couldn't be given a separate name like 'Gryffindor'.

All he had to do was step forward and touch the phoenix's talons, and it would take him where he needed to be, where he kept thinking he ought to be, down into the central pit of Azkaban. Harry could see the image in his mind, shining with unbearable clarity, the image of himself suddenly smiling with joyous release as he threw all his fears away and *chose* —

"But I —" Harry whispered, not even aware of what he was saying. Harry lifted his shaking hands to wipe at his eyes from which tears had sprung, as the phoenix hovered before him with great wing-sweeps. "But I — there's other people I also have to save, other things I have to do —"

The fire-bird let out a piercing scream, and the boy flinched back as though from a blow. It wasn't a command, it wasn't an objection, it was the *knowledge*—

The corridors lit by dim orange light.

It felt like a tightening compulsion in Harry's chest, the desire to just *do* it and get it over with. He might die, but if he didn't die he could feel *clean* again. Have principles that were more than excuses for inaction. It was *his* life. His to spend, if he chose. He could do it any time he wanted...

... if he wasn't a good person.

The boy stood there on the rooftop, his own eyes locked with two points of fire. The stars might have had time to shift in their constellations while he stood there, agonizing over the decision...

... that wouldn't ...

... change.

The boy's eyes flickered once to the stars above; and then he looked at the phoenix.

"Not yet," the boy said in a voice hardly audible. "Not yet. There's too much else I have to do. Please come back later, when I've found others who can cast the True Patronus — in six months, maybe —"

Without word, without sound, a sphere of fire surrounded the bird's form, crackling and blazing with white and crimson veins as though it meant to consume that which lay within; and when the fire dispersed into grey smoke, no phoenix remained.

There was silence on the top of the Ravenclaw tower. The boy gradually lowered his hands from his ears, pausing only to wipe at his wet cheeks.

Slowly, the boy turned —

Then cried out and leapt back and almost fell off the Ravenclaw tower; though the misstep would hardly have mattered, with that other wizard standing there.

"And so it was done," Albus Dumbledore said, almost in a whisper. "So it was done." Fawkes was on his shoulder, staring at where the other phoenix had been with an indecipherable avian gaze.

"What are you doing here?"

"Ah?" said the ancient man standing on the roof-platform's opposite corner. "I felt the presence of a creature Hogwarts did not know, and came to see, of course." Slowly the old wizard's shaking hand came up to remove the half-moon glasses, his other hand wiped at his eyes and forehead with his robe's sleeve. "I dared — I dared not speak — I knew, I knew this choice above all choices must be your own —"

A strange apprehension was beginning to fill Harry, welling up in him like a sick feeling in his stomach.

"That everything depended on this," Albus Dumbledore said, still in that almost-whisper, "that much I knew. But which choice led into darkness, that I could not guess. At least the choice was your own."

"I don't —" Harry said, and then his voice stopped.

A terrible hypothesis, rising in credibility...

"The phoenix comes," said the old wizard. "To those who would fight, to those would act even at cost of their lives, the phoenix comes. Phoenixes

are not wise, Harry, they know no means to judge us, save witnessing the choice. I thought it was to my death I went, when the phoenix took me to fight Grindelwald. I did not know that Fawkes would sustain me, and heal me, and stay by my side —" The old wizard's voice quavered, for a moment. "It is not spoken of — you should realize, Harry, why it is never spoken of — if the one knew, the phoenix could not judge. But to you, Harry, I may say it now, for the phoenix comes only once."

The old wizard walked across the top of the Ravenclaw tower to where a boy stood rooted in dawning horror, in dawning and utter horror.

In my duel with Grindelwald I could not win, only fight him for long hours until he collapsed in exhaustion; and I would have died of it afterward, if not for Fawkes —

Harry didn't even know he was speaking, until the whisper had escaped him —

"Then I could have —"

"Could you have?" said the ancient wizard, his voice sounding far older than his normal tones. "Three times, now, a phoenix has come for my student. One did send hers away, and the grief of it broke her, I think. And the last was cousin to your young friend Lavender Brown, and he —" The old wizard's voice cracked. "He did not return, did poor John, and he saved none of those he meant to save. It is said, among the few scholars of phoenix-lore, that not one in four returns from their ordeal. And even if you did survive — for the life you must lead, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres — the choices you must make and the path you must walk — to always hear the phoenix's cries — who is to say it would not have driven you mad?" The old wizard raised his sleeve again, drawing it once more across his face. "I had more joy of Fawkes's companionship, in the days before I fought Voldemort."

The boy did not seem to be listening, all his eyes were on the red-gold bird on the ancient wizard's shoulder. "Fawkes?" the boy said in shaking voice. "Why won't you look at me, Fawkes?"

Fawkes craned his head to peer at the boy curiously, then turned back and resumed gazing at his master.

"See?" said the old wizard. "He does not reject you. Fawkes may not be interested in you in quite that way, now; and he knows —" the wizard smiled wryly, "— that you are not exactly loyal to his master. But one to whom the phoenix comes at all — cannot be one whom a phoenix would dislike." The

wizard's voice fell to a whisper again. "There never was a bird seen on Godric Gryffindor's shoulder. Though it is not written even in his secrets, I think he must have sent his phoenix away, before he chose the red and gold for his colors. Perhaps the guilt of it urged him to greater lengths than he ever would have dared otherwise. Or it might have taught him humility, and respect for human frailty, and failure..." The wizard bowed his head. "I truly do not know if your choice was wise. I truly do not know if it was the right thing, or the wrong thing. If I knew, Harry, I would have spoken. But I —" Dumbledore's voice broke, then. "I am nothing but a foolish young boy who has become a foolish old man, and I have no wisdom."

Harry couldn't breathe, the nausea seeming to fill and overflow his whole body, stomach locked solid. He was suddenly and terribly certain that he had failed, in some final sense failed, failed this very night —

The boy whirled and ran out to the curb of the Ravenclaw rooftop. "Come back!" His voice cracked, rising to a shriek. "Come back!"

## FINAL AFTERMATH:

She came awake with a gasp of horror, she woke with an unvoiced scream on her lips and no words came forth, she could not understand what she had seen, she could not understand what she had seen —

"What time is it?" she whispered.

Her golden jeweled alarm clock whispered back, "Around eleven at night. Go back to sleep."

Her sheets and her nightclothes were soaked in sweat, so she took her wand from beside the pillow and cleaned herself up before attempting to fall asleep again.

Sybill Trelawney went back to sleep.

In the Forbidden Forest, a centaur woken by a nameless apprehension ceased scanning the night sky, having found only questions there and no answers; and with a folding of his many legs, Firenze went back to sleep.

In the distant lands of magical Asia, an ancient witch named Fan Tong, sleeping the tired days away, told her anxious great-grandson that she was fine, it had only been a nightmare, and went back to sleep.

In a land where Muggleborns received no letters of any kind, a girl-child too young to have a name of her own was rocked in the arms of her annoyed but loving mother until she stopped crying and went back to sleep.

None of them slept well.

(International news headlines of April 7th, 1992:)

Toronto Magical Tribune:

Entire British Wizengamot Reports Seeing 'Boy-Who-Lived' Frighten a Dementor

Expert on Magical Creatures: "Now You're Just Lying"

France, Germany Accuse Britain of Making the Whole Thing Up

New Zealand Spellcrafter's Diurnal Notice:

What Drove British Legislature Insane? Could Our Government Be Next?

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

American Mage:

WEREWOLF CLAN TO BECOME FIRST INHABITANTS OF WYOMING

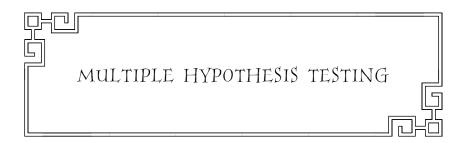
The Quibbler:

Malfoy Flees Hogwarts As Veela Powers Awaken

Daily Prophet:

Legal Tricks Free
"Mad Muggleborn"
As Potter Threatens Ministry
With Attack on Azkaban

## CHAPTER EIGHTY-SIX



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

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

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

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

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

A boy's small, thin frame, perched on the arm of his chair, as though the energies running through him were too great to allow ordinary seating. Set face, sweaty hair, intent green eyes, and within it all, the jagged lightning-bolt

of his never-healing scar. He seemed grimmer, now; even compared to a single week earlier.

For a moment Minerva flashed back to her trip to Diagon Alley with Harry, what seemed like ages and ages ago. There'd been this somber boy *inside* that Harry, somehow, even then. This wasn't entirely her own fault, or Albus's fault. And yet there was something almost unbearably sad about the contrast between the young boy she'd first met, and what magical Britain had made of him. Harry had never had much of an ordinary childhood, she'd gathered; Harry's adoptive parents had said to her that he'd spoken little and played less with Muggle children. It was painful to think that Harry might have had only a few months of playing beside the other children in Hogwarts, before the war's demands had stripped it all away. Maybe there was another face that Harry showed to the children his own age, when he wasn't staring down the Wizengamot. But she couldn't stop herself from imagining Harry Potter's childhood as a heap of firewood, and herself and Albus feeding the wooden branches, piece by piece, into the flames.

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

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

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

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

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

work from partial guesses?"

Time passed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No," said Severus.

Harry looked at the Potions Master in surprise.

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

he cannot comprehend at all, even having seen it ..."

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

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

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

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

"What?" she cried. Albus just sighed and leaned back in the vast Headmaster's chair.

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

"But —" Minerva blurted. "But the raid on Azkaban —"

"If the Dark Lord survived, then sure, he's the most likely suspect for the Azkaban breakout," Harry said reasonably. "You could even say that the Azkaban breakout is Bayesian evidence for the Dark Lord surviving, because an Azkaban breakout is more likely to happen in worlds where he's alive than worlds where he's dead. But it's not strong Bayesian evidence. It's not something that can't possibly happen unless the Dark Lord is alive. Professor Quirrell, who didn't start from the assumption that You-Know-Who was still around, had no trouble thinking of his own explanation. To him, it was obvious that some powerful wizard might want Bellatrix Black because she knew a secret of the

Dark Lord's, like some of his magical knowledge that he'd told to only her. The priors against anyone surviving their body's death are very low, even if it's magically possible. *Most* times it doesn't happen. So if it's *just* the Azkaban breakout... I'd have to say formally that it isn't enough Bayesian evidence. The improbability of the evidence assuming that the hypothesis is false, is not commensurate with the prior improbability of the hypothesis."

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

"Are you sure of that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where are you getting all these numbers, Potter?"

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

"Such as the Defense Professor," Severus said with a thin smile. "I suppose I must agree that he is a suspect. It was the Defense Professor last year, after

all; and the year before that, and the year before that."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I see," Harry said tonelessly, and looked back down at the parchment. "I'll take the prophecy as assumed accurate for now. The next part says that the Dark Lord has marked me as his equal. Any ideas on what that means exactly?"

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

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

"I do not know," said Severus.

"Nor I," she said.

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

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

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

"Meh," said Harry, still looking meditatively at his wand. "I'd fight the Dark Lord without any magic at all, if I had to. *Homo sapiens* didn't become the dominant species on this planet by having the sharpest claws or hardest

armor — though I suppose some of that point may be lost on wizards. Still, it's beneath my dignity as a human being to be scared of anything that isn't smarter than I am; and from what I've heard, on that particular dimension the Dark Lord wasn't very scary."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I ask you this," Albus said, still in that mild tone, "because I did indeed, in the early days of the war, perform such tests as you suggested. The Order

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thank you, Mr. Potter."

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

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

The Potions Master shook his head. "The Dark Lord was no fool, despite Potter's delusions. The moment such a test is suspected, the Mark ceases to bind our tongues. Yet I could not hint at the possibility, but only wait for another to deduce it." Another thin smile. "I would award you a good many House points, Mr. Potter, if it would not compromise my cover. But as you can see, the Dark Lord was quite cunning." His gaze grew more distant. "Oh," Severus breathed, "he was *very* cunning indeed..."

Harry Potter sat still for a long moment.

Then —

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

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

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

"I remember your first day of Potions class," the Potions Master said dryly.

"I think you have a ways still to go."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Polyjuice or a temporary Confundus or read-only Legilimency all sounded better than an extra day of Azkaban... but...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Please do," said Albus Dumbledore.

Harry closed his eyes.

His Ravenclaw side divided into three.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Let Three talk, said Ravenclaw One.

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

Imperius them too, interjected Ravenclaw Two.

- and the oligarchs have Thief's Downfall in the entrances to their homes
   Complexity penalty! cried Ravenclaw Two. More epicycles!
- oh, be reasonable, said Ravenclaw Three. We haven't actually seen anyone taking over the Ministry with a couple of well-placed Imperius curses. We don't know that it can actually be done that easily.

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

Maybe Lord Voldemort did have more creative ideas, replied Ravenclaw Three, but he didn't want to tip his hand to other countries' governments, didn't want them to know how vulnerable they were and install Thief's Downfall in their Ministries. Not until he had Britain as a base and enough servants to subvert all the other major governments simultaneously.

You're assuming he wants to conquer the whole world, noted Ravenclaw Two. Trelawney prophesied that he would be our equal, intoned Ravenclaw Three solemnly. Therefore, he wanted to take over the world.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But Lord Voldemort wasn't a randomly selected wizard, he was one particular wizard in the population who'd come to everyone's attention. The puzzle of the Mark implied a certain minimum level of intelligence, even if (hypothetically) the Dark Lord had taken longer to think it through. Then again, in the Muggle world, all of the extremely intelligent people Harry knew about from history had *not* become evil dictators or terrorists. The closest thing to that in the Muggle world was hedge-fund managers, and none of *them* had tried to take over so much as a third-world country, a point which put upper bounds on both their possible evil and possible goodness.

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

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

Harry was wondering if he could even *get* a Bayesian calculation out of this. Of course, the point of a subjective Bayesian calculation wasn't that, after you

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hypothesis: Hermione Granger (April 8th, 1992, 6:53 pm)

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, there must've been *some* sort of love triangle," said a second-year witch named Samantha Crowley (she never answered when asked if there was any relation). "The question is, which ways was it *going* before it all went wrong? Who was in love with who — and whether or not that person loved them back — I don't know *how* many possibilities there are —"

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

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

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

"Sometimes you can't describe a thing using real words."

"It's so *sad*," said Sherice Ngaserin, who actually had tears in her eyes. "They were just — they were just so *obviously* meant to be together!"

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

"No, I mean all three of them," said Sherice.

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

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

"Look, you all, we need to keep this realistic," said Eloise Rosen, a tall

witch who'd been General of an army and hence spoke with an air of authority. "We *know* — because she kissed him — that Granger was in love with Potter. So the only reason she'd try to kill Malfoy is if she knew that she was losing Potter to him. There's no need to make it all sound so complicated — you're all acting like this is a play instead of real life!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You don't mean —" gasped Sarah.

"Yes," Adrian said. "The real one behind it all is — Tracey Davis!"

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

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

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

"Personally," Dean said, also in a quieter voice, "I'd say the really scary part is — that could've been *us.*"

"Yeah," said Lavender. "It's a good thing we're all perfectly sane now." Dean and Seamus nodded solemnly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"There are only friends here," Dumbledore said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not certain —" Dumbledore began.

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

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

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

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

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

"Checked his grades," Moody said. "Record shows Gilderoy Lockhart

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

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

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

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

Harry listened to this with increasing alarm, wondering if even the *Ministry* had any rules about magistrates needing to issue warrants — never mind the illegal vigilante organization Harry now seemed to have joined. "Excuse me," Harry said. "What *exactly* happens at three in the morning?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What is a first-year doing in this room, Albus?" demanded the scarred

man, now whirling to face the Headmaster. "And don't tell me it's for what he did when he was a baby."

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

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

"I'm an Occlumens, actually."

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

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

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

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

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

"So you're think you're all grown up already, eh? Look me in the eyes!" Harry strengthened his shields, and looked once more into the dark grey

eye and the brilliant blue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hello, Harry," the Headmaster said quietly.

"I didn't even see him *move*," Harry marveled, muscles creaking as he sat up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Stupefy!"

Mad-Eye's body seemed to almost flicker as he spun on his wooden foot like lightning, faster than she'd ever seen anyone move without magic, the red Stunning Hex passing through the suddenly empty air and barely missing

## MULTIPLE HYPOTHESIS TESTING

Severus to crash into the opposite wall, and by the time her eyes jerked back to Moody there were seventeen radiant orbs in the pattern of a *Sagitta Magica*, visible for only an instant before they streaked brilliance and struck *something* that fell to the floor with a thud —

"Hello again, Harry," said Dumbledore.

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

— and then Mad-Eye ducked hard and fast, his hands hitting flat on the floor. She almost didn't see the two tiny white threads passing through the space he'd been, but her eyes went to the blue spark when the threads impacted on one of the Headmaster's devices, and by the time she managed to turn her eyes back, Mad-Eye had spun smoothly up to his feet, his wand was dancing unseeably fast and there was another thudding sound —

"Hello again, Harry."

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

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

"Well, boy?" said Mad-Eye Moody. "What else have you got?" Harry Potter's head appeared, floating in midair as an invisible hand drew back the hood of his invisibility cloak.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Moody fell.

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

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

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

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

"I know that, son."

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

"But —" said Professor McGonagall. She glanced at Mad-Eye Moody, who was nodding his approval, and at Severus, who was keeping his face decid-

edly blank. "Mr. Potter, you just stunned *Mad-Eye Moody!* The most famous Dark wizard hunter in the history of the Auror Office! That should've been impossible!"

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

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

"Neither of you?"

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

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

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

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

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

"That kind of cleverness gets people killed, boy, and don't you forget it." A sad-sounding sigh from the Boy-Who-Lived. "I know. Sorry."

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

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

"If I can," said Moody.

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

Moody frowned. "Son, nobody gains power that fast without being up to something."

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

"I don't see the sense of it, son, but I suppose I could do you the favor." "Is there aught else, Alastor?" inquired Albus.

"Yes," said Moody. "About that Defense Professor of yours —"

Hypothesis: Gilderoy Lockhart: END

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

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

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

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

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

"I'll agree with that in one sense," Harry said. "If somebody tells me that everyone is *staring* at them and that their underwear is being dusted with thought-controlling powder, I know they're psychotic, because that's the standard signature of psychosis. But if you tell me that *anything* confusing points to Albus Dumbledore as a suspect, that seems... overreaching. Just because I can't see a purpose doesn't mean there *is* no purpose."

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

Harry had politely declined tea, even knowing that Professor Quirrell would know what it meant. He'd considered bringing his own can of soda — but had decided against that as well, after realizing how easy it would be for

the Defense Professor to teleport in a bit of potion, even if the two of them couldn't touch each other with direct magic.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not necessarily, Mr. Potter." Professor Quirrell drained his teacup in one swallow and then set it down, the cup making a sharp rap as it descended. "There is also Severus Snape — though what he might think to gain from this, I could not guess. Thus he is not my prime suspect either."

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

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

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

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

Draco? Draco had been interrogated under Veritaserum — but Lucius might

have had enough control to subvert Aurors to ... oh.

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

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

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

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

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

The Defense Professor did not react to this at all.

Harry continued. "From what Draco says, Lucius prioritized him over important Wizengamot votes. That's significant evidence, since there's less expensive ways to fake love, if you just want to fake it. And it's not like the prior probability of a parent loving their child is *low*. I suppose it's possible that Lucius was just taking on the *role* of a loving father, and he renounced that role after he learned Draco was consorting with Muggleborns. But as the saying goes, Professor, one must distinguish possibility from probability."

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

"And how would Lucius even Memory-Charm Hermione in the first place, without setting off the wards? *He's* not a Professor — oh, right, you think it's Professor Snape."

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

"Imperio."

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

"Or even more obviously, Professor Sprout," said Harry. "Since she's the last person anyone would suspect."

The Defense Professor hesitated minutely. "Perhaps."

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

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

Harry shrugged artfully. "Seemed worth asking the question, just to check. Anyway, Professor, I agree it's possible that some outsider Legilimized a member of Hogwarts staff — and then Obliviated them afterward, there's no way anyone would forget that part. But I don't think Lucius Malfoy is a probable candidate for the mastermind. It's possible but not probable that all of Lucius's apparent love for Draco was just a sense of duty, and that it all went up in a puff of smoke. It's possible though not probable that everything Lucius did in front of the Wizengamot was just an act. People's outsides do not always resemble their insides, like you said. But there's one piece of evidence that doesn't fit at all."

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

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

There was a pause. "Perhaps the role he was playing ran away with him,"

said Professor Quirrell. "It does happen, Mr. Potter, in the heat of the moment."

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

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

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

Harry nodded.

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

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

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

He is coming. The one who will tear apart the very —

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Honestly, no," Harry said. "It had honestly slipped clear out of my mind." "Then I am rather put out with him," Professor Quirrell said softly. "In fact, I think that I am angry."

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

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

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

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

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

Hypothesis: The Defense Professor (April 8th, 1992, 8:37 pm)

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

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

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

"I did not *quite* phrase it in that fashion —"

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

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

It was strange how the Headmaster's office seemed... unbalanced... without the Headmaster in it. If you didn't have the ancient wizened master to make it all seem solemn, you were just four people trying to have a serious meeting while surrounded by bizarre, noisy gidgets. Clearly visible from where Harry had perched himself on his chair's arm was a truncated-conical object, like a cone with its top snipped off, slowly spinning around a pulsating central light which it shaded but did not obscure; and each time the inner light pulsated, the assembly made a vroop-vroop-vroop sound that sounded oddly distant, muffled like it was coming from behind four solid walls, even though the spinning-conical-section thingy was only a meter or two away.

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

And then there were the various still-breathing bodies of Harry Potter he'd stashed in one quiet corner, cleaning up a mess that was his own in more ways than one. (Only one body *wasn't* inside a copy of the Invisibility Cloak; but then it merely took a small effort of concentration for Harry to perceive

his other selves beneath the Cloak of which he was master — an effort which Harry had carefully *not* put forth earlier, to avoid getting advance temporal information he wanted to determine by his own decision.) The sad thing was that by this point, having his own body visibly lying in a corner didn't seem all that crazy. It was just . . . Hogwarts.

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

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

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

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

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

himself had to step into Monroe's shoes, and that was barely enough for us to survive."

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

This was Professor Quirrell they were talking about.

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

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

"That's obvious?" said Professor McGonagall. "Dear Merlin..."

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

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

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

There was a pause.

"I see ... " Harry said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Professor McGonagall was nodding firmly.

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

"What?" cried Professor McGonagall.

"Our mystery wizard hears about a missing kid from a Most Ancient House of Britain," Moody said. "Steps into the shoes of 'David Monroe', but stays away from the real Monroe family. But eventually the House is bound to notice something wrong. So this impostor somehow prods Voldie into wiping them all out — maybe leaked a password they'd given him for their wards — and then he was a Lord of the Wizengamot!"

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

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

This from an orphan who was raised unaware of his heritage, commented

Harry's Inner Critic. With a prophecy about him. You know, I don't think we've ever read a story about two equally destined heroes competing to see who's cliched enough to take down the villain —

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, and I'm always right!"

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

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

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

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

"Could the person in the cell be a ringer?"

"I administer a blood test for his identity, son."

"Where do you keep the blood you use as a reference?"

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

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

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

"You've no proof of that!" Professor McGonagall said.

"That man might as well be wearing a sign saying 'Dark Wizard' in glowing green letters over his head."

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

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

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

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

"Ah," said Harry. "That does seem like an excellent reason to ban —"

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

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

force... that does sound like a difficult spell to block."

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

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

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

"It damages the mind?"

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

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

It only takes a little cracking...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Professor McGonagall nodded firmly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry gave an internal sigh. He supposed he had no right to expect Professor McGonagall to say anything else. In a moral dilemma where you lost something either way, making the choice would *feel* bad either way, so you could temporarily save yourself a little mental pain by refusing to decide. At the cost of not being able to plan anything in advance, and at the cost of incurring a huge bias toward inaction or waiting until too late . . . but you couldn't expect a witch to know all that. "All right," Harry said.

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

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

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

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

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

Harry stepped out -

A hand caught at Harry's shoulder.

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

Harry turned around again.

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

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

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

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

"Why do you ask?" Harry said.

Professor McGonagall seemed to hesitate —

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

"Harry —" the Transfiguration Professor said, and then closed her mouth. "I obviously know *something* you don't," Harry said helpfully. "See, this is why we can't always put off trying to decide our awful moral dilemmas."

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

"I've read all of them."

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

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

Professor McGonagall gave Harry a very strange look.

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

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

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

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

$$2 + 2 = \dots$$

"Snape and Dumbledore?" Then Harry heard the words that had just come out of his mouth, and hastily added, "Not that there's anything wrong with that —"

"No!" said Professor McGonagall. "Oh, for pity's sake — I can't explain it to you, Mr. Potter!"

The other shoe finally dropped.

He was still in love with my mother?

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

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

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

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

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

There was a long silence.

What would he do then?

Minerva lowered her hands, gazing down at the upturned face of the Boy-Who-Lived. One simple question shouldn't have caused her so much dismay. She'd known Severus for years; the two of them bound, in some strange way, by the prophecy they'd both heard. Though Minerva suspected, from what she knew of the rules of prophecy, that she had only *overheard* it herself. It had been Severus's acts which had brought about the prophecy's fulfillment. And the guilt, the heartbreak which had come of that choice, had been tormenting the Potions Master for years. She couldn't imagine who Severus would be without it. Her mind went blank, trying to imagine; her thoughts an empty parchment.

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

Did she really know him at all?

Had anyone ever seen the real Severus Snape?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry silently nodded.

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

me what happened ...?"

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

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

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

Shut up. Overruled.

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

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

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

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

"Seers are the pawns of time, Mr. Potter. Coincidence is beneath them, and they are above it. I was the one meant to hear that prophecy and become its fool. Minerva's presence made no final difference to how it came about. There was no Memory Charm as you supposed, I do not know why you thought that, but there was no Memory-Charm, there could have been no Memory-Charm. The voice of a seer has a quality, an enigma which even Legilimency cannot share, how could that be imbued in a false memory? Do you think the Dark Lord would believe my mere words? The Dark Lord seized my mind and saw the mystification there, even if he could not seize the mystery, and so he knew the prophecy had been true. The Dark Lord could have killed me then, having taken what he wanted — I was a fool indeed to go to him — but he saw

something in me I do not know, and took me into the Death Eaters, though on his terms rather than mine. That is how I brought it about, brought it all about, from beginning to end, always my own doing." Severus's voice had gone rather hoarse, and his face was filled with naked pain. "Now tell me, please, how did Lily die?"

Harry swallowed twice, and began his recounting.

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

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

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

The words were very clear in Harry's memory.

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

I give you this rare chance to flee.

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

Very well, I accept the bargain.

"—he said that he accepted her offer, and that she should drop her wand so he could kill her. And then the Dark Lord waited, just waited. I, I don't know what Lily Potter was thinking, it hadn't even made sense in the first place, what she said, it wasn't like the Dark Lord would kill her and then just *leave*, when he'd come there for me. Lily Potter didn't say anything, and then the Dark Lord started laughing at her and it was horrible and — and she finally tried the only thing left that wasn't abandoning me or just giving up and dying. I don't know if she even could've, if the spell would've worked for her, but when you

## MULTIPLE HYPOTHESIS TESTING

think about, she had to try. The last thing my mother said was 'Avada Ke-' but the Dark Lord started his own curse as soon as she said 'Av' and he said it in less than half a second and there was a flash of green light and then — and then — and then —"

"That's enough."

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

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

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

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

Behind Harry, the door unlocked itself and swung open.

Harry left.

It was Friday, April 10th, of 1992.

## CHAPTER EIGHTY-SEVEN



THURSDAY, APRIL 16TH, 1992.

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

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

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

It would be a mistake to think that Hermione drooped about the corridors weeping all day long. Oh, she'd cried a lot the first two days, of course, but two days had been enough. There were parts of Harry's borrowed books about

that, how even people who were paralyzed in car accidents weren't nearly as unhappy as they'd expected to be, six months later, just like lottery winners weren't nearly as happy as they'd expected. People adjusted, their happiness levels went back to their happiness set point, life went on.

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

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

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

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

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

"I was going to give you more space," said Harry Potter, "only I was reading up on Critch's theories about hedonics and how to train your inner pigeon and how small immediate positive and negative feedbacks secretly control most of what we actually do, and it occurred to me that you might be avoiding me because seeing me made you think of things that felt like negative associations, and I really *didn't* want to let that run any longer without doing something

about it, so I got ahold of a bag of chocolates from the Weasley twins and I'm just going to give you one every time you see me as a positive reinforcement if that's all right with you —"

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

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

The two of them stared at each other.

The books stared at them from the surrounding shelves.

They stared some more at each other.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry stared at the open page.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

think are literally impossible. I can't even imagine what we could rule out the *real* laws of magic being able to do."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"All right then, Professor Quirrell would've kidnapped this Flamel guy. It's

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

"So? That wouldn't stop *you*," Hermione said, her voice now roughening again. "You do impossible things all the time, I bet you've done something impossible in the last *week* and you didn't bother *telling* anyone."

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

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

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

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

"Well, it *can't* work," Hermione said. She'd flown across the library to look up the only book on alchemy that wasn't in the Restricted Section. And then — she remembered the crushing letdown, all the sudden hope dissipating

like mist. "Because *all* alchemical circles have to be drawn 'to the fineness of a child's hair', it isn't any finer for some alchemies than others. And wizards *have* Omnioculars, and I haven't heard of any spells where you use Omnioculars to magnify things and do them exactly. I should've realized that!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

can help much on this one."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"All right," Harry said after a while. "I see what you mean. Instead of the famous Potter-and-Granger research team, there'll be Harry Potter and his lab assistant. Um... here's an idea. How about if I *don't* focus on making money

for a while? I mean, the debt doesn't come due until I graduate Hogwarts. So you can do it yourself and show the world you've still got it. And if you coincidentally crack the secret of immortality along the way, we'll just call it a bonus."

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

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

"My own approach is usually to identify the different desires, give them names, conceive of them as separate individuals, and let them argue it out inside my head. So far the main persistent ones are my Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, Gryffindor, and Slytherin sides, my Inner Critic, and my simulated copies of you, Neville, Draco, Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick, Professor Quirrell, Dad, Mum, Richard Feynman, and Douglas Hofstadter."

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

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

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

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

"Good," Harry said seriously. "I mean, I don't see how people could be friends without that."

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

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

"Harry?" she said. (She was leaning a bit away from him now, though she

didn't realize it.) "If there's a copy of Draco Malfoy in your head, does that mean you're friends with Draco Malfoy?"

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

"What do you mean corrupting?"

"Tempting him to the Light Side of the Force."

Her mouth just stayed open.

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

"Draco Malfoy," she said. "Harry, do you have any idea —"

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

have it!"

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

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

"Stop," she said.

"— roast it over a bonfire. Just a regular celebration. Good clean fun. And I'll give them this, it was cleaner fun than burning women they thought were witches. Because the way people are built, Hermione, the way people are built to *feel* inside —" Harry put a hand over his own heart, in the anatomically correct position, then paused and moved his hand up to point toward his head at around the ear level, "— is that they hurt when they see their *friends* hurting. Someone inside their circle of concern, a member of their own tribe. That feeling has an off-switch, an off-switch labeled 'enemy' or 'foreigner' or sometimes just 'stranger'. That's how people are, if they don't *learn* otherwise. So, no, it does *not* indicate that Draco Malfoy was inhuman or even unusually evil, if he grew up believing that it was fun to hurt his enemies —"

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

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

pretty well so far."

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

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

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

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

"Why didn't you *tell* me any of this?" Hermione said, and despite herself, her voice rose in pitch. "If I'd *known* —"

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

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

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

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

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

"What were you really doing with Draco Malfoy?"

Harry winced, and said, "Probably not *quite* what you're thinking, but..." The horror scaled and scaled within her, and finally broke loose.

"You were doing SCIENCE with him?"

"Well —"

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

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

"And I suppose you didn't tell him about me, either?"

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

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

"Er —"

"I mean, you can't do science with two different people and *not tell them about each other!*"

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

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

Harry raised a hand and rubbed at his messy hair, and somehow that made her want to scream at him even *more*. "Miss Granger," said Harry, "I think this conversation has become *metaphorical* on a level that's, um..."

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

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

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

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

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

"That was not why I —"

Harry paused.

Harry looked at her.

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

Harry was staring at her in dawning and complete terror.

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

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

"Just friends?"

Harry Potter's breathing was starting to scale up toward hyperventilation. "Very good friends! Extra-special friends, even! Best friends forever, possibly! But not *that* kind of friends!"

"Is it really that awful to think about?" she said with a catch in her voice. "I mean — I'm not saying *I'm* in love with *you*, but —"

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

She took a staggering step back.

" - but - even with my dark side -"

"Is that what this is about?" said Hermione. "But I — I wouldn't —"

"No, no, I mean, I have a mysterious dark side and probably other weird magic stuff going on, you *know* I'm not a normal child, not really —"

"It's okay to not be normal," she said, feeling increasingly desperate and confused. "I'm okay with it —"

"But even with all that weird magical stuff letting me be more adult than I should be, I haven't gone through puberty yet and there's no hormones in my bloodstream and my brain is *physically incapable* of falling in love with anyone. So I'm not in love with you! I couldn't possibly be in love with you! For all I know at this point, six months from now my brain is going to wake up and

decide to fall in love with Professor Snape! Er, can I take it from this that you have been through puberty?"

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

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

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

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

"— though not necessarily a probability higher than fifty percent, I mean, from the outside view there's a lot of other possibilities, and who I like before I hit puberty probably isn't all that strongly *diagnostic* of who I'll be with seven years later — I don't want to sound like I'm *promising* anything —"

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

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

Tano Wolfe, of fifth-year Ravenclaw, slowly stood up from his library desk, from which vantage point he'd just watched Granger flee the library, sobbing.

He hadn't been able to hear the argument, but it had clearly been one of *those*. Slowly and with his knees trembling, Tano approached the Boy-Who-Lived, who was staring in the direction of the library doors, still vibrating from the force of how they'd been slammed.

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

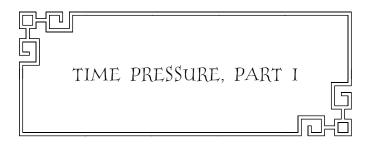
The Boy-Who-Lived didn't say anything as Tano approached him, but his gaze wasn't friendly.

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

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

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

## CHAPTER EIGHTY-EIGHT



THURSDAY, APRIL 16TH, 1992.

12:07 рм.

Lunchtime.

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

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

"Our beloved, but clumsy Professor Trelawney —"

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

"Not to mention Mr. Hagrid."

A quick glance at the Head Table confirmed that the Divination Professor was waving her wand frantically as the half-Giant dabbed at his clothes. Nobody

else seemed to be paying much attention, even Professor McGonagall. Professor Flitwick was standing on his chair as usual, the Headmaster seemed to be absent again (he'd been gone most days of the holiday), Professors Sprout and Sinistra and Vector were eating in their usual grouping, and —

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

"What does?" said Fred or George.

The powerful and enigmatic Defense Professor was 'resting' or whateverthe-heck-was-wrong-with-him, his hands making fumbling, hesitant grabs at a chicken-leg that seemed to be eluding him on the plate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

A sudden hush fell.

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

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

Right now Mr. Filch's brown clothing was disarrayed and soaked with

sweat, his shoulders were visibly heaving as he breathed, and his ever-present cat was missing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Deputy Headmistress."

She turned.

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

"I do apologize, Professor," said Professor McGonagall, as she turned toward the great doors. Filius and Pomona had already risen to follow her, with Rubeus Hagrid towering over all of them as the half-giant stood up. She'd been through similar experiences too many times, at this point. "Sad experience has taught me that on occasions such as these, it is not a good time to take any advice the current Defense Professor may offer. Indeed, I think it wise that the two of us search for the troll together, so that no suspicions may be cast upon you for any untoward events which occur during that time."

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

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

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

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

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

"Ah," Sybill said falteringly. Beneath her overdone makeup and mess of

shawls, the woman looked rather pale. "I'm afraid — I'm not entirely well today — indeed, I feel rather faint —"

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

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

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

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

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

... and he still didn't realize.

Tick.

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

Tick.

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

Tick.

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

Tick.

And Harry still didn't realize.

Tick.

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

Tick.

Some students were speculating in whispers about what the Defense Professor could possibly be trying to achieve by smuggling in a troll, and whether he was angry that Professor McGonagall had caught on to his attempted distraction, and what it was a distraction *from*.

Tick.

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

Tick.

That was when Harry wondered where Hermione was.

Tick

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

Tick.

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

Tick.

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

Tick.

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

Nobody answered.

Tick.

Somewhere in the back of his mind was a rising sense of horror, as other parts of him tried to decide exactly how much to panic. The first Defense class of the year was rather fuzzy in Harry's mind, but he distantly remembered something about trolls being able to track prey that was alone and undefended.

Tick.

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

Tick.

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

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

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

Tick.

She wouldn't.

Tick.

That just wasn't her.

Tick.

And then it occurred to Harry that somebody had previously tried to frame Hermione Granger for murder using Memory Charms. Had done so inside Hogwarts, without setting off any alarms. And had arranged for Draco to die slowly enough that it wouldn't set off the wards until at least six hours

later when nobody could use a Time-Turner to check. And that whoever was clever enough to infiltrate a troll past the ancient wards of Hogwarts without the Headmaster coming to investigate the strange creature, could be clever enough to *also* take the obvious step of jinxing Hermione's magic items...

Tick.

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

Tick.

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

Tick.

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

Tick.

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

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

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

The background babble stilled further.

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

"Oh, Merlin," somebody said from nearby, and then the background babble

started up again, taking on a new and excited tone.

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

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

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

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

"We've got to go find her —"

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

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

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

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

"All right everyone! Listen up!"

People turned to look.

"QUIET! EVERYONE! SHUT UP!"

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

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

The Great Hall became entirely silent, then.

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

through a wall.

No one moved.

No one spoke.

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

People went on looking at other people.

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

Tick.

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

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

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

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

Tick.

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

Tick.

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

Tick.

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

Tick.

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

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

There was an awkward pause that suffused the whole room.

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

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

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

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

The half-giant startled as Harry spoke the words.

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

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

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

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

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

"Eh —" Rubeus Hagrid frowned. "No."

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

Silence.

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

The half-giant wrung his hands with an agonized expression. "Eh - I -"

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

A huge figure interposed itself in his way.

Harry looked up.

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

"Stupefy!"

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

"Sorry!" she screamed. "Incendium! Glisseo!"

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

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

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

"Harry!" Neville burst out. "Harry, Mr. Hagrid's right, you *can't*, this could all be a trap, they could be after *you*—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Fred? George?"

"We can't figure out how to find her!" one of the Weasley twins blurted, hands twisting in distress. "We snuck out because we thought we could find

Miss Granger — there *has* to be a quick way to find anyone inside the Hogwarts castle, we're both sure of it — but we can't figure out what it is!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We —" said the Weasley twin seated lower down. "We can't remember!" Another sharp turn taken at, Harry estimated, roughly 0.3% of the speed of light, and they were going through a twisty curving corridor that Harry

always took to get from the Great Hall to the library only it *wasn't* the shortest way if you were *on a broomstick*, he should've taken the long straight West Corridor instead —

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

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

"What?" cried Fred or George.

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

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

Hermione Granger wasn't there.

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

"Have you seen Hermione Granger?" Harry said.

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

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

"No, now be off!"

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

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

"Yes or no. Please answer immediately."

"Ah — there's the Floo —"

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

"Young man, I insist that you —"

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

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

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

## "EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

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

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

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

"Merlin's underpants," breathed Fred or George.

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

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

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

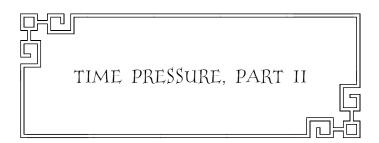
The silver blaze moved and Harry accelerated after it, the Weasley twins giving out high-pitched shrieks behind him as he fired through the air like a cannonball, moving faster than sanity, he didn't focus on the walls whizzing

past him or how fast he was moving, just followed the silver light through corridors and flying up staircases and blitzing through doors that Fred or George cried desperate incantations to open and it was all still taking too much time, somewhere deep inside Harry felt like he was sinking through molasses as windows and portraits shot past.

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

His Patronus slowed to a halt (Harry braking hard in response) just as they reached the level of a wide-open floor space that that spread out until it escaped the ceiling and turned into an outdoor terrace, a spread of tiled marble open to the air and sky —

## CHAPTER EIGHTY-NINE



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

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

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

The Weasley twins screamed.

Harry's Patronus shattered.

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

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

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

The levitated club moved backwards from the troll, from the terrace onto the wide-open floor beneath the ceiling; and the troll made a great prodigious leap that almost brought the club into its hands. Then the troll made another great leap as the club moved to one side; and the broomstick moved forwards and Harry jumped off and ran towards where Hermione Granger was lying in a pool of her own blood with her legs eaten away to the upper thighs.

Harry's hands tore open the healer's kit from his pouch, grabbed one of the self-tightening tourniquets, wrapped them around one ragged tooth-marked stump, his hands briefly slipping in the blood, they didn't tremble, there wasn't any allowance for his hands to tremble. As the tourniquet formed a complete loop it tightened hard and more blood came out, but then the bleeding stopped on that thigh-stump, and Harry turned to the other. Part of his mind was screaming, screaming, screaming and even the part of him picking up the other self-tightening tourniquet heard it, but that also wasn't allowed.

The two Weasley twins were shouting spells, one after another in rapid-fire casting that would have had Harry unconscious in sixty seconds, sometimes the twins shouted two spells simultaneously in perfect coordination, but most of the spells were disrupting in harmless showers of sparks against the troll's skin. As the other tourniquet tightened itself in another pulse of blood, Harry looked up at a "Diffindo!" / "Reducto!" that made the troll's vulnerable eyes explode in twin showers of vitreous humor, but the troll only bellowed once more, its eyes already reforming.

"Fire and acid!" Harry shouted. "Use fire or acid!"

"Fuego!" / "Incendio!" Harry heard, but he wasn't looking, he was reaching for the syringe of glowing orange liquid that was the oxygenating potion, pushing it into Hermione's neck at what Harry hoped was the carotid artery, to keep her brain alive even if her lungs or heart stopped, so long as her brain stayed intact everything else could be fixed, it had to be possible for magic to fix it, it had to be possible for magic to fix it, and Harry pushed the plunger of the syringe all the way down, creating a faint glow beneath the pale skin of her neck. Harry then pushed down on her chest, where her heart should be, hard compressions that he hoped was moving the oxygenated blood around to where it could reach her brain, even if her heart might have stopped beating, he hadn't actually thought to check her pulse.

Then Harry stared at the other things in his medical kit, his mind going blank as he tried to figure out what else of what was there, if anything, he could use. The screaming in that distant corner of his mind was getting louder, much louder, now that his hands had stopped their frantic motions. He was suddenly aware of the liquid sensation where blood had soaked through his robes and the knees of his pants.

From behind Harry came the sound of another bellow from the troll, and he heard one of the Weasley twins shout "Deligitor prodeas!" and then, "HELP! Do something!"

Harry twisted his head back to look, and saw that one of the Weasley twins was somehow now wearing the Sorting Hat on his head, facing off against the troll which held the huge stone club in both its hands, looking somewhat scorched now and with one or two smoking scars across its arms, but still intact.

And then the voice of the Hat bellowed in a voice so loud it seemed to shake the walls,

## "GRYFFINDOR!"

A pulse of power burned the air, magic feeling almost tangible even to Harry's young senses, the troll jumped back a pace with a snort of surprise. Fred or George, with a strange look on his face, swept the Hat off his head with a motion smooth as a magician's trick, and reached in with one hand and drew forth a hilt whose pommel was a glowing ruby, followed by a wide crossguard of gleaming white metal, and a blade as long as a tall child. As the sword was revealed the air seemed to fill with a silent scream of fury.

Upon the blade was written in golden script, nihil supernum.

Then the Weasley twin raised the sword aloft as though the huge blade weighed nothing, and screamed and charged.

Harry's lips opened to say something, some long sentence like, *No, stop, you have no idea how to use a sword* but not even a single syllable left his lips before the sword sliced off the troll's right arm through the elbow, cutting through skin and flesh and bone like jelly; just as the already-swinging arc of the stone club smashed into the charging Weasley twin and sent him flying through the air above the marble floor, over the gap out of which they'd risen on the broomstick, until that Weasley hit the wall on the opposite side and then collapsed into an unmoving heap.

The bright sword vanished down into the opening in the floor, clattering

distantly as it dropped.

"Fred!" screamed George Weasley, and then "VENTUS!"

An invisible blow caught the troll and hurled it sideways through the air. "VENTUS!"

The troll was hit again, blown to the edge of the floor and the gap leading downwards.

"VENTUS!"

But the troll had reached down and grabbed at the floor, its remaining hand crunching through marble to gain a firm hold. The third blow sent the troll's body over the gap; but the hand remained at the edge. And then the troll was pulling itself back up single-handedly, roaring.

George Weasley staggered, almost falling, his hand dropping to his side. "Harry —" the Weasley twin said in a strained voice, "Run —"

The remaining Weasley twin took a step sideways, slumped against the wall, and slid to the ground.

Time was fractured in Harry's mind, the world around him seemed to move slowly, distorted, or perhaps it was his own mind twisting and folding. He should have been moving, doing something, but a strange paralysis seemed to be stopping all his muscles, all his motions. Without any time for words, thoughts came in flashes of concepts: that if Harry ran away the troll would eat the Weasley twins as well as Hermione, that if Bludgers didn't kill wizards then Fred should still be alive, that the Weasley twins were more powerful spellcasters than him and they hadn't been able to hold back the troll, there was no time to Transfigure anything he didn't already possess, the troll seemed too agile to be lured over the edge of the terrace to fall off the sides of the Hogwarts castle, someone had enchanted the troll against sunlight before using it as a murder weapon and might also have strengthened it in other ways. And then a mental image of Hermione running from the troll, running for sunlight, finally reaching the bright terrace with the troll hot on her heels, only to find that someone else had thought of that possibility, too.

The screaming horror in his mind was drowned out by another emotion. Harry stood up.

On the other side of the room, the enemy had also risen, the unregenerating stump of one sword-cut arm still bloody.

intent to kill

The troll grasped its fallen club in its remaining hand, and gave a huge

bellow, smashing the club into the floor and sending marble chips flying. think purely of killing

The troll began to lumber towards where George had fallen, a thin string of drool trailing from the side of its lips.

grasp at any means to do so

Harry took five strides forward, and the enemy gave another bellow and turned away from George, its eyes focusing squarely on him.

censors off, do not flinch

The third most perfect killing machine in nature bounded towards him in leaping steps.

**KILL** 

Harry's left hand already held the Transfigured diamond from his ring, his right hand already held his wand.

"Wingardium Leviosa."

Harry's wand directed the tiny jewel into the troll's mouth.

"Finite Incantatem."

The troll's head blew off its spine as the rock expanded back into its old form, and Harry stepped aside as the Enemy's body crashed where he'd been standing.

The enemy's head was already beginning to regenerate, the ragged stump of the jaw and spine smoothing over, the mouth completing itself and replacing its teeth.

Harry bent down and picked up the troll's head by its left ear. His wand jammed through the troll's left eye, plunging through the jelly-like material and passing through the wide socket in the bone. Harry visualized a one-millimeter-wide cross-section through the enemy's brain, and Transfigured it into sulfuric acid.

The enemy stopped regenerating.

Harry threw the corpse over the edge of the terrace and turned back to Hermione.

Her eyes were moving, and focused on him.

Harry scrambled down beside her, ignoring the blood soaking more of his already-soaked robes. *You'll be all right*, his brain formed the sentence, but his lips wouldn't move. *You'll be all right*, we'll find some magic to fix all this, put you back to normal, just hold on, don't —

Hermione's lips were moving, just a tiny bit but they were moving.

"your ... fault ..."

Time froze. Harry should have told her not to talk, to save her breath, only he couldn't unblock his lips.

Hermione drew in another breath, and her lips whispered, "Not your fault."

Then she exhaled, and closed her eyes.

Harry stared at her with his mouth half-open, his breath caught in his throat.

"Don't do this," said his voice. He'd only been two minutes late.

Hermione suddenly convulsed, her arms twitching into the air as though reaching up for something, and her eyes flew open again. There was a burst of *something* that was magic and also more, a shout louder than an earthquake and containing a thousand books, a thousand libraries, all spoken in a single cry that was Hermione; too vast to be understood, except that Harry suddenly knew that Hermione had whited out the pain, and was glad not to be dying alone. For a moment it seemed like the outpouring of magic might hold, take root in the castle's stone; but then the outpouring ended and the magic faded, her body stopped moving and all motion halted as Hermione Jean Granger ceased to exist —

No.

Harry stood up from the body, swaying.

No.

There was a burst of flame and Dumbledore was standing there with Fawkes, his eyes filled with horror. "I felt a student die! What —"

The old wizard's eyes saw what lay upon the ground.

"Oh, no," whispered Albus Dumbledore. Fawkes gave a sad, mournful croon.

"Bring her back."

There was silence on the terrace. Fred Weasley had risen up into the air at a gesture from Dumbledore's wand and was floating towards them, surrounded by a reassuring pink glow.

"Harry —" the old wizard began. His voice cracked. "Harry —"

"Have Fawkes cry on her or whatever. Hurry up." The voice that spoke sounded perfectly calm.

"I, I can't, Harry, it's too late, she's dead —"

"I don't want to hear about it. If it was me lying there, you'd pull some

kind of amazing rabbit out of your hat and save me, right, because the hero isn't allowed to die before the story's over. Well, she's the hero too, so whatever you were saving for that extra-special occasion, just go ahead and use it now. I promise I'll pay you back."

"There isn't anything I can do! Her soul has departed, she's passed on!"

Harry opened his mouth to scream out all his fury, and then closed it again. There wasn't any point in screaming, it wouldn't accomplish anything. The unbearable pressure rising inside him couldn't be let out that way.

Harry turned away from Dumbledore and looked down at where the remains of Hermione Granger were lying in a pool of blood. Part of his mind was hammering at the world around him, trying to make it go away, wake up from the nightmare and find himself back in his Ravenclaw dorm room with the morning sun shining through the curtains. But the blood remained and Harry didn't wake up, and another part of him already knew that this event was real, part of the same flawed world that included Azkaban and the Wizengamot chamber and

No

With a fracturing feeling, as though time was still torn to pieces around him, Harry turned away from Dumbledore and looked down at the remains of Hermione Granger lying in a pool of blood with two tourniquets tied around her thigh-stumps, and decided

No.

I do not accept this.

There isn't any reason to accept it, not when there's magic in the world.

Harry would learn whatever he had to learn, invent whatever he had to invent, rip the knowledge of Salazar Slytherin from the Dark Lord's mind, discover the secret of Atlantis, open any gates or break any seals necessary, find his way to the root of all magic and reprogram it.

He would rip apart the foundations of reality itself to get Hermione Granger back.

"The crisis is over," the Defense Professor said. "You may dismount, Madam."

Trelawney, who had been sitting behind him on the two-person broomstick

that had just blazed through Hogwarts burning directly through all the walls and floors in their way, hastily pulled herself off and then sat down hard on the floor, a pace away from the red-glowing edges of a newly made gap in the wall. The woman was still breathing in gasps, bending over herself as though she were on the verge of vomiting out something larger than she was.

The Defense Professor had felt the boy's horror, through the link that existed between the two of them, the resonance in their magic; and he had realized that the boy had sought the troll and found it. The Defense Professor had tried to send an impulse to retreat, to don the Cloak of Invisibility and flee; but he'd never been able to influence the boy through the resonance, and hadn't succeeded that time either.

He'd felt the boy give himself over fully to the killing intention. That was when the Defense Professor had begun burning through the substance of Hogwarts, trying to reach the battle in time.

He'd felt the boy exterminate his enemy in seconds.

He'd felt the boy's dismay as one of his friends died.

He'd felt the fury the boy had directed at some annoyance who was likely Dumbledore; followed by an unknown resolution whose unyielding hardness even he found adequate. With any luck, the boy had just discarded his foolish little reluctances.

Unseen by anyone, the Defense Professor's lips curved up in a thin smile. Despite its little ups and downs, on the whole this had been a surprisingly good day —

"He is here. The one who will tear apart the very stars in heaven. He is here. He is the end of the world."

## CHAPTER NINETY



simple *Innervate* from the Headmaster had awakened Fred Weasley, followed by a preliminary healing Charm for a broken arm and cracked ribs. Harry's voice had distantly told the Headmaster about the Transfigured acid inside the troll's head (Dumbledore had looked down over the side of the terrace and made a gesture before returning) and then about the Weasley twins' minds having been tampered with, carrying on a separate conversation that Harry remembered but could not process.

Harry still stood over Hermione's body, he hadn't moved from that spot, thinking as fast as he could through the sense of dissociation and fragmented time, was there anything he should be doing *now*, any opportunities that were passing irrevocably. Some way to reduce the amount of magical omnipotence that would be required later. A temporal beacon effect to mark this instant for later time travel, if he someday found a way to travel back further than six hours. There were theories of time travel under General Relativity (which had seemed much less plausible before Harry had run across Time-Turners) and those theories said you couldn't go back to before the time machine was built — a relativistic time machine maintained a continuous pathway through time, it didn't teleport anything. But Harry didn't see anything helpful he could do using spells in his lexicon, Dumbledore wasn't being very cooperative, and in any case this was several minutes after the critical location within Time

"Harry," the Headmaster whispered, laying his hand on Harry's shoulder. He had vanished from where he was standing over the Weasley twins and come into existence beside Harry; George Weasley had discontinuously teleported from where he was sitting to be kneeling next to his brother's side, and Fred was now lying straight with his eyes open and wincing as he breathed. "Harry, you must go from this place."

"Hold on," said Harry's voice. "I'm trying to think if there's anything else I can do."

The old wizard's voice sounded helpless. "Harry — I know you do not believe in souls — but whether Hermione is watching you now, or no, I do not think she would wish for you to be like this."

... no, it was obvious.

Harry leveled his wand at Hermione's body -

"Harry! What are you —"

- and poured everything down his arm into his hand -

"Frigideiro!"

" — doing?"

"Hypothermia," Harry said distantly, as he staggered. It'd been one of the spells he and Hermione had experimented on, a lifetime ago, so he was able to control it precisely, though it had taken a lot of power to affect that much mass. Hermione's body should now be at almost exactly five degrees Celsius. "People have been revived from cold water after more than thirty minutes without breathing. The cold protects you from brain damage, you see, it slows everything down. There's a saying Muggle doctors have, you're not dead until you're warm and dead — I think they even cool down the patient during some surgeries, if they have to stop someone's heart for a while."

Fred and George started sobbing.

Dumbledore's face was already streaked with tears. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "Harry, I'm so sorry, but you have to stop this." The Headmaster took Harry by the shoulders and pulled on him.

Harry allowed himself to be turned away from Hermione's body, walked forward as the Headmaster pushed him away from the blood. The Cooling Charm would buy him time. Hours at least, maybe days if he could manage to keep casting the spell on Hermione or if they stored her body somewhere cold.

Now there was time to think.

Minerva had seen Albus's face and she'd known something was wrong; there had been time for her to wonder what had happened, and even who had died; her mind flashing to Alastor, to Augusta, to Arthur and Molly, all the most likely targets at the start of Voldemort's second rise. She had thought that she had steeled herself, she had thought herself ready for the worst.

Then Albus spoke, and all the steel left her.

Not Hermione — no —

Albus gave her a brief space to weep; and then told her that Harry Potter, who had watched Miss Granger die, had seated himself outside the infirmary storeroom where Miss Granger's remains were being kept, refusing to move from the spot, and telling anyone who spoke to him to go away so he could think.

The only thing that had elicited any reaction from the boy was when Fawkes had tried to sing to him; Harry Potter had shrieked at the phoenix not to do that, his feelings were real, he didn't want magic trying to *heal* them like they were a disease. After that Fawkes had refused to sing again.

Albus thought that she might have the best chance of reaching Harry Potter now.

So she had to pull herself together, and clean up her face; there would be time later for private grief, when her surviving children no longer needed her.

Minerva McGonagall pulled together the dislocated pieces of herself, wiped her eyes a final time, and laid her hand on the doorknob of the infirmary section whose back storeroom was now being used, for the second time this century and for the fifth time since the castle of Hogwarts had been raised, as the resting place of a promising young student.

She opened the door.

Harry Potter's eyes gazed at her. The boy was sitting on the floor in front of the door to the back storeroom, and holding his wand in his lap. If those eyes were grieving, if they were empty, if they were even broken, it couldn't be seen from looking at the boy's face. There were no dried tears on those cheeks.

"Why are you here, Professor McGonagall?" Harry Potter said. "I told the Headmaster I'd like to be left alone for a while."

She couldn't think of anything to say. *To help you — you're not all right —* but she didn't know what to say, there was nothing she could imagine saying

that would make things better. She hadn't planned ahead before she'd walked into the room, having not been at her best.

"What are you thinking about?" Minerva said. It was the only sentence that came into her mind. Albus had told her that Harry had been saying, over and over, that he was thinking; and she had to get Harry talking, somehow.

Harry stared half at her and half past her, a tension coming into his face, as she held her breath.

It took a while before Harry spoke.

"I'm trying to think if there's anything I should be doing right now," said Harry Potter. "It's hard, though. My mind keeps on imagining ways the past could have gone differently if I'd thought faster, and I can't rule out that there might be a key insight in there somewhere."

"Mr. Potter —" she said falteringly. "Harry, I don't think it's healthy for you to be — thinking like that —"

"I disagree. It's not thinking that gets people killed." The words were spoken in a level monotone, as though reciting lines from a book.

"Harry," she said, hardly even thinking as she said it, "there's nothing you could have done —"

Something flickered in Harry's expression. His eyes seemed to focus on her for the first time.

"Nothing I could have done?" Harry's voice rose on the last word. "Nothing I could have DONE? I've lost track of how many different ways I could've saved her! If I'd asked to have us all given communications mirrors! If I'd insisted on Hermione being taken out of Hogwarts and put in a school that isn't insane! If I'd snuck out immediately instead of trying to argue with normal people! If I'd remembered the Patronus earlier! If I'd thought through possible emergencies and trained myself to think about Patronuses earlier! Even at the very last minute it might not have been too late! I killed the troll and turned to her and she was still ALIVE and I just knelt next to her listening to her last words like an IDIOT instead of casting the Patronus again and calling Dumbledore to send Fawkes! Or if I'd just approached the whole problem from a different angle — if I'd looked for a student with a Time-Turner to send a message back in time before I found out about anything happening to her, instead of ending up with an outcome that can't be altered — I asked the Headmaster to go back and save Hermione and then fake everything, fake the dead body, edit everyone's memories, but Dumbledore said that he tried something like that once and it didn't work

and he lost another friend instead. Or if I'd — if I'd only gone with — if, that night —"

Harry pressed his hands over his face, and when he removed them again, his face was calm and composed once more.

"Anyway," said Harry Potter, now in a monotone again, "I don't want to repeat that mistake, so I'm going to spend until dinnertime thinking if there's anything I should be doing. If I haven't thought of anything by then I'll go to dinner and eat. Now please go away."

She was aware now that tears were sliding down her cheeks, again. "Harry — Harry, you have to believe that this isn't your fault!"

"Of course it's my fault. There's no one else here who could be responsible for anything."

"No! You-Know-Who killed Hermione!" She was hardly aware of what she was saying, that she hadn't screened the room against who might be listening. "Not you! No matter what else you could've done, it's not you who killed her, it was Voldemort! If you can't believe that you'll go mad, Harry!"

"That's not how responsibility works, Professor." Harry's voice was patient, like he was explaining things to a child who was certain not to understand. He wasn't looking at her anymore, just staring off at the wall to her right side. "When you do a fault analysis, there's no point in assigning fault to a part of the system you can't change afterward, it's like stepping off a cliff and blaming gravity. Gravity isn't going to change next time. There's no point in trying to allocate responsibility to people who aren't going to alter their actions. Once you look at it from that perspective, you realize that allocating blame never helps anything unless you blame yourself, because you're the only one whose actions you can change by putting blame there. That's why Dumbledore has his room full of broken wands. He understands that part, at least."

Some distant part of her mind made a note to wait until much later and then speak sharply to the Headmaster about what he was showing to impressionable young children. She might even scream at him this time. She'd been thinking about screaming at him anyway, because of Miss Granger —

"You're *not* responsible," she said, though her voice trembled. "It's the Professors — it's us who are responsible for student safety, not you."

Harry's eyes flicked back to her. "You're responsible?" There was a tightness in the voice. "You want me to hold you responsible, Professor McGonagall?" She raised her chin and nodded. It would be better, by far, than Harry

blaming himself.

The boy pushed himself up from where he was sitting on the floor, and took a step forward. "All right, then," Harry said in a monotone. "I tried to do the sensible thing, when I saw Hermione was missing and that none of the Professors knew. I asked for a seventh-year student to go with me on a broomstick and protect me while we looked for Hermione. I asked for help. I begged for help. And nobody helped me. Because you gave everyone an absolute order to stay in one place or they'd be expelled, no excuses. No matter what else Dumbledore gets wrong, he at least thinks of his students as people, not animals that have to be herded into a pen and kept from wandering out. You knew you weren't any good at military thinking, your first idea was to have us walking through the hallways, you knew some students there were better than you at strategy and tactics, and you still nailed us down in one room without any discretionary judgment. So when something you didn't foresee happened and it would've made perfect sense to send out a seventh-year student on a fast broom to look for Hermione Granger, the students knew you wouldn't understand or forgive. They weren't afraid of the troll, they were afraid of you. The discipline, the conformity, the cowardice that you instilled in them delayed me just long enough for Hermione to die. Not that I should've tried asking for help from normal people, of course, and I will change and be less stupid next time. But if I were dumb enough to allocate responsibility to someone who isn't me, that's what I'd say."

Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"That's what I'd tell you if I thought you could be responsible for anything. But normal people don't choose on the basis of consequences, they just play roles. There's a picture in your head of a stern disciplinarian and you do whatever that picture would do, whether or not it makes any sense. A stern disciplinarian would order the students back to their rooms, even if there was a troll roaming the hallways. A stern disciplinarian would order students not to leave the Hall on pain of expulsion. And the little picture of Professor McGonagall that you have in your head can't learn from experience or change herself, so there isn't any point to this conversation. People like you aren't responsible for anything, people like me are, and when we fail there's no one else to blame."

The boy strode forward to stand directly before her. His hand darted beneath his robes, brought forth the golden sphere that was the Ministryissued protective shell of his Time-Turner. He spoke in a dead, level voice without any emphasis. "This could've saved Hermione, if I'd been able to use it. But you thought it was your role to shut me down and get in my way. Nobody has died in Hogwarts in fifty years, you said that when you locked it, do you remember? I should've asked again after Bellatrix Black got loose from Azkaban, or after Hermione got framed for attempted murder. But I forgot because I was stupid. Please unlock it now before any of my other friends die."

Unable to speak, she brought forth her wand and did so, releasing the time-keyed enchantment she'd laced into the shell's lock.

Harry Potter flipped open the golden shell, looked at the tiny glass hourglass within its circles, nodded, and then snapped the case shut. "Thank you. Now go away." The boy's voice cracked again. "I have to think."

She closed the door behind her, an awful and still mostly-muffled sound escaping her throat —

Albus shimmered into existence beside her, taking on a brief garish hue as the Disillusionment wore off.

She did not jump, quite. "I've told you, stop doing that," Minerva said. Her voice sounded dull in her own ears. "That was private."

Albus flickered his fingers at the door behind her. "I was afraid Mr. Potter might do you some harm." The Headmaster paused, then said quietly, "I am very surprised that you stood there and took that."

"All I had to do was say 'Mr. Potter', and he would have stopped." Her voice had dropped almost to a whisper. "Just that, and he would have stopped. And then he would have had no one to say those awful things to, no one at all."

"I thought Mr. Potter's remarks were entirely unfair and undeserved," Albus said.

"If it had been you, Albus, you would not have threatened to expel anyone leaving the room. Can you honestly tell me otherwise?"

Albus's brows rose. "Your role in this disaster was tiny, your decisions quite sensible at the time, and it is only Harry Potter's perfect hindsight that lets him imagine otherwise. Surely you are wiser than to blame yourself for this, Minerva."

She knew perfectly well that Albus would be placing a picture of Hermione in that awful room of his, that it would occupy a place of honor. Albus would hold *himself* responsible, she was certain, even though he hadn't even been in Hogwarts at the time. But not her.

So you also don't think it's worth the trouble of holding me responsible...

She slumped against the nearest wall, trying not to let the tears emerge again; she'd never seen Albus weep save thrice. "You have always believed in your students, as I never have. They would not have been afraid of you. They would have known you would understand."

"Minerva —"

"I am not fit to succeed you as Headmistress. We both know it."

"You are wrong," Albus said quietly. "When the time comes, you will be the forty-fifth Headmistress of Hogwarts and you will do an excellent job of it."

She shook her head. "What now, Albus? If he will not listen to me, then who?"

It was perhaps half an hour later. The boy still guarded the door to where his best friend's body lay, sitting his vigil. He was staring downward, at his wand as it lay in his hands. Sometimes his face screwed up in thought, at other times it relaxed.

Although the door did not open, and there was no sound, the boy looked up. He composed his face. His voice, when he spoke, was dull. "I don't want company."

The door opened.

The Defense Professor of Hogwarts entered into the room and shut the door behind him, taking up careful position in a corner between two walls, as far away from the boy as the room permitted. A sharp sense of catastrophe had risen in the air between the two of them, and hung there unchanging.

"Why are you here?" said the boy.

The man tilted his head slightly. Pale eyes examined the boy as though he were a specimen of life from a distant planet, and correspondingly dangerous.

"I've come to apologize, Mr. Potter," the man said quietly.

"Apologize for what?" the boy said. "Why, what could you have done to

prevent Hermione's death?"

"I should have thought to check for the presence of yourself, Mr. Longbottom, and Miss Granger, all of whom were obvious next targets," the Defense Professor said without hesitation. "Mr. Hagrid was not mentally equipped to command the student contingent. I should have ignored the Deputy Headmistress's request for silence, and told her to leave behind Professor Flitwick, who would have been better able to defend the students from any threat, and who could have maintained communication via Patronus."

"Correct." The boy's voice was razor-sharp. "I'd forgotten there was someone else in Hogwarts who could be responsible for things. So why didn't you think of it, Professor? Because I don't believe that *you* were stupid."

There was a pause, and the boy's fingers whitened on his wand.

"You did not think of it either, Mr. Potter, at the time." There was a weariness in the Defense Professor's voice. "I am smarter than you. I think faster than you. I am more experienced than you. But the gap between the two of us is not the same as the gap between us and them. If you can miss something, then so can I." The man's lips twisted. "You see, I deduced at once that the troll was but a distraction from some other matter, and of no great importance in itself. So long as nobody sent the students wandering pointlessly through the halls, or uncaringly dispatched the young Slytherins to those very dungeons where the troll had been spotted."

The boy did not seem to relax. "I suppose that is plausible."

"In any case," said the man, "if there is anyone who can be said to be responsible for Miss Granger's death, it is myself, not you. It is I, not you, who should have —"

"I perceive that you have spoken to Professor McGonagall and that she has given you a script to follow." The boy did not bother keeping the bitterness from his voice. "If you have something to say to me, Professor, say it without the masks."

There was a pause.

"As you wish," the Defense Professor said emotionlessly. The pale eyes stayed keen and sharp. "I do regret that the girl is dead. She was a good student in my Defense class, and could have been an ally to you later. I would wish to console you for your loss, but I cannot see how to go about doing so. Naturally, if I find the ones responsible I shall kill them. You are welcome to join in should circumstances permit."

"How touching," the boy said, his voice cool. "You are not claiming to have liked Hermione, then?"

"Her charms were lost on me, I suspect. I no longer form such bonds easily."

The boy nodded. "Thank you for being honest. Is that all, Professor?" There was a pause.

"The castle is scarred, now," said the man standing in the corner.

"What?"

"When a certain ancient device in my possession informed me that Miss Granger was on the verge of death, I cast that spell of cursed fire of which I once spoke. I burned through some walls and floors so that my broomstick could take a more direct path." The man still spoke tonelessly. "Hogwarts will not heal such wounds easily, if at all. I suppose it will be necessary to patch over the holes with lesser conjurations. I regret that now, since I was in any case too late."

"Ah," said the boy. He closed his eyes briefly. "You did want to save her. You wanted it so strongly that you made some sort of actual effort. I suppose your mind, if not theirs, would be capable of that."

A brief, dry smile from the man.

"Thank you for that, Professor. But I would like to be left alone now until dinnertime. You of all people will understand. Is that all?"

"Not quite," the man said. A tinge of sardonic dryness now returned to his voice. "You see, based on recent experiences, I am concerned that you may now intend to do something extremely foolish."

"Such as what?" said the boy.

"I am not quite sure. Perhaps you have decided that a universe without Miss Granger is devoid of value, and should be destroyed for the insults it has dealt you."

The boy smiled without any humor. "Your own issues are showing, Professor. I don't really go in for that sort of thing. Did you, at some point?"

"Not particularly. I have no great fondness for the universe, but I do live there."

There was a pause.

"What are you planning, Mr. Potter?" said the man in the corner. "You have come to some significant resolution, though you are trying to hide it from me. What do you now intend?"

The boy shook his head. "I'm still thinking, and would like to be left alone to do it."

"I recall an offer you once made to me, some months ago," said the Defense Professor. "Do you want someone intelligent to talk to? I will understand if you are not pleasant to be around."

The boy shook his head again. "No, thank you."

"Well, then," said the Defense Professor. "What about someone who is powerful and not particularly bound by naive scruples?"

There was a hesitation, and then the boy once more shook his head.

"Someone who is knowledgeable of much secret lore, and magics that some might consider to be unnatural?"

There was a slight narrowing of the boy's eyes, so imperceptible that someone else might not have —

"I see," said the Defense Professor. "Go ahead and ask me about it, then. I give you my word that I will repeat nothing of it to the others."

The boy took a while to speak, and when he did it was in a cracked voice.

"I mean to bring Hermione back. Because there isn't an afterlife, and I'm not about to just let her — just *not be* —"

The boy pressed his hands over his face, and when he withdrew them, he once more seemed as dispassionate as the man standing in the corner.

The Defense Professor's eyes were abstract, and faintly puzzled.

"How?" the man said finally.

"However I have to."

There was another pause.

"Regardless of the risks," the man in the corner said. "Regardless of how dangerous the magic required to accomplish it."

"Yes."

The Defense Professor's eyes were thoughtful. "But what general approach did you have in mind? I presume that turning her corpse into an Inferius is not what you —"

"Would she be able to think?" the boy said. "Would her body still decay?"

"No, and yes."

"Then no."

"What of the Resurrection Stone of Cadmus Peverell, if it could be obtained for you?"

The boy shook his head. "I don't want an illusion of Hermione drawn

from my memories. I want her to be able to *live* her *life* —" the boy's voice cracked. "I haven't decided yet on an object-level angle of attack. If I have to brute-force the problem by acquiring enough power and knowledge to just *make it happen*, I will."

Another pause.

"And to go about *that*," the man in the corner said, "you will use your favorite tool, science."

"Of course."

The Defense Professor exhaled, almost like a sigh. "I suppose that makes sense of it."

"Are you willing to help, or not?" the boy said.

"What help do you seek?"

"Magic. Where does it come from?"

"I do not know," said the man.

"And neither does anyone else?"

"Oh, the situation is far worse than that, Mr. Potter. There is hardly a scholar of the esoteric who has not unraveled the nature of magic, and every one of them believes something different."

"Where do new spells come from? I keep reading about someone who invented a spell to do something-or-other but there's no mention of *how*."

A shrug of robed shoulders. "Where do new books come from, Mr. Potter? Those who read many books sometimes become able to write them in turn. How? No one knows."

"There are books on how to write —"

"Reading them will not make you a famous playwright. After all such advice is accounted for, what remains is mystery. The invention of new spells is a similar mystery of purer form." The man's head tilted. "Such endeavors are dangerous. The saying is that one should either not have children, or else wait until after they are grown. There is a reason why so many innovators seem to hail from Gryffindor, rather than Ravenclaw as might be expected."

"And the more powerful sorts of magics?" the boy said.

"A legendary wizard might invent one sacrificial ritual in his life, and pass on the knowledge to his heirs. To try inventing five such would be suicide. That is why wizards of true power are those who have acquired ancient lore."

The boy nodded distantly. "So much for the direct solution, then. It would've been nice to just invent a spell for 'Raise Dead', 'Become God' or

'Summon Terminal'. Do you know anything about Atlantis?"

"Only what any scholar knows," the man said dryly. "If you would like to hear about the top eighteen standard theories — do not glare at me, Mr. Potter. If it were that simple, I would have done it many years earlier."

"I understand. Sorry."

There was a time of silence. The Defense Professor's gaze rested on the boy, the boy stared off seemingly at nothing.

"There's some magics I mean to learn. Spells I could've used earlier today, if I'd thought to study them beforehand." The boy's voice was cold. "Spells I'll need, if this sort of thing goes on happening. Most I expect I can just look up. Some I expect I can't."

The Defense Professor inclined his head. "I shall teach you almost any magic you wish to know, Mr. Potter. I do have some limits, but you may always ask. But what specifically do you seek? You lack the raw power for the Killing Curse and most other spells deemed forbidden —"

"That spell of cursed fire. I don't suppose it's a sacrificial ritual that even a child could use, if he dared?"

The Defense Professor's lips twitched. "It requires the permanent sacrifice of a drop of blood; your body would be lighter by that drop of blood, from that day forward. Not the sort of thing one would wish to do often, Mr. Potter. Strength of will is demanded for the cursed fire not to turn upon you and consume you; the usual practice is to first test one's will in lesser trials. And although it is not a primary element of the ritual, I am afraid that it does require more magic than you shall possess for another few years."

"Pity," the boy said. "It would've been nice to see the look on the enemy's face the next time they tried using a troll."

The Defense Professor inclined his head, his lips twitching again.

"What about Memory Charms? The Weasley twins were acting oddly and the Headmaster said he thinks they've been Obliviated. It seems to be one of the enemy's favorite tricks."

"Rule Eight," said the Defense Professor. "Any technique which is good enough to defeat me once is good enough to learn myself."

The boy smiled humorlessly. "And I once heard about an adult casting Obliviate while she was almost completely drained, so it must not take too much magic to cast. It's not even considered Unforgiveable, though I can't imagine why not. If I could've made Mr. Hagrid remember a different set of

orders —"

"It is not that straightforward," said the Defense Professor. "You are not powerful enough to use the False Memory Charm, and even a simple Obliviation will stretch the edge of your current stamina. It is a dangerous art, illegal to use without Ministry authorization, and I would caution you not to use it under circumstances where it would be inconvenient to accidentally erase ten years of someone's life. I wish I could promise you that I would obtain one of those highly guarded tomes from the Department of Mysteries, and pass it to you beneath a disguised cover. But what I must actually tell you is that you will find the standard introductory text in the north-northwest stacks of the main Hogwarts library, filed under M."

"Seriously," the boy said flatly.

"Indeed."

"Thank you for your guidance, Professor."

"Your creativity has become a great deal more practical, Mr. Potter, since I have known you."

"Thank you for the compliment." The boy did not look up from where he was again gazing down at the wand held between his hands. "I would like to go back to thinking now. Please explain to them on my behalf what happens if I am disturbed."

The door to the storeroom clicked open, and Professor Quirrell stepped out. His face had a dead, emotionless look to it; she would have said that it reminded her of Severus, though Severus had never looked quite like that.

Even as the door clicked shut again, Minerva had thrown up a wordless Quieting barrier. The words spilled forth from her rapidly: "How did it go — you were in there for a while — is Harry talking now?"

Professor Quirrell paced swiftly across the room to the far wall near the entrance, looked back at her. The emotionlessness slid off his face, as though he were taking off a mask, leaving behind someone very grim. "I spoke to Mr. Potter as he expected me to speak, and avoided saying things that would annoy him. I do not think it consoled him. I do not think I have the knack."

"Thank you — it is good that he spoke at all —" She hesitated. "What did Mr. Potter say?"

"I am afraid that I promised him not to speak of it. And now... I think that I must visit the Hogwarts library."

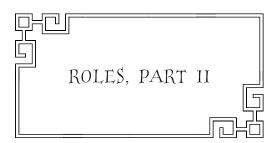
"The library?"

"Yes," Professor Quirrell said. An uncharacteristic tension had come into his voice. "I intend to strengthen the security upon the Restricted Section with certain precautions of my own devising. The current wards are a joke. And Mr. Potter must be kept out of the Restricted Section *at all costs*."

She stared at the Defense Professor, her heart suddenly in her throat.

Professor Quirrell continued speaking. "You will *not* tell the boy that I have said this much to you. You will confirm to Flitwick and Vector that the boy is to be diverted by the usual evasions if he asks precocious questions about spell creation. And though it is not my own area of expertise, Deputy Headmistress, if there is any way you can imagine to convince the boy to stop sinking further into his grief and madness — any way at all to undo the resolutions he is coming to — then I suggest you resort to it *immediately*."

## CHAPTER NINETY-ONE



hortly after, there was another knock upon the storeroom door.

"If you actually care about my mental health," the boy said without looking up, "you will go away, leave me alone, and wait for me to come down to dinner. This isn't helping."

The door opened, and the one who had waited outside stepped in.

"Seriously?" the boy said flatly.

The door closed and clicked behind Severus Snape.

The Potions Master of Hogwarts wore none of his customary arrogance, or even the dispassionate guise that he ordinarily took in the Headmaster's office; his gaze was strange, as he looked down upon the boy guarding that door; his thoughts unfathomable.

"I also cannot imagine what the Deputy Headmistress is thinking," said the Potions Master of Hogwarts. "Unless I am meant to serve as a warning of where it will lead you, if you decide to take the blame for her death upon yourself."

The boy's lips pressed together. "Fine. Let's just skip ahead to the end of this conversation. You win, Professor Snape. I concede that you were more responsible for Lily Potter's death than I was responsible for Hermione Granger's death, and that my guilt can't stack up to your guilt. And then I ask you to go, and you tell them that it would probably be best to let me alone for a while. Are we done?"

"Almost," the Potions Master said. "I am the one who put the notes under Miss Granger's pillow, telling her where to find the fights in which she intervened."

The boy did not react to this at all. Finally he spoke. "Because you dislike bullying."

"Not that alone." There was a note of pain in the Potions Master's voice that sounded alien to it; it was hard to imagine it being the same acid voice that instructed children not to stir one more time or they'd blow off their wrists. "I should have realized it... very much earlier, I suppose, and yet I did not see it at all, being entirely absorbed in myself. For me to be placed as Head of Slytherin... it means that Albus Dumbledore has entirely lost hope that Slytherin House can be helped. I am certain that Dumbledore must have tried, I cannot imagine that he did not try, when he first took trust of Hogwarts. It must have been a severe blow to him, when after that so much of Slytherin answered to the Dark Lord's call... he would not have placed me in authority over that House, acting as I did, unless he had lost all hope." The Potions Master's shoulders fell, beneath his spotted and stained cloak. "But you and Miss Granger were trying to do something, and the two of you had even managed to bring over Mr. Malfoy and Miss Greengrass, and perhaps those two could have set a different example ... I suppose it was foolish for me to believe. The Headmaster does not know of what I have done, and I ask you not to tell him."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Matters have become far too serious not to tell someone." Severus Snape's lips twisted. "I have seen enough disastrous plotting, in my tenure as Head of Slytherin, to know how that sometimes goes. If, in the future, all should come to light — then at least I have told you, and you may say as much."

"Lovely," the boy said. "Thank you for clearing that up. Is that all?"

"Do you intend to declare that your life is now a ruin and that there is nothing left for you but vengeance?"

"No. I still have —" The boy cut himself off.

"Then there is very little advice that I can give you," said Severus Snape.

The boy nodded distantly. "On Hermione's behalf, thank you for helping her with the bullies. She would tell you that it was the right thing to do. And now I would be much obliged if you could tell them to *leave me alone*."

The Potions Master turned to the door, and when his face was unseen, his

voice came in a whisper. "I truly am sorry for your loss."

Severus Snape departed.

The boy stared after him, trying to remember, as best as he could at this distance, words which had been spoken some time earlier.

Your books betrayed you, Potter. They did not tell you the one thing you needed to know. You cannot learn from books what it is like to lose the one you love. That is something you could never know without experiencing it for yourself.

It had gone something like that, the boy thought, if he was remembering correctly.

Hours had passed now, in the infirmary section with its closed door and a body lying in state behind it.

Harry went on staring at his wand, as it lay in his lap. At the tiny scratches and smudges on the eleven inches of holly, flaws he'd never looked closely enough to notice before. A quick mental calculation said there was no reason to worry since if this was six or seven months' accumulation of damage, then a standard lifetime wouldn't wear away the wand entirely. At the time, he probably would've worried about his own Time-Turner being taken away if he'd just openly yelled out 'Does anyone have a Time-Turner?' into the Great Hall, but it would have been easy enough to precommit to, after lunch, finding someone to send Professor Flitwick a message two hours earlier and then Professor Flitwick could've just gone straight to Hermione, or sent her his raven Patronus, long before the troll was anywhere near her. Or might that alternate Harry have already learned it was too late — heard about Hermione's death after lunch and before he could buy any messages sent backwards in time? Maybe a basic guideline of working with time-travel was to make sure you never risked learning you were too late, if you hadn't yet gone backwards. There was a tiny chemical burn now on the end of his wand, presumably from contacting the acid he'd partially Transfigured the troll's brain into, but the wand seemed robust against losses of small amounts of wood. Really the concept of a 'magic wand' being required just got stranger the more you thought about it. Though if spells were always being invented in some mysterious way, new rituals being carved as new levers upon the unknown machine, it might just be that people just kept inventing rituals that involved wands, just like they invented phrases

like 'Wingardium Leviosa'. It really seemed like magic ought to be, in some sense, almost arbitrarily powerful, and it certainly would be convenient if Harry could just bypass whatever conceptual limitation prevented people from inventing spells like 'Just Fix Everything Forever', but somehow nothing was ever that easy where magic was concerned. Harry looked at his mechanical watch again, but it still wasn't time.

He'd attempted to cast the Patronus Charm, meaning to tell his Patronus to go to Hermione Granger. Just in case it was all a lie, a False Memory Charm or one of the who-knew-how-many-ways that wizards could be made to close their eyes and dream. Just in case the real Hermione was alive and being held somewhere, despite his feeling her life as it left her. Just in case there was an afterlife and the True Patronus could reach it.

The spell hadn't worked though, so that particular test had failed to provide any evidence, leaving him with the previous, unfavorable prior.

Time passed, and yet more time. From the outside you would've just seen a boy, sitting, staring at his wand with an abstracted gaze, looking at his watch every two minutes or so.

The door to the infirmary section opened once again.

The boy sitting there looked up with a deadly, chilling glare.

Then the boy's face cracked in dismay, and he scrambled to his feet.

"Harry," said the man in the button-down formal shirt and a black vest thrown over it. His voice was hoarse. "Harry, what's happening? The Headmaster of your school — he showed up in those ridiculous robes at my office and told me that Hermione Granger was dead!"

A moment later a woman followed the man into the room; she seemed less confused than the man, less bewildered and more frightened.

"Dad," the boy said thinly. "Mum. Yes, she's dead. They didn't tell you anything else?"

"No! Harry, what's happening?"

There was a pause.

The boy slumped back against the wall. "I c-can't, I can't, I can't do this." "What?"

"I can't pretend to be a little boy, I j-just don't have the energy right now."

"Harry," the woman said falteringly. "Harry —"

"Dad, you know those fantasy books where the hero has to hide everything from his parents because they, they wouldn't understand, they'd react stupidly and get in the hero's way? It's a plot device, right, so that the hero has to solve everything himself instead of telling his parents. P-please don't be that plot device, Dad, or you either, Mum. Just . . . just don't play that role. Don't be the parents who won't understand. D-don't yell at me and give me parental demands I can't follow. Because I've wandered into a bloody stupid fantasy novel and now Hermione's — I j-just don't have the energy to deal with it."

Slowly, as though his limbs were only half-animated, the man in the black vest knelt down to where Harry was standing, so that his eyes were level with his son's. "Harry," the man said. "I need you to tell me everything that has happened, right now."

The boy took a deep breath, swallowed. "They t-tell me the Dark Lord I defeated may still be alive. Like that's not the p-plot of a hundred sodding books, right? So, it could also be that the Headmaster of my school, who's the most powerful wizard in the world, has gone insane. And, and Hermione was framed for an attempted murder just before this, not that anyone would've told her parents about it or anything. The student she was framed for attempted-murdering was the son of Lucius Malfoy, who's the most powerful politician in magical Britain, and used to be the Dark Lord's number two. The Defense Professor position at this school has a curse on it, nobody ever lasts more than a year, they have a saying that the Defense Professor is always a suspect. This year the Defense Professor is secretly a mysterious wizard who opposed the Dark Lord during the last war and may or may not be evil himself. Also the Potions Master has been pining after Lily Potter for years and might be behind this whole thing for some twisted psychological reason." The boy's lips pressed together bitterly. "I think that's most of the bloody stupid plot."

The man, who had listened to all this quietly, stood up. He put a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder. "That's enough, Harry," he said. "I've heard enough. We're leaving this school right now and taking you with us."

The woman was looking at the boy, her face asking a question.

The boy gazed back at her and nodded.

The woman's voice was thin when she spoke. "They won't let us, Michael."

"They have no legal right to stop us —"

"Right? You're Muggles," said the boy. He smiled twistedly. "You have as much standing in the magical British legal system as mice. No wizard is going to care about any arguments you make about rights, about fairness, they won't even take the time to listen. You don't have any power, see, so they don't have to

bother. No, Mum, I'm not smiling like this because I agree with their Muggle policies, I'm smiling because I disagree with your children policies."

"Then," Professor Michael Verres-Evans said firmly, "we shall see what the *real* government has to say about that. I know an MP or three —"

"They'll say, you're crazy, have a nice stay in this asylum. That's assuming the Ministry Obliviators don't get to you first and erase your memories. They do that to Muggles a lot, I hear. I figure the real higher-ups in our government have formed some cozy accommodations of their own. Maybe they get a few healing Charms now and then, if someone important manages to get cancer." The boy gave that twisted smile again. "And that's the situation, Dad, as Mum already knows. They'd never have brought you here or told you anything, if there was a single thing you could do about it."

The man's mouth opened but no words came out, as though he had been reading from a script which described what a concerned parent ought to do in this sort of situation, and this script had suddenly arrived at a blank spot.

"Harry," the woman said falteringly.

The boy looked at her.

"Harry, did something happen to you? You seem ... different ..."

"Petunia!" the man said, his tongue apparently working once more. "Don't say such things! He's under stress, that's all."

"Well, Mum, you see —" The boy's voice cracked. "Are you sure you want this all at once, Mum?"

The woman nodded, though she didn't speak.

"I've got ... you know how that school psychiatrist thought I had anger management problems? Well —" The boy stopped, and swallowed. "I don't know how to explain this to you, Mum. It's something magical instead. Probably something to do with whatever happened on the night my parents died. I have ... well, I was calling it a mysterious dark side and I know it sounds like a joke and I did check with ... with an ancient telepathic magical hat to make sure my scar wasn't actually inhabited by the Dark Lord's spirit and it said that there was only one person under its brim and I don't think wizards have actual souls anyway since they can still suffer from brain damage, only —"

"Harry, slow down!" said the man.

"— only, only whatever it is, it's still *real*, there's something inside me, it gave me willpower when things were bad, I could face down anything so long as I was angry, Snape, Dumbledore, the entire Wizengamot, my dark side

wasn't afraid of anything but Dementors. And I wasn't stupid, I knew that there might be a price for using my dark side and I kept on looking to see what the price might be. It didn't change my magic, it didn't seem to cause permanent alignment shift, it didn't try to take me away from my friends or anything like that, so I kept on using it whenever I had to and I only figured out too late what the price really was —" The boy's voice had become almost a whisper. "I only figured out today ... every time I call on it ... it uses up my childhood. I killed the thing that got Hermione. And it wasn't my dark side that did it, it was me. Oh, Mum, Dad, I'm sorry."

There was a long silence filled with the sound of broken masks.

"Harry," the man said, kneeling down again, "I need you to start over from the beginning and explain that much more slowly."

The boy spoke.

The parents listened.

Some time later, the father stood up.

The boy looked up at him, grimacing in bitter anticipation.

"Harry," the man said, "Petunia and I are going to get you out of here as quickly as possible —"

"Don't," the boy said warningly. "I mean it, Dad. The Ministry of Magic isn't something you can stand up to. Pretend they're the tax office or the dean or something else that won't brook any challenge to their dominance. In magical Britain you're only allowed to remember what the government thinks you should remember, and remembering the existence of magic or that you have a son named Harry is a privilege, not a right. And if they did that I'd crack and turn the Ministry into a giant flaming crater. Mum, you know the score, you absolutely have to stop Dad from trying anything stupid."

"And son —" The man rubbed at his temples. "Maybe I shouldn't say this now... but are you sure that what you're talking about is really a magical dark side, and not something normal for a boy your age?"

"Normal," the boy said with elaborate patience. "Normal how, exactly? I could check again, but I'm reasonably sure there wasn't anything about this in *Childcraft: A Guide For Parents*. My dark side isn't just an emotional state, it *makes me smarter*. In some ways, anyhow. You can't just *pretend* yourself smarter."

The man rubbed at his head again. "Well... there's a certain well-known phenomenon wherein children undergo a biological process which can some-

times make them angry and dark and grim, and this process also significantly increases their intelligence and their height —"

The boy slumped back against the wall. "No, Dad, it's not that I'm turning into a teenager. I checked with my brain and it still thinks that girls are icky. But if that's what you want to pretend, then fine. Maybe I'm better off with you not believing me. I just —" The boy's voice choked. "I just couldn't stand lying about it."

"Adolescence doesn't necessarily work like that, Harry. It may still take a while for you to notice girls. If, in fact, you haven't noticed one alrea —" and the man abruptly stopped.

"I didn't like Hermione in that way," the boy whispered. "Why does everyone keep thinking it has to be about that? It's disrespectful to her, to think someone could only like her in that way."

The man swallowed visibly. "Anyway, son, you keep yourself safe while we work on getting you out of here, is that understood? Don't you go actually thinking that you've turned to the dark side. I know you've had, ah, what I used to call your Ender Wiggin moments —"

"I think we are now well past Ender and on to Ender after the buggers kill Valentine."

"Language!" said the woman, and then her hand flew to cover her mouth. The boy spoke wearily. "Not that kind of bugger, Mum. They're insectoid aliens — never mind."

"Harry, that's exactly what I'm saying you shouldn't think," Professor Verres-Evans said firmly. "You're not to go believing that you're turning evil. You are not to hurt anyone, place yourself in harm's way, or mess around with any sort of black magic whatsoever, while your Mum and I work on extracting you from this situation. Is that clear, son?"

The boy closed his eyes. "That'd be wonderful advice, Dad, if only I were in a comic book."

"Harry —" the man began.

"Police can't do that. Soldiers can't do that. The most powerful wizard in the world couldn't do that, and he tried. It's not fair to the innocent bystanders to play at being Batman if you can't actually protect everyone under that code. And I've just proven that I can't."

Beads of sweat were glistening on Professor Michael Verres-Evans's forehead. "Now you listen to me. No matter what you've read in books, you aren't *supposed* to be protecting anyone! Or involving yourself in anything dangerous! Absolutely anything dangerous whatsoever! Just stay out of the way of *everything*, every bit of craziness going on in this madhouse, while we get you out of here the first instant we possibly can!"

The boy looked searchingly at his father, then his mother. Then he looked at his wristwatch again.

"Excellent point," said the boy.

The boy marched over to the door leading outward, and flung it open.

The door flew open with a crack that caused Minerva to startle where she stood, and before she had time to think, Harry Potter marched out of the room, glaring directly at her.

"You brought my parents *here*," the Boy-Who-Lived said. "To *Hogwarts*. Where You-Know-Who or *someone* is lurking around, targeting my friends. What exactly were you thinking?"

She did not reply that she had been thinking about Harry sitting in front of the door to the storeroom containing Hermione's body, refusing to move.

"Who else knows about this?" Harry Potter demanded. "Did anyone see them with you?"

"The Headmaster brought them here —"

"I want them out of here *immediately* before anyone else notices, especially You-Know-Who, but also including Professor Quirrell or Professor Snape. Please send your Patronus to the Headmaster and tell him that he needs to bring it back at once. Do not mention my parents by name, or as people, in case somebody else is listening."

"Indeed," said Professor Verres-Evans, nodding sternly along with this from where he stood directly behind the boy, Petunia a step behind him. His hand rested firmly on Harry's shoulder. "We'll finish talking to our son at home."

"A moment, please," Minerva said in reflexive politeness. Her first try at casting the Patronus failed, a disadvantage of that Charm under certain circumstances. It wasn't the first time she'd done it so, but she seemed to have lost some of the knack —

Minerva shut the thought down and concentrated.

When the message was sent, she turned back to Professor Verres-Evans.

"Sir," she said, "I'm afraid that Mr. Potter must not leave the Hogwarts School —"

By the time Albus finally arrived, there was shouting, the Muggle man having given up on dignity. At least there was shouting on one side of the argument. Minerva's heart wasn't in it. The truth was that she couldn't believe the words coming out of her mouth.

When the Professor turned to argue with the Headmaster, Harry Potter, who had remained silent through this, spoke up. "Not here," said Harry. "You can argue with him anywhere but Hogwarts, Dad. Mum, please, please make sure that Dad doesn't try anything that will get him in trouble with the Ministry."

Michael Verres-Evans's face screwed up. He turned, looked at Harry Potter. When his voice came out it was hoarse, accompanied by water in his eyes. "Son — what are you doing?"

"You know perfectly well what I'm doing," Harry Potter said. "You read those comic books long before you gave them to me. I've been through a bunch of crap, matured a bit, and now I'm protecting my relatives. Actually, it's simpler than that, you know what I'm doing because you tried to do the same thing. I'm having my loved ones taken out of Hogwarts immediately, that's what I'm doing. Headmaster, please get them out of here before You-Know-Who discovers their presence and marks them for death."

Michael Verres-Evans began a frantic dash toward Harry, and then all motion stopped with the Muggle man leaning forward in his flight.

"I am sorry," the Headmaster said quietly. "We shall speak more soon. Minerva, I was with the others when you called, they are waiting in your office."

The Headmaster passed forwards like he was gliding, until he stood in the midst of where the man and woman stood frozen; and there was another flash of flame.

Motion resumed.

Minerva looked at Harry.

Words did not come to her.

"Clever move, bringing them here," Harry Potter said. "Probably damaged our relationship permanently. All I wanted was to be bloody left alone until bloody dinnertime. Which," the boy looked at his wristwatch, "it now is anyway. I'm going to go say goodbye to Hermione by myself, which I promise

will take less than two minutes, and then after that I'll come out and go eat something like I would have done regardless. Do *not* disturb me for those two bloody minutes or I will snap and try to kill someone, I mean it, Professor."

The boy turned and strode into the small room, opened the rear door to where Hermione Granger's body was being kept, and strode inside before she could think to speak. Through the doorway she saw a flash of a sight she knew no child ought to see —

The door slammed shut.

She started forwards, unthinking.

Halfway to the door, she stopped herself.

Her mind was still slow, and hurting, and the part of her that Harry Potter would have called *the picture of a stern disciplinarian* was lifelessly mouthing words about inappropriate behavior from children. The rest of her didn't think it was a good idea to leave any child, even Harry Potter, alone in a room with the bloody corpse of his best friend. But the act of opening the door, or asserting any sort of authority, did not seem to her wise. There was no right thing to do, and no right thing to say; or if there was any right path, she did not know it.

Very slowly, a minute and a half passed.

When the door opened again, Harry seemed to have changed, as though that minute and a half had passed over the course of lifetimes.

"Seal up the room," Harry said quietly, "and let's go, Professor McGonagall."

She walked over to the storeroom door. She wasn't quite able to stop herself from looking in, and saw the dried blood, the sheet covering the lower half, the upper body waxy and doll-like, and a glimpse of Hermione Granger's closed eyes. Something inside her began its weeping all over again.

She closed the door.

Her fingers moved upon her wand, her mouth spoke words without thought, Charms and wards to seal the room against entry.

"Professor McGonagall," Harry said in a strange voice, as if by rote, "do you have the rock? The rock that the Headmaster gave me? I should Transfigure it into a jewel again, since it did prove useful."

Automatically her eyes went to the ring on Harry's left pinky finger, noting the emptiness of the setting where the jewel should have been. "I shall mention it to the Headmaster," her tongue replied.

"Is that a usual tactic, by the way?" Harry said, voice still odd. "Carrying something large Transfigured into something small to use as a weapon? Or is that a usual exercise for Transfiguration practice?"

Distantly, she shook her head.

"Well, let's go, then."

"I have —" her voice stopped. "I'm afraid I have something else which I must do, now. Will you be all right on your own, and will you promise to go to the Great Hall directly and eat something, Mr. Potter?"

The boy promised (barring exceptional and unforeseen circumstances, a clause with which she did not argue) and then walked out of the room.

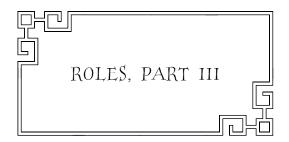
What lay ahead of her... would be no easier, certainly, and might well be harder.

Minerva walked to her office at a swift pace; not slowly, for that would have been a discourtesy.

Professor McGonagall opened the door to her office.

"Madam Granger," her voice said, "Mr. Granger, I am so terribly sorry for —"

## CHAPTER NINETY-TWO



There was nothing left to do.

There was nothing left to plan.

There was nothing left to think.

Into that emptiness rose the new worst memory —

The Boy-Who-Lived-Unlike-His-Best-Friend trudged the long, echoing corridors toward the Great Hall. With all his energies of thought exhausted, his mind was starting to throw out thoughts like an image of Hermione walking beside him and wordless concepts like *That will never happen again* until another part yelled *No* and shouted it down with determination to bring her back, only that part's voice was getting tired and the other part seemed tireless. Another part of his mind insisted on reviewing what he'd said to Professor McGonagall and Dad and Mum, even though he'd only been trying to get them out of there as quickly as possible and had been running on limited mental energy. As though somehow he could have done better, by an act of his defective will. What would be left of his relationship with his parents now, Harry couldn't guess.

He came finally to a junction where there waited a older boy in greenfringed black robes, silently reading a textbook, on the path that anyone would pick if they wanted to intercept someone going from the healer's chambers to the Great Hall. Harry was wearing the Cloak of Invisibility, of course, he'd put it on after leaving the office, rendering himself immune to almost all forms of magical detection. There was no point in making it easy for anyone trying to find him and kill him. And Harry was almost set to continue past without bothering to find out what was going on, when he recognized the Slytherin boy's face.

Realization dawned on Harry then. Of course, one of the students who had stayed in school over the Easter holiday would naturally have been —

"You were waiting for me," Harry said out loud, without removing the Cloak.

The Slytherin boy jerked back, hitting his head against the wall, his fifthyear Charms textbook dropping from his hands, before he looked up with wide eyes.

"You're —"

"Invisible. Yes. Say what you mean to say."

Lesath Lestrange scrambled to his feet, a position of attention, then blurted out, "My lord, did I do the right thing — I thought you would not wish me to step forward before all those others, that they might suspect our connection — I thought, surely if you wished my help you would call on me —"

It was amazing how many different ways there were to kill your best friend by being stupid.

"I—" Lesath hesitated, then said in a small voice, "I was wrong, wasn't I?" "You acted exactly as you should have, under the circumstances. It is I who was a fool."

"I'm sorry, my lord," whispered Lesath.

"If you *had* come with me, would you have been able to kill the troll?" It wasn't even the correct question, the correct question was whether Harry himself would have considered Lesath as sufficient and flown out sixty seconds earlier, but still...

"I... I'm not sure, my lord... I am not much welcome to dueling practices in Slytherin, I have not learned the gestures to the Killing Curse — should I study those arts to better serve you, my lord?"

"I continue to insist that I am not your lord," Harry said.

"Yes, my lord."

"Although," Harry said, "and this is not any kind of order, just a remark, anyone ought to know how to defend themselves, especially you. I'm sure the Defense Professor would help you with that on general principles, if you

asked."

Lesath Lestrange bowed and said, "Yes, my lord, I will follow your orders if I can, my lord."

Harry would have complained about being misunderstood, if he hadn't been understood perfectly.

Lesath left.

Harry stared at the wall.

He'd honestly thought that he'd already figured out all the different ways that he'd been stupid, after spending half a day thinking about it.

Apparently this had just been more overconfidence on his part.

Do we understand what we did wrong? his Slytherin side said coldly.

Yes, Harry thought.

Your ethical qualms don't even make sense. You're not tricking Lesath. You did exactly what Lesath thinks you did. You wouldn't have to make excuses for why Lesath was helping you, you could just say you were calling in the debt from rescuing him from bullies, there were six witnesses to that. Hermione died because you forgot about an extremely valuable resource, and you forgot about Lesath because ... why?

Because having Lesath Lestrange for a minion seemed sort of Dark-Lordish? Hufflepuff said in a small mental voice. I mean... that decision was probably mostly me...

Harry's Slytherin side didn't answer that in words, just radiated contempt and flashed an image of Hermione's corpse.

Stop it! Harry screamed internally.

Next time, Slytherin said icily, I suggest that we spend more time worrying about what is efficient and effective, and less time worrying about what seems sort of Dark-Lordish.

Point made, Harry thought, I will.

No, you won't, said Slytherin. You'll come up with more rationalizations for your petty qualms. You'll start listening to me after your next friend dies.

Harry was starting to worry that he was going insane. The conversations he had with the voices in his head weren't usually like this.

The Boy-Who-Lived

pain

Harry Verres trudged on alone

hurts

Harry walked on through the silent corridors.

"How is Mr. Potter doing?" demanded Professor Quirrell. There was a tension about the man, you could not quite call it *concern*, more like an ambusher measuring the time to strike. The Grangers had hardly left with Madam Pomfrey before the Defense Professor had knocked upon the door to her office and then entered without waiting for her answer, and spoken before she could say a word. Part of Minerva wondered distantly whether Harry Potter had picked up that habit from his Defense Professor, being unaware of others' pain when there was something else on his mind, or if it was only a childish flaw which this man had somehow failed to grow out of.

"Mr. Potter has ceased guarding Miss Granger's body," she said, putting some of the chill she felt into her voice. She felt certain that the Defense Professor was not experiencing as much grief as she was, the man had spoken not a single word of Hermione Granger. For *him* to put demands on her —"I believe he has gone down to dinner."

"I am not asking after the boy's *physical* state! Have you — has he —" Professor Quirrell made a sharp gesture, as though to indicate a concept for which he had no words.

"Not particularly," she said. She was around thirty seconds away from ordering the Defense Professor out of her office.

Professor Quirrell began to pace within the small confines of her office. "Miss Granger was the only one whose worries he truly heeded — with her gone — all checks on the boy's recklessness are removed. I see it now. Who else is there? Mr. Longbottom? Mr. Potter does not pretend that they are peers. Flitwick? His goblin blood would only cry for vengeance. Mr. Malfoy, if he were returned? To what end? Snape? A walking disaster. Dumbledore? Pfah. Events are already set for catastrophe, they must be steered along some course they would not naturally go. Who might Mr. Potter heed, who would not ordinarily speak to him? Cedric Diggory has taught him, but what would Mr. Diggory say in advice? An unknown. Mr. Potter spent long in speech with Remus Lupin. To him I have paid little heed. Would Lupin know the words to speak, the act which must be done, the sacrifice which must be made to change the boy's course?" Professor Quirrell whirled on her. "Did Remus Lupin comfort those in grief or stay those moved to rash deeds, during his time with the Order of the Phoenix?"

"It is not a poor thought," she said slowly. "I believe that Mr. Lupin was often a voice of restraint to James Potter in his Hogwarts days."

"James Potter," said Professor Quirrell, his eyes narrowing. "The boy is not much like James Potter. Are you confident in the success of this plan? No, that is the wrong question, we are not limited to a single plan. Are you certain that this plan will be *enough*, that we need essay no others? Asked in such fashion, the question answers itself. The path leading to disaster must be averted along every possible point of intervention." The Defense Professor had resumed pacing the confines of her office, reaching one wall, turning on his heel, pacing to the other.

"My apologies, Professor," she did not bother keeping the sharpness from her voice, "but I have quite reached my limits for the day. You may go."

"You." Professor Quirrell spun, and she found herself gazing directly into eyes of icy blue. "You would be the first one I would think of after Miss Granger, to stay the boy from a folly. Have you already done your utmost? Of course you have not."

How *dare* he suggest that. "If you have nothing more to say, Professor, then you *will* go."

"Has your confederacy deduced who I really am?" The words were spoken with deceptive mildness.

"Yes, in fact. Now -"

Pure magic, pure power crashed into the room like a flash of lightning, like a thunderclap echoing about her ears that deafened her other senses, the papers on her desk blown aside not by any conjured wind but by the sheer raw force of arcane might.

Then the power subsided, leaving only Hermione Granger's death certificates drifting down through the air to the floor.

"I am David Monroe, who fought Voldemort," the man said, still in mild tones. "Heed my words. The boy cannot be allowed to continue in this state of mind. He will become *dangerous*. It is possible that you have already done everything you can. Yet I find this a very rare event indeed, and more often said than done. I suspect rather that you have only done what you customarily do. I cannot truly comprehend what drives others to break their bounds, since I never had them. People remain surprisingly passive when faced with the prospect of death. Fear of public ridicule or losing one's livelihood is more likely to drive men to extremes and the breaking of their customary habits.

On the other side of the war, the Dark Lord had excellent results from the Cruciatus Curse, judiciously used on Marked servants who cannot escape punishment except by success, with no reasonable efforts accepted. Imagine their state of mind within yourself, and ask yourself whether you have truly done *all that you can* to wrench Harry Potter from his course."

"I am a Gryffindor and not much given to being moved by fear," she snapped back. "You will exercise courtesy within my office!"

"I find fear an excellent motivation, and indeed it is fear that moves me now. You-Know-Who, for all his horror, still abided by certain boundaries. It is my professional judgment, speaking as a learned wizard almost on par with Dumbledore or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, that the boy could join the ranks of those whose rituals are inscribed upon the tombstones of countries. This is not an idle worry, McGonagall, I have already heard words to produce the gravest apprehensions."

"Are you mad? You think that Mr. Potter could — this is ridiculous. Mr. Potter cannot possibly —"

A wordless image crossed her mind of a patch of glass on a steel ball.

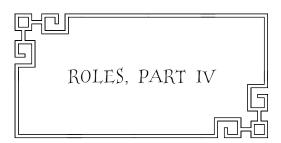
"— Mr. Potter would not do such a thing!"

"His deliberate choice is not required. Wizards rarely set out to invoke their own dooms. Mr. Potter may not strike you as malicious. Does he strike you as reckless once he is resolved upon a goal? I say again that I have specific reason for the gravest *possible* concerns!"

"Have you spoken to the Headmaster of this?" she said slowly.

"That would be worse than pointless. Dumbledore cannot reach the boy. At best he is wise enough to know this and make things no worse. I lack the requisite frame of mind. You are the one who — but I see that you still look for others to save you." The Defense Professor turned from her, and strode to the door. "I think I shall consult with Severus Snape. The man may be a walking disaster, but he knows the fact, and he may possess a greater understanding of that boy's mood. As for you, madam, imagine yourself at the end of your life, knowing that Britain — but no, Britain is not your true country, is it? Imagine yourself at the end of your life as the darkness eats through the fading walls of Hogwarts, knowing that your students will die with you, remembering this day and realizing there was something else you could have done."

## CHAPTER NINETY-THREE



Parry had walked into the Great Hall, looked around only once, grabbed enough calories to sustain himself, walked out, put on his Cloak again and found a small random corner in which to eat. Seeing the students at their tables —

Feeling revulsion when you look at other humans is not a good sign, Hufflepuff said. It's not reasonable to blame them for having not had your opportunities to learn what you've learned. Inaction in emergencies has nothing to do with people being selfish. Normalcy bias, like that plane crash in Tener-something where a few people ran out and escaped but most people just sat in their seats not moving while their plane was literally on fire. Look at how long you took to really start moving.

It serves no useful purpose to hate, said Gryffindor. It's just going to damage your altruism.

Try to figure out a training method you could use to prevent this from happening next time, said Ravenclaw.

Pll go ahead and register the experimental prediction, said Slytherin, that we'll always observe exactly what would be predicted on the hypothesis that people cannot be saved, cannot be taught, and will never help us with anything important. Also, we need some way of keeping track of all the times I'm right.

Harry ignored the voices in his head and just ate slices of toast as fast as he could. It wasn't proper nutrition as a general policy, but one-time exceptions wouldn't hurt so long as he made them up the next day.

In mid-bite, the blazing silver silhouette of a phoenix flew in from nowhere and said, in the voice of a tired old man, "Please remove your Cloak, Harry, I have a letter to deliver to you."

Harry coughed for a bit, swallowed some toast which had gone down the wrong way, stood up, took off the Cloak of Invisibility, said aloud "Tell Dumbledore I said fine," and then sat down and continued to eat his toast.

The toast had all gone by the time Albus Dumbledore walked up to Harry's nook, carrying folded sheets of paper in his hand; real paper, with lines, not wizard's parchment.

"Is that —" Harry said.

"From your father, and from your mother," said the old wizard. Wordlessly, Dumbledore handed over the folded sheets, and wordlessly Harry accepted them. The old wizard hesitated, then said quietly, "The Defense Professor has told me to restrain my counsel, and I thought the same thing myself when given time to think. I have always taken too long to learn the virtues of silence. But if I am mistaken, you need only say the word —"

"You're not mistaken," Harry said. He looked down at the folded, lined papers, feeling the sickness in his gut that was how his body indicated a strong pessimistic prediction. His parents wouldn't actually disown him, and there wasn't much they could *do* to him (some part of himself was still afraid in a very visceral way of television privileges being taken away, no matter how little sense that made now). But he had stepped outside the role that parents would expect of children who, in their internal beliefs, were lower on the pecking order. It would be stupid to expect anything except complete indignant fury, all-out righteous rage, when you acted like that to someone who thought they were dominant over you.

"After you read it," the Headmaster said, "I believe that you should come to the Great Hall at once, Harry. There is an announcement which you will wish to hear."

"I'm not interested in funerals —"

"No. Not that. Please, Harry, come as soon as you are done reading, and do so without your Cloak. Will you?"

"Yes."

The old wizard left.

Harry had to force himself to open up the letter. The important thing was keeping your vulnerable friends and relations out of harm's way, it might be a cliche but so far as Harry could tell the logic was valid. Damaged relationships could be repaired later.

The first letter said, in script handwriting that required a careful focus for Harry to read,

Son,

No matter what you've read in books, keeping us out of harm's way is not as important as having adults who can help when you're in trouble. You decided without giving us a word in edgewise that we'd abandon you because of your 'dark side'. The ghost of Shakespeare knows that I've seen things in this last year that were not dreamt of in my philosophy—sometimes I wonder if your Mum isn't just humoring me and the authorities took you away when I started thinking you were a magic-user—so I can't deny that it's possible you've managed to develop some... I'm not quite sure what to call it, but 'dark side' seems premature if we don't know what's happening. Are you sure it's not a burgeoning telepathic talent and you're just picking up on the minds of other wizards around you? Their thoughts might seem evil to a child who grew up in a saner civilization. These are ungrounded speculations, I admit, but you shouldn't jump to conclusions either.

The two most important things I have to tell you are this. First, son, I have every confidence in your ability to stay on the Light Side of the Force so long as you choose to, and I have every confidence that you will choose to. If there's some evil spirit whispering horrible suggestions in your ears, just ignore the suggestions. I do feel the need to emphasize that you should exercise special caution to ignore this evil spirit even if it is suggesting what seem like wonderful creative ideas and I hope I do not need to remind you about the Incident with the Science Project which would, I admit, make a deal more sense if you were struggling with demonic possession.

The second thing I have to say is that you do not need to fear that Mum or I are going to abandon you because of your 'dark side'. We may not have expected you to gain magical powers or develop an affinity for black magic, but we did expect you to become a teenager. Which, if you think about it from your poor father's perspective, is already a sufficiently worrying prospect regarding a child who, by the age of nine, had been party to the summoning of a total of five fire engines. Children grow up. I won't lie

to you and say that you will feel as close to us at 20 as you do now. But your Mum and I will feel just as close to you when we are old and grey and bothering the nursing-home robots. Children always grow up and away from their parents, and the parents always follow them from behind, offering helpful advice. Children grow up, and their personalities change, and they do things that their parents wish they would not do, and they act disrespectfully toward their parents and have them hauled out of their magical schools, and the parents go on loving them anyway. It is Nature's way. Though in the event that you have not yet hit puberty and your teenage years are proportionately worse than this, we reserve the right to reconsider this sentiment.

No matter what is happening, remember that we love you and will always love you no matter what. I don't know if our love has any magical power under your rules, but if it does, don't hesitate to call on it.

With all of this said... Harry, what you did there is not acceptable. I think you know that. And I also know that it is not the time to lecture you on it. But you must write and tell us what is happening. I can understand very well why you'd want us taken out of your school at once, and I know we can't force you to do anything, but please, Harry, be reasonable and realize how terrified we must be.

I would like to tell you that you are absolutely forbidden to mess around with any magic that the adults around you consider the least bit unsafe, but for all I know, the teachers at your school are giving everyone lessons in advanced necromancy every Monday. Please, please exercise as much caution as your situation permits, whatever your situation may be. Despite your very hurried summary we don't have the slightest idea what is happening and I hope that you will write us as much as you can. It is clear that you are, at least in some ways, growing up, and I will try not to act like the children'sbook parent who only makes things worse — though I hope you appreciate how hard this is — and your Mum has said a number of frightening things to me about how wizardry stays secret and how I might get you into trouble by making waves. I cannot tell you to avoid anything unsafe, because your school is unsafe and your Headmaster will not let you leave. I can't tell you that you shouldn't take responsibility for anything happening around you, because for all I know there are other children in trouble. But remember that it is not your moral responsibility to protect any adults, their place is

to protect you, and every good adult would agree with that. Please write and tell us more as soon as you can.

Both of us are desperate to help. If there is anything at all that we can do, please let us know at once. There is nothing which can happen to us which would be worse than learning that something had happened to you.

Love,

Dad.

The last page said only,

You promised me that you wouldn't let magic take you away from me. I didn't raise you to be a boy who would break a promise to his Mum. You must come back safely, because you promised.

Love,

Mum.

Slowly, Harry lowered the letters and began to walk towards the Great Hall. His hands were shaking, his whole body was shaking, and it seemed to be taking a very great deal of effort not to cry; which he knew wordlessly that he must not do. He hadn't cried through all of the day. And he wouldn't cry. Crying was the same as admitting defeat. And this wasn't over. So he wouldn't cry.

The food served in the Great Hall that evening was plain that night, toast and butter and jam, water and orange juice, oatmeal and other simple fare, without dessert. Some students had worn simple black robes without their House colors. Others had still worn theirs. It should have been cause for argument, but there was instead a quietness, the sound of people eating without talking. It took two sides to make a debate, and one of the sides, this night, was not much interested in debating.

Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall sat at the Head Table and did not eat. She should have. Perhaps she would in a short while. But she could not force herself to do it now.

For a Gryffindor there was only one path. It had taken Minerva only a

short time to remember that, when after the Defense Professor's urgings her mind had stayed empty of clever plots to try. That was not a Gryffindor's way; or perhaps she ought to say only that it was not *her* way, Albus did seem to try his hand at plotting... and yet when she thought back on their history, there were no plots at the moment of crisis, no cleverness and games in the last resort. For Albus Dumbledore, as for her, the rule *in extremis* was to decide what was the right thing to do, and do it no matter the cost to yourself. Even if it meant breaking your bounds, or changing your role, or letting go of your picture of yourself. That was the last resort of Gryffindor.

Through a side entrance of the Great Hall she saw Harry Potter quietly slip in.

It was time.

Professor Minerva McGonagall rose from her chair, straightened the worn point on her hat, walked slowly to the lectern before the Head Table.

The sounds in the Great Hall, already muted, fell away entirely as all students turned to look at her.

"By now you have all heard," she said, her voice not quite steady. *That Hermione Granger is dead.* She didn't say those words aloud, since they had all heard. "Somehow, a troll was infiltrated into the castle Hogwarts without alarm from our ancient wards. Somehow this troll succeeded in injuring a student, without alarm from the wards until the point of her death. Investigations are underway to determine how this has occurred. The Board of Governors is meeting to determine how Hogwarts will respond. In due time justice shall be served. Meanwhile there is another matter of justice, which must be handled at once. George Weasley, Fred Weasley, please come forward to stand before us all."

The Weasley twins exchanged glances where they sat at the Gryffindor table, and then stood up and walked toward her, slowly, reluctantly; and Minerva realized then that the Weasley twins thought that they were to be expelled.

They honestly thought that she would expel them.

That was what the picture of Professor McGonagall who lived in her head had wrought.

The Weasley twins walked over to the lectern, looking up at her with faces that were frightened, but resolute; and she felt something in her heart break a little further.

"I am not going to expel you," she said, and was saddened further by the

surprised look on their faces. "Fred Weasley, George Weasley, turn and face your classmates, let them see you."

Still looking surprised, the Weasley twins did so.

She drew up all the steel in her heart, and said what was right.

"I am ashamed," said Minerva McGonagall, "of the events of this day. I am ashamed that there were only two of you. Ashamed of what I have done to Gryffindor. Of all the Houses, it should have been Gryffindor to help when Hermione Granger was in need, when Harry Potter called for the brave to aid him. It was true, a seventh-year could have held back a mountain troll while searching for Miss Granger. And you should have believed that the Head of House Gryffindor," her voice broke, "would have believed in you. If you disobeyed her to do what was right, in events she had not foreseen. And the reason you did not believe this, is that I have never shown it to you. I did not believe in you. I did not believe in the virtues of Gryffindor itself. I tried to stamp out your defiance, instead of training your courage to wisdom. Whatever the Sorting Hat saw in me that led it to place me in Gryffindor, I have betrayed it. I have offered my resignation to the Headmaster as Deputy Headmistress and as the Head of House Gryffindor."

There were cries of shock and dismay, and not only from the Gryffindor Table, as Harry's heart froze within his chest. Harry needed to run forward, say something, he hadn't meant for *this* to —

Minerva took another breath, and continued. "However, the Headmaster has declined to accept my resignation," she said. "So I will continue to serve, and try to undo what I have wrought. Somehow I must find a way to teach my students how to do what is right. Not what is safe, not what is easy, not what we are told to do. If all I can teach you is to turn in your essays on time, there might as well not be a House Gryffindor. This road will be more difficult for me, and maybe for all of us. But I know now that before I was only taking the easy path."

She stepped down from the lectern, moved down to where the Weasley

twins stood.

"Fred Weasley, George Weasley," she said. "The two of you have not always done what is right. The path of wisdom does not lie in flagrant and needless defiance of authority. And yet today you proved to be the last of our House to survive my mistakes. Because it was the right thing to do, you defied a threat of expulsion and risked your lives to face a mountain troll. For your astounding courage that honors your House to have you, I award each of you two hundred points for Gryffindor."

Again the look of shock on their faces, again the pain like a knife through her heart.

She turned to face the other students.

"I will not award any points to Ravenclaw," she said. "I suspect that Mr. Potter would not want them. If I am wrong, he may correct me and take as many House points as he pleases. But for whatever it is worth, Mr. Potter, I am," her voice faltered, "I am sorry —"

"Stop!" Harry screamed, and then, again, "Stop." The word sticking in his throat. "You don't have to, Professor." Something inside him was twisting, threatening to split him open, like a giant's hands wrenching at him to tear him in half. "And, and you shouldn't forget Susan Bones, and Ron Weasley — they also helped, they should get House points too —"

"Miss Bones and the young Weasley?" said Professor McGonagall. "Rubeus said nothing of that — what did they do?"

"Miss Bones tried to stun Mr. Hagrid when he tried to stop me, and Mr. Weasley shot Neville when Neville tried to stop me. They should both get points, and, and so should Neville," Harry hadn't thought to imagine it before, the way Neville must be feeling now, but the instant he'd thought, he knew, "because Neville tried to do something, even if it wasn't the right thing, doing what's right is the *second* lesson, you can start practicing that after you learn to do anything at all —"

"Ten points to Hufflepuff, Miss Bones," Professor McGonagall said, her voice breaking in the middle. "Ten points to Gryffindor, Ron Weasley, your family has done itself exceeding proud, this day. And ten points to Hufflepuff for Neville Longbottom, for standing up to Mr. Potter and doing what he

thought was right —"

"You shouldn't!" screamed a young voice from the Hufflepuff table, followed by a single choking sound.

Harry looked there, and then quickly looked back at Professor McGonagall and said, as steadily as he could, "Neville's right, actually, you can't award literally zero points for the part where you get the action correct, that sends the wrong message too, but he was halfway there so it could be five points instead."

Professor McGonagall looked, for a moment, like she couldn't think of what to say; but then her eyes went to Neville's place at the table, and she said, "As you wish, Mr. Potter. What is it, Miss Bones?"

Harry looked and saw that Susan Bones had stepped forward, wiping at her own eyes, and the Hufflepuff girl said, "Actually — Professor McGonagall — General Potter didn't see it — but Captain Weasley and I weren't the only ones who tried to get in Mr. Hagrid's way, after he ran out. Before some of the older students stopped us. But we managed to slow Mr. Hagrid down a minute, so General Potter could get away."

"You've got to give them points too," said Ron Weasley from the Gryffindor table. "Or I won't take any."

"Who else?" said Professor McGonagall, her voice a bit unsteady.

Seven other children stood up.

What was that our Slytherin side was saying about predicting nothing would ever work? said Hufflepuff.

Something in Harry cracked, so that he had to exert all his force to hold himself together.

When all had been said, and all had been done, Minerva went to where Harry Potter stood. Though it was not her greatest skill she cast a ward about them to blur vision, and muffled sounds with another thought.

"You, you didn't have to —" said Harry Potter. "You shouldn't have said —" He sounded like he was choking. "P-Professor, everything I said to you was hurtful, and hateful, and wrong —"

"I already knew that, Harry," she said. "Even so, I wished to do better." There was a feeling of lightness in her chest, much as one might experience after stepping off a cliff, when your legs no longer had to hold your body upright. She wasn't sure she could do this, she did not know the way; and yet for the first time it seemed possible that Hogwarts wouldn't become a sad ghost of its former self, when she became its Headmistress.

Harry stared at her, then made a odd noise that sounded like it had been forced from his throat, and covered his face in his hands.

So she knelt down, and hugged him. It might go wrong, but it might also go right, and she would not let that uncertainty stop her; it was time she began to learn a Gryffindor's courage, so that she could teach it in turn.

"I had a sister once," she whispered. Just that, and nothing more.

Just to make sure, said some part of Harry, while the rest of him sobbed into Professor McGonagall's arms, this doesn't mean we've accepted Hermione's death, right?

NO said all the rest of him, every part of his mind in unanimous agreement, warmth and cold and a hidden place of steel. Never, ever, forever.

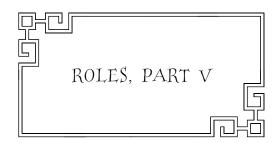
And an ancient wizard to whom that ward meant nothing gazed upon them both, the witch and the weeping young wizard. Albus Dumbledore was smiling with a strange sad look in his eyes, like someone who has taken one more step toward a foreseen destination.

The Defense Professor watched them both, the woman and the crying boy. His eyes were very cold, and very calculating.

He did not think that this would be enough.

It wasn't until the next morning that it was discovered that Hermione Granger's body was missing.

## CHAPTER NINETY-FOUR



# THE FIRST MEETING:

At 6:07 AM on April 17th, 1992, the Sun was just rising above the horizon as seen from the castle Hogwarts, filtering in through drawn curtains in the Ravenclaw first-year boys' dorm to provide a gentle light, red-orange for dawn and little-changed by the white fabric covering the windows, not yet waking boys more accustomed to winter's schedule.

In one bed among many, Harry Potter slept the sleep of the just exhausted. Quietly the door opened.

Quietly a figure walked across the floor.

That figure came to Harry Potter's bed.

The figure laid a hand on the shoulder of the sleeping boy, who started and shrieked.

No others heard.

"Mr. Potter," the small man squeaked, "the Headmaster has requested your presence immediately."

Slowly the boy sat up in bed, his hands momentarily fiddling beneath the covers. He'd expected to feel much worse, waking up this morning. It felt... wrong, that his brain functioned now, that his thoughts still moved, that he wasn't incapacitated with weeping for at least a week. The boy knew that it

wouldn't have been an adaptive response, for brains to evolve to do that. His dark side, certainly, would not do that. Even so, it still felt wrong to be alive and lucid, this morning.

But his resolution to revive Hermione Granger felt — sufficient, like he was already doing the right thing, bent on the right path, and she would be brought back, and that was all there was to it; grief would have been giving up. There was nothing left to decide, no ambiguity, no conflict to tear at him, and no need to remember what he'd *seen* —

"I'll get dressed," Harry said.

Professor Flitwick looked rather reluctant, but said in his high voice, "The Headmaster specified you were to be brought to his office directly and without pause, Mr. Potter. I'm sorry."

Less than a minute later — Professor Flitwick had sent him straight to the Headmaster's office through the Hogwarts internal Floo — Harry found himself, still in his pajamas, facing Albus Dumbledore. The Deputy Headmistress was also sitting in another chair, and the Potions Master lurked nearby amid the weird devices, caught in a gaping yawn just as Harry had entered through the fireplace.

"Harry," the Headmaster said without preamble, "before I say what I must say next, I tell you that Hermione Granger did truly die. The wards recorded it and informed me. The very stones spoke that a witch had died. I tested her body where it lay and those were Hermione Granger's true mortal remains, not any doll or likeness. There is no way known to wizardry by which death may be undone. All this being said, Hermione Granger's remains are now missing from the storeroom where they were placed, and where you guarded them. Did you take them, Harry Potter?"

"No," Harry said, narrowing his eyes. A glance showed him that Severus was watching him intently.

Dumbledore's gaze was also keen, though not unfriendly. "Is Hermione Granger's body in your possession?"

"No."

"Do you know where it is?"

"No."

"Do you know who took it?"

"No," Harry said, then hesitated. "Besides the obvious probabilistic speculations which are not based upon any specific knowledge of mine."

The old wizard nodded. "Do you know why it was taken?"

"No. Besides the obvious speculations etcetera."

"What would those be?" Sharp the ancient eyes.

"If the enemy can notice you running off to consult the Weasley twins during class after Hermione was arrested, and find out about that magic map you said was stolen, then the enemy can wonder why I was guarding Hermione Granger's body. My turn. Did you arrange for Hermione's death in hopes of getting the money back from Lucius?"

"What?" said Professor McGonagall.

"No," said the old wizard.

"Did you know or suspect that Hermione Granger would die?"

"I did not know. As for suspicions, I placed her in the most strongly defended position I could, against Voldemort. I did not will her death, nor allow it, nor plan to benefit from it, Harry Potter. Now show me your pouch."

"It's in my trunk —" Harry began.

"Severus," said the old wizard, and the Potions Master moved forward. "Check his trunk as well, every compartment."

"My trunk has wards."

Severus Snape grinned mirthlessly and strode into the green flame.

Dumbledore took out his long dark-grey wand and began to wave it close around Harry's hair, looking like a Muggle using a metal-detector. Before he had reached as far as Harry's neck, Dumbledore stopped.

"The gem upon your ring," Dumbledore said. "It is no longer a clear diamond. It is brown, the color of Hermione Granger's eyes, and the color of her hair."

A sudden tension filled the room.

"That's my father's rock," Harry said. "Transfigured the same as before. I just did it to remember Hermione —"

"I must be sure. Take off that ring, Harry, and place it upon my desk."

Slowly, Harry did so, removing the gem and setting the ring off to the other side of the desk.

Dumbledore pointed his wand at the gem and —

A large, undistinguished grey rock jumped into the air from the force of its sudden expansion, hit some invisible barrier in the air above, and then fell with a loud crack upon the Headmaster's desk,

"There's another half-hour of work for me, Transfiguring it again," Harry

said evenly.

Dumbledore resumed his examination. Harry had to remove his left shoe, and take off the toe-ring that was his emergency Portkey if someone kidnapped him and took him outside the wards of Hogwarts (and didn't put up anti-Apparition, anti-Portkey, anti-phoenix, and anti-time-looping wards, which Severus had warned Harry that any inner-circle Death Eater would certainly do). It was verified that the magic radiating from the toe-ring was indeed the magic of a Portkey, and not the magic of a Transfiguration. The rest of Harry was deemed clear.

Not long after, the Potions Master returned, bearing Harry's pouch, and several other magical things which had been in Harry's trunk, which the Headmaster also examined, one by one, even to all the items remaining within the healer's kit.

"Can I go now?" Harry said when it was all done, putting as much cold as he could into his voice. He took up his pouch, and began the process of feeding the grey rock into it. The empty ring went back on his finger.

The old wizard breathed out, slipping his wand back into his sleeve. "I *am* sorry," he said. "I had to know. Harry . . . the Dark Lord has taken Hermione Granger's remains, it seems. I cannot think of anything he would gain thereby, except to send her corpse against you as an Inferius. Severus shall give you certain potions to keep about your person. Be warned now, and be prepared for when you must do what must be done."

"Will the Inferius have Hermione's mind?"

"No -"

"Then it's not her. Can I go? At least to change out of my pajamas."

"There is other news, but I shall be brief. The wards of Hogwarts record that no foreign creature has entered, and that it was the Defense Professor who killed Hermione Granger."

"Um," Harry said.

Thought 1: But I saw the troll kill Hermione.

Thought 2: Professor Quirrell Memory-Charmed me and set up the scene that Dumbledore saw when he arrived.

Thought 3: Professor Quirrell can't do that, his magic can't touch mine. I saw that in Azkaban —

Thought 4: Can I trust those memories?

Thought 5: There was clearly some sort of debacle at Azkaban, we wouldn't

have needed a rocket if Professor Quirrell hadn't fallen unconscious, and why'd he be unconscious if not —

Thought 6: Did I ever actually go to Azkaban at all?

Thought 7: I clearly practiced controlling Dementors at some point before I scared that Dementor in the Wizengamot. And that was in the newspapers.

Thought 8: Am I accurately remembering the newspapers?

"Um," Harry said again. "That spell seriously ought to be Unforgiveable. You think Professor Quirrell could have Memory-Charmed —"

"No. I went back through time and placed certain instruments to record Hermione's last battle, which I could not quite bear to watch in my own person." The old wizard looked very grim indeed. "Your guess was right, Harry Potter. Voldemort sabotaged everything we gave Hermione to protect her. Her broomstick lay dead in her hands. Her invisibility cloak did not conceal her. The troll walked in the sunlight unharmed; it was no stray creature, but a weapon pure and aimed. And it was indeed the troll who killed her, with strength alone, so that my wards and webs to detect hostile magics went for naught. The Defense Professor never crossed her path."

Harry swallowed, shut his eyes, and thought. "So this was an attempted frame on Professor Quirrell. Somehow. It does seem to be the enemy's *modus operandi*. Troll eats Hermione Granger, check the wards, oh look actually the Defense Professor did it, same as last year... no. No, that can't be right."

"Why not, Mr. Potter?" said the Potions Master. "It seems obvious enough to me —"

"That's the problem."

The enemy is smart.

Slowly the fog of sleep was drifting out of Harry's mind, and after a full night's sleep his brain could see the things which hadn't been obvious the day before.

Under standard literary convention... the enemy wasn't supposed to look over what you'd done, sabotage the magic items you'd handed out, and then send out a troll rendered undetectable by some means the heroes couldn't figure out even after the fact, so that you might as well have not defended yourself at all. In a book, the point-of-view usually stayed on the main characters. Having the enemy just bypass all the protagonists' work, as a result of planning and actions taken out of literary sight, would be a *diabolus ex machina*, and dramatically unsatisfying.

But in real life the enemy would think that they were the main character, and they would also be clever, and think things through in advance, even if you didn't see them do it. That was why everything about this felt so disjointed, with parts unexplained and seemingly inexplicable. How had Lucius felt, when Harry had threatened Dumbledore with breaking Azkaban? How had the Aurors above Azkaban felt, seeing the broomstick rise up on a torch of fire?

The enemy is smart.

"The enemy knew perfectly well that you'd turn back time to check what really happened to Hermione, especially since the troll getting into Hogwarts at all tells us that somebody can fool the wards." Harry shut his eyes, thinking harder, trying to put himself into the enemy's shoes. Why would he, or his dark side, have done something like —"We're meant to conclude that the enemy has control of what the wards tell us. But that's actually something the enemy can only do with difficulty, or under special conditions; they're trying to create a false appearance of omnipotence." *Like I would.* "Later, hypothetically, the wards show Professor Sinistra killing someone. We think the wards are just being fooled again, but really, Professor Sinistra was Legilimized and she *did* do it."

"Unless that is precisely what the Dark Lord expects us to think," said Severus Snape, his brow furrowed in concentration. "In which case he does have control of the wards, and Professor Sinistra will be innocent."

"Does the Dark Lord *really* use plots with that many levels of meta —"
"Yes," said Dumbledore and Severus.

Harry nodded distantly. "Then this could be a setup to either make us think the wards are telling the truth when they're lying, or a setup to make us think the wards are lying when they're telling the truth, depending on what level the enemy expects us to reason at. But if the enemy is planning to make us trust the wards — we would have trusted the wards anyway, if we'd been given no reason to distrust them. So there's no need to go to all the work of framing Professor Quirrell in a way that we would realize we were intended to discover, just to trick us into going meta —"

"Not so," said Dumbledore. "If Voldemort has not fully mastered the wards, then the wards had to believe that some Professor's hand was at work. Else they would have cried out at Miss Granger's injury, and not only upon her death."

Harry reached up a hand and rubbed at his brow, just beneath his hair.

Okay, serious question. If the enemy is that smart, why the heck am I still alive? Is it seriously that hard to poison someone, are there Charms and Potions and bezoars which can cure me of literally anything that could be slipped into my breakfast? Would the wards record it, trace the magic of the murderer?

Could my scar contain the fragment of soul that's keeping the Dark Lord anchored to the world, so he doesn't want to kill me? Instead he's trying to drive off all my friends to weaken my spirit so he can take over my body? It'd explain the Parselmouth thing. The Sorting Hat might not be able to detect a lich-phylacterythingy. Obvious problem 1, the Dark Lord is supposed to have made his lich-phylactery-thingy in 1943 by killing whatshername and framing Mr. Hagrid. Obvious problem 2, there's no such thing as souls.

Though Dumbledore also thought that my blood was a key ingredient in a ritual to restore the Dark Lord's full strength, which would require keeping me alive until then... now there's a cheery thought.

"Well..." Harry said. "I'm sure of one thing."

"And that is?"

"Neville needs to be taken out of Hogwarts *now*. He's the obvious next target and no first-year student can survive this level of offense. We're lucky Neville wasn't assassinated yesterday evening, the enemy doesn't have to wait until we're finished mourning to make their next move." Why didn't the enemy strike while we were distracted?

Dumbledore exchanged glances with Severus, and then with the suddenly tight expression of Professor McGonagall. "Harry," said the old wizard, "if you send all your friends away yourself, that is just the same as if Voldemort —"

"I will be *fine* I can do without Neville for a couple of extra months it's not like you were planning to make my friends stay here over the summer and that is just plain *not sufficient justification* to let him get killed! Professor McGonagall —"

"I quite agree," said the Scottish witch. She frowned. "I extremely agree. I agree to the point where... I'm having some trouble figuring out how to express this, Albus..."

"To the point where you're going to haul him out of there yourself, regardless of what anyone else says, because it's no excuse to say you were only following orders if Neville gets killed?" Harry said.

Professor McGonagall closed her eyes briefly. "Yes, but surely there ought to be some way to be responsible without threats of unilateral action."

The Headmaster sighed. "No need. Go, Minerva."

"Wait," the Potions Master said, just as Professor McGonagall, moving rather swiftly, was taking a pinch of green dust from the Floo-vase. "We should not call attention to the boy, as the Headmaster called attention to the Weasley twins. It would be wiser, I think, if Mr. Longbottom's grandmother took him from Hogwarts. Let him stay in his Common Room for now; the Dark Lord does not seem able to act so openly."

There was another long exchange of glances among the four, and finally Harry nodded, followed by Professor McGonagall.

"In that case," said Harry, "I'm sure of one other thing."

"And that is?" said Dumbledore.

"I very much need to visit the washroom, and I would also like to change out of these pajamas."

"By the way," Harry said as he and the Headmaster emerged from Floo into the empty office of the Ravenclaw Head of House. "One last quick question I wanted to ask just you. That sword the Weasley twins pulled out of the Sorting Hat. That was the Sword of Gryffindor, wasn't it?"

The old wizard turned, face neutral. "What makes you think that, Harry?" "The Sorting Hat yelled *Gryffindor!* just before handing it out, the sword had a ruby pommel and gold letters on the blade, and the Latin script said *Nothing better*. Just a hunch."

"Nihil supernum," said the old wizard. "That is not quite what it means." Harry nodded. "Mmhm. What'd you do with it?"

"I retrieved it from where it fell, and placed it in a secure place," the old wizard said. He gave Harry a stern look. "I hope you are not greedy for it yourself, young Ravenclaw."

"Not at all, just want to make sure you're not keeping it permanently from its rightful wielders. So the Weasley twins are the Heir of Gryffindor, then?"

"The Heir of Gryffindor?" Dumbledore said, looking surprised. Then the old wizard smiled, blue eyes twinkling brightly. "Ah, Harry, Salazar Slytherin may have built a Chamber of Secrets into Hogwarts, but Godric Gryffindor was not much given to such extravagances. We have seen only that Godric left his Sword to the defense of Hogwarts, if a worthy student ever faced a foe they

could not defeat alone."

"That's not the same as saying no. Don't think I didn't notice that you didn't actually say no."

"I did not live in those years, Harry, and I do not know all that Godric Gryffindor may or may not have done —"

"Do you in fact assign greater than fifty percent subjective probability that there is something like a Heir of Gryffindor and one or both Weasley twins are it. Yes or no, evasion means yes. You're not going to succeed in distracting me, no matter how much I have to go to the bathroom."

The old wizard sighed. "Yes, Fred and George Weasley are the Heir of Gryffindor. I beg you not to speak of it to them, not yet."

Harry nodded, and turned to go. "I'm surprised," Harry said. "I read a little about Godric Gryffindor's historical life. The Weasley twins are... well, they're awesome in various ways, but they don't seem much like the Godric in the history books."

"Only a man exceedingly proud and vain," Dumbledore said quietly, as he turned back to the Floo roaring up again with green flames, "would believe that his heir should be like himself, rather than like who he wished that he could be."

The Headmaster stepped into green fire, and was gone.



Neville Longbottom's face was drawn up in anguish, as he spoke with no one to hear, to the empty air.

"Seriously," the empty air said back to him. "I'm wearing an invisibility cloak with extra anti-detection charms just to walk through the hallways because *I* don't want to be killed. My parents would have me out of Hogwarts in an instant if the Headmaster allowed it. Neville, your getting the heck out of Hogwarts is common sense, it has *nothing to do* with —"

"I betrayed you, General," Neville said, his voice around as hollow as any normal eleven-year-old boy could reasonably manage. "I didn't even do it the Chaotic way. I conformed to authority and tried to make you conform to authority too. What's that you always say, about how in the Chaos Legion, a soldier who can only obey orders is useless?"

"Neville," the empty air said firmly. The pressure of two hands, beneath thin cloth, came firmly to bear on Neville's shoulders; and the voice moved closer to him. "You weren't blindly obeying authority, you were trying to protect me. It's true that in this chaotic world, soldiers who can only follow rules and regulations are worthless. However, soldiers who follow rules for the sake of protecting their friends are —"

"Slightly better than worthless?" Neville said bitterly.

"Significantly better than worthless. Neville, you made an error of judgment. It cost me around six seconds. Now it could be that Hermione's injuries were just barely fatal, but even then, I don't think six seconds was actually enough time for the troll to take an extra bite of Hermione. In the counterfactual world where you didn't step in front of me, Hermione still died. Now, I could stand here listing out the first dozen ways that Hermione would be alive if I hadn't been stupid—"

"You? You ran right out after her. I'm the one who tried to stop you. It's my fault if it's anyone's," Neville said bitterly.

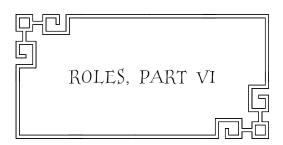
The empty air went silent at this for a while.

"Wow," the empty air finally said. "Wow. That puts a pretty different perspective on things, I have to say. I'm going to remember this the next time I feel an impulse to blame myself for something. Neville, the term in the literature for this is 'egocentric bias', it means that you experience everything about your own life but you don't get to experience everything else that happens in the world. There was way, way more going on than you running in front of me. You're going to spend weeks remembering that thing you did there for six seconds, I can tell, but nobody else is going to bother thinking about it. Other people spend a lot less time thinking about your past mistakes than you do, just because you're not the center of their worlds. I guarantee to you that nobody except you has even considered blaming Neville Longbottom for what happened to Hermione. Not for a fraction of a second. You are being, if you will pardon the phrase, a silly-dilly. Now shut up and say goodbye."

"I don't want to say goodbye," Neville said. His voice was trembling, but he managed not to cry. "I want to stay here and fight with you against — against whatever's happening."

The empty air moved closer to him, and embraced him in a hug, and Harry Potter's voice whispered, "Tough luck."

## CHAPTER NINETY-FIVE



The third meeting: (April 17th, 1992, 10:31 am)

pring had begun, the late-morning air still crisp with the leavings of winter. Daffodils had bloomed amid the sprouting grass of the forest, the gentle yellow petals with their golden hearts dangling limply from their dead, greyed stems, wounded or killed by one of the sudden frosts that you often saw in April. In the Forbidden Forest there would be stranger lifeforms, centaurs and unicorns at the least, and Harry had heard allegations of werewolves. Though from what Harry had read of real-life werewolves, that did not make the slightest bit of sense.

Harry didn't venture anywhere near the border of the Forbidden Forest, since there was no reason to take the risk. He walked invisibly among the more ordinary life-forms of the permitted woods, wand in hand, a broomstick strapped to his back for easier access, just in case. He was not actually afraid; Harry thought it odd that he didn't feel afraid. The state of constant vigilance, readiness for fight or flight, failed to feel burdensome or even abnormal.

On the edges of the permitted woods Harry walked, his feet never straying near the beaten path where he might be more easily found, never leaving sight of Hogwarts's windows. Harry had set the alarm upon his mechanical watch to tell him when it was lunchtime, since he couldn't actually look at his wrist, being invisible and all that. It raised the question of how his eyeglasses worked while he was wearing the Cloak. For that matter the Law of the Excluded Middle seemed to imply that either the rhodopsin complexes in his retina were absorbing photons and transducing them to neural spikes, or alternatively, those photons were going straight through his body and out the other side, but not both. It really did seem increasingly likely that invisibility cloaks let you see outward while being invisible yourself because, on some fundamental level, that was how the caster had — not wanted — but implicitly believed — that invisibility should work.

Whereupon you had to wonder whether anyone had tried Confunding or Legilimizing someone into implicitly and matter-of-factly believing that *Fixus Everythingus* ought to be an easy first-year Charm, and then trying to invent it.

Or maybe find a worthy Muggleborn in a country that didn't identify Muggleborn children, and tell them some extensive lies, fake up a surrounding story and corresponding evidence, so that, from the very beginning, they'd have a different idea of what magic could do. Though apparently they'd still have to learn a number of previous Charms before they became capable of inventing their own...

It might not work. Surely there'd been some organically insane wizards who'd truly believed in their own possibility of godhood, and yet had failed to become god. But even the insane had probably believed the ascension spell ought to be some grandiose dramatic ritual and not something you did with a carefully composed twitch of your wand and the incantation *Becomus Goddus*.

Harry was already pretty sure it wouldn't be that easy. But then the question was, *why not?* What pattern had his brain learned? Could the reason be predicted in advance?

A slight fringe of apprehension crept through Harry then, a tinge of worry, as he contemplated this question. The nameless concern sharpened, grew greater —

Professor Quirrell?

"Mr. Potter," a soft voice called from behind him.

Harry spun, his hand going to the Time-Turner beneath his cloak; again the principle of being ready to flee upon an instant's notice felt only ordinary. Slowly, palms empty and turned outward, Professor Quirrell was walking towards him within the forests' outskirts, coming from the general direction of the Hogwarts castle.

"Mr. Potter," Professor Quirrell said again. "I know that you're here. You know that I know that you're here. I must speak to you."

Still Harry said nothing. Professor Quirrell hadn't actually said what this was about, and Harry's sunlit morning walk about the forest edge had produced a mood of silence within him.

Professor Quirrell took a small step to the left, a step forward, another to the right. He tilted his head with a look of calculation, and then he walked almost directly towards where Harry stood, halted a few paces off with the sense of doom inflamed to the height of bearability.

"Are you still resolved upon your course?" Professor Quirrell said. "The same course you spoke of yesterday?"

Again Harry did not reply.

Professor Quirrell sighed. "There is much I have done for you," the man said. "Whatever else you may wonder of me, you cannot deny that. I am calling in some of the debt. Talk to me, Mr. Potter."

I don't feel like doing this right now, Harry thought; then: Oh, right.

Two hours later, after Harry had spun the Time-Turner once, noted down the exact time and memorized his exact location, spent another hour walking, went inside and told Professor McGonagall that he was currently talking to the Defense Professor in the woods outside Hogwarts (just in case anything happened to him), walked for a further hour, then returned to his original location exactly one hour after he'd left and spun the Time-Turner again —

"What was that?" Professor Quirrell said, blinking. "Did you just —"

"Nothing important," Harry said without pulling back the hood of his invisibility cloak, or taking his hand from his Time-Turner. "Yes, I'm still resolved. To be honest, I'm thinking I shouldn't have said anything."

Professor Quirrell inclined his head. "A sentiment which shall serve you well in life. Is there anything which is liable to change your mind?"

"Professor, if I already *knew* about the existence of an argument which would change my decision —"

"True, for the likes of us. But you would be surprised how often someone knows what they are waiting to hear, yet must wait to hear it said." Professor Quirrell shook his head. "To put this in your terms... there is a true fact, known to me but not to you, of which I would like to convince you, Mr. Potter."

Harry's eyebrows rose, though he realized in the next moment that Professor Quirrell couldn't see it. "That's in my terms, all right. Go ahead."

"The intention you have formed is far more dangerous than you realize."

Replying to this surprising statement did not take much thought on Harry's part. "Define dangerous, and tell me what you think you know and how you think you know it."

"Sometimes," said Professor Quirrell, "telling someone about a danger can cause them to walk directly into it. I have no intention of having that happen this time. Do you expect me to tell you exactly what you must not do? Exactly why I am afraid?" The man shook his head. "If you were wizardborn, Mr. Potter, you would know to take it seriously, when a powerful magus tells you only to beware."

It would have been a lie to say that Harry was not annoyed, but he also wasn't an idiot; so Harry said merely, "Is there anything you *can* tell me?"

Carefully, Professor Quirrell seated himself upon the grass, and took out his wand, his hand assuming a position that Harry recognized. Harry's breath caught.

"This is the last time that I shall be able to do this for you," Professor Quirrell said quietly. Then the man began to speak words that were strange, of no language Harry could recognize, intonation that seemed not quite human, words which seemed to slip from Harry's memory even as he tried to grasp them, exiting from his mind as quickly as they entered.

The spell took effect more slowly, this time. The trees seemed to darken, branches and leaves staining, as though seen through perfect sunglasses that faded and attenuated light without distorting it. The blue bowl of the sky receded, the horizon which Harry's brain falsely assigned a finite distance pulling back as it turned grey, and darker grey. The clouds became translucent, transparent, wisping away to let the darkness shine through.

The forest shaded, faded, abated into blackness.

The great sky river became visible once again, as Harry's eyes adjusted,

became able to see the largest object which human eyes could ever behold as more than a point, the surrounding Milky Way.

And the stars, piercingly bright and yet remote, out of a great depth.

Professor Quirrell breathed deeply. Then he raised his wand again (just barely visible, in the starlight without sun or moon) and tapped himself on the head with a sound like an egg cracking.

The Defense Professor also faded away, became likewise invisible.

A tiny disk of grass, illuminated by not much light at all, drifted unoccupied within empty space.

Neither of them spoke for a time. Harry was content to look at the stars, undistracted even by his own body. Whatever Professor Quirrell had called him here to say, it would be said in due time.

In due time, a voice spoke.

"There is no war here," said a soft voice emanating from within the emptiness. "No conflict and battle, no politics and betrayal, no death and no life. That is all for the folly of men. The stars are above such foolishness, untouched by it. Here there is peace, and silence eternal. So I once thought."

Harry turned to look at where the voice originated, and saw only stars.

"So you once thought?" Harry said, when no other words seemed to be forthcoming.

"There is nothing above the folly of men," whispered the voice from the emptiness. "There is nothing beyond the destructive powers of sufficiently intelligent idiocy, not even the stars themselves. I went to a great deal of trouble to make a certain golden plaque last forever. I would not like to see it destroyed by human folly."

Again Harry's eyes reflexively darted toward where the voice should have been, again saw only emptiness. "I think I can reassure you on that score, Professor. Nuclear weapons don't have a fireball extending out for... how far away is Pioneer 11? Somewhere around a billion kilometers, maybe? Muggles talk about nuclear weapons destroying the world, but what they actually mean is lightly warming up some of Earth's surface. The *Sun* is a giant fusion reaction and *it* doesn't vaporize distant space probes. The worst-case scenario for nuclear war wouldn't even come close to destroying the Solar System, not that this is much of a consolation."

"True while we speak of Muggles," said the soft voice amid starlight. "But what do Muggles know of true power? It is not they who frighten me now. It

is you."

"Professor," Harry said carefully, "while I have to admit I've rolled a few critical failures in my life, there's a bit of distance between that and missing a saving throw so hard that the Pioneer 11 probe gets caught in the blast radius. There's no realistic way to do that without blowing up the Sun. And before you ask, our Sun is a main-sequence G-type star, it *can't* explode. Any energy input would just increase the volume of the hydrogen plasma, the Sun doesn't have a degenerate core that could be detonated. The Sun doesn't have enough mass to go supernova, even at the end of its lifespan."

"Such amazing things the Muggles have learned," the other voice murmured. "How stars live, how they are preserved from death, how they die. And they never wonder if such knowledge might be dangerous."

"In all frankness, Professor, that particular thought has never occurred to me either."

"You are Muggleborn. I speak not of blood, I speak of how you spent your childhood years. There is a freedom of thought in that, true. But there is also wisdom in the caution of wizardkind. It has been three hundred and twenty-three years since the magical territories of Sicily were ruined by one man's folly. Such incidents were more common in the years when Hogwarts was raised. Commoner still, in the aftertime of Merlin. Of the time before Merlin, little remains to study."

"There's around thirty orders of magnitude of difference between that and blowing up the Sun," Harry observed, then caught himself. "But that's a pointless quibble, sorry, blowing up a country would also be bad, I agree. In any case, Professor, I don't plan on doing anything like that."

"Your choice is not required, Mr. Potter. If you had read more wizardborn novels and fewer Muggle stories, you would know. In serious literature the wizard whose foolishness threatens to unleash the Shambling Bone-Men will not be deliberately bent on such a goal, that is for children's books. This truly dangerous wizard shall perhaps be bent on some project of which he anticipates great renown, and the certain prospect of losing that renown and living out his life in obscurity will seem to him more vivid than the unknown prospect of destroying his country. Or he shall have promised success to one he cannot bear to disappoint. Perhaps he has children in debt. There is much literary wisdom in those stories. It is born of harsh experience and cities of ash. The most likely prospect for disaster is a powerful wizard who, for whatever reason,

cannot bring himself to halt as warning signs appear. Though he may speak much and loudly of caution, he will not be able to bring himself actually to halt. I wonder, Mr. Potter, have you thought of trying anything which Hermione Granger herself would have told you not to do?"

"All *right*, point taken," said Harry. "Professor, I am well aware that if I save Hermione at the price of two other people's lives, I've lost on total points from a utilitarian standpoint. I am *extremely* aware that Hermione would not want me to risk destroying a whole country just to save her. That's just common sense."

"Child who destroys Dementors," said that soft voice, "if it were only one country I feared you might ruin, I would be less concerned. I did not at first credit that your knowledge of Muggle science and Muggle practices would be a source of great power. I now credit it more. I am, in complete sincerity, concerned for the safety of that golden plaque."

"Well, if science fiction has taught me anything," said Harry, "it's taught me that destroying the Solar System is not morally acceptable, especially if you do it before humanity has colonized any other star systems."

"Then will you give up this —"

"No," Harry said without even thinking before he opened his mouth. After a moment, he added, "But I do understand what you're trying to tell me."

Silence. The stars had not shifted, not even as they would have in an Earthly night sky, over time.

A very slight rustle, as of someone shifting their body. Harry realized that he had been standing for a while in the same position, and dropped down to the almost unseeable circle of grass that still stayed beneath him, careful not to touch the edges of the spell.

"Tell me this," said the soft voice. "Why does that girl matter to you so much?"

"Because she is my friend."

"In the English language as it is customarily used, Mr. Potter, the word 'friend' is not associated with a desperate effort to raise the dead. Are you under the impression that she is your true love, or some such?"

"Oh, not you too," Harry said wearily. "Not you of all people, Professor. Fine, we're best friends, but that's *all*, okay? That's enough. Friends don't let friends stay dead."

"Ordinary folk do not do as much, for those they call friends." The voice

sounded more distant now, abstracted. "Not even for those they say they love. Their companions die, and they do not go in search of power to resurrect them."

Harry couldn't help himself. He looked over again, despite knowing it would be futile, and saw only more stars. "Let me guess, from this you deduce that... people don't actually care as much about their friends as they pretend."

A brief laugh. "They would scarcely pretend to care less."

"They care, Professor, and not just for their true loves. Soldiers throw themselves on grenades to save their friends, mothers run into burning houses to save their children. But if you're a Muggle you don't think there's any such thing as magic to bring someone back to life. And normal wizards don't... think outside the box like that. I mean, most wizards aren't searching for power to make themselves immortal. Does that prove they don't care about their own lives?"

"As you say, Mr. Potter. Certainly I myself would consider their lives pointless and without a shred of value. Perhaps, somewhere in their hidden hearts, they also believe that my opinion of them is the correct one."

Harry shook his head, and then, in annoyance, cast back the hood of his Cloak, and shook his head again. "That seems like a rather *contrived* view of the world, Professor," said the dim-lit head of a boy, floating unsupported on a circle of dark grass amid stars. "Trying to invent a resurrection spell just isn't something normal people would think of, so you can't deduce anything from their not taking the option."

A moment later, the dim-lit outline of a man sitting on the circle of grass was visible as well.

"If they *truly* cared about their supposed loved ones," the Defense Professor said softly, "they would think of it, would they not?"

"Brains don't work that way. They don't suddenly supercharge when the stakes go up — or when they do, it's within hard limits. I couldn't calculate the thousandth digit of pi if someone's life depended on it."

The dim-lit head inclined. "But there is another possible explanation, Mr. Potter. It is that people play the *role* of friendship. They do just as much as that role requires of them, and no more. The thought occurs to me that perhaps the difference between you and them is not that you care more than they do. Why would you have been born with such unusually strong emotions of friendship, that you alone among wizardkind are driven to resurrect Her-

mione Granger after her death? No, the most likely difference is not that you care more. It is that, being a more logical creature than they, you alone have thought that playing the role of Friend would require this of you."

Harry stared out at the stars. He would have been lying if he'd claimed not to be shaken. "That... can't be true, Professor. I could name a dozen examples in Muggle novels of people driven to resurrect their dead friends. The authors of those stories clearly understood exactly how I feel about Hermione. Though you wouldn't have read them, I guess... maybe Orpheus and Eurydice? I didn't actually read that one but I know what's in it."

"Such tales are also told among wizardkind. There is the story of the Elric brothers. The tale of Dora Kent, who was protected by her son Saul. There is Ronald Mallett and his doomed challenge to Time. In Sicily before its fall, the drama of Precia Testarossa. In Nippon they tell of Akemi Homura and her lost love. What these stories have in common, Mr. Potter, is that they are all *fiction*. Real-life wizards do not attempt the same, even though the notion is clearly *not* beyond their imagination."

"Because they don't think they can!" Harry's voice rose.

"Shall we go and tell the good Professor McGonagall about your intention to find a way to resurrect Miss Granger, and see what she thinks of it? Perhaps it has simply never occurred to her to consider that option... Ah, but you hesitate. You already know her answer, Mr. Potter. Do you know why you know it?" You could hear the cold smile in the voice. "A lovely technique, that. Thank you for teaching it to me."

Harry was aware of the tension that had developed in his face, his words came out as though bitten off. "Professor McGonagall has not grown up with the Muggle concept of the increasing power of science, and nobody's ever told her that when a friend's life is at stake is a time when you need to *think very rationally*—"

The Defense Professor's voice was also rising. "The Transfiguration Professor is *reading from a script*, Mr. Potter! That script calls for her to mourn and grieve, that all may know how much she cared. Ordinary people react poorly if you suggest that they go off-script. As you already knew!"

"That's funny, I could have sworn I saw Professor McGonagall going offscript at dinner yesterday. If I saw her go off-script another ten times I might actually try to talk to her about resurrecting Hermione, but right now she's new to that and needs practice. In the end, Professor, what you're trying to explain away by calling love and friendship and everything else a lie is just human beings not knowing any better."

The Defense Professor's voice rose in pitch. "If it were you who had been killed by that troll, it would not even *occur* to Hermione Granger to do as you are doing for her! It would not occur to Draco Malfoy, nor to Neville Longbottom, nor to McGonagall or any of your precious friends! There is not one person in this world who would return to you the care that you are showing her! So *why?* Why do it, Mr. Potter?" There was a strange, wild desperation in that voice. "Why be the only one in the world who goes to such lengths to keep up the pretense, when none of them will ever do the same for you?"

"I believe you are factually mistaken, Professor," Harry returned evenly. "About a number of things, in fact. At the very least, your model of my emotions is flawed. Because you don't understand me the tiniest bit, if you think that it would stop me if everything you said was *true*. Everything in the world has to start somewhere, every event that happens has to happen for a first time. Life on Earth had to start with some little self-replicating molecule in a pool of mud. And if I were the first person in the world, no —"

Harry's hand swept out, to indicate the terribly distant points of light.

"— if I were the first person in the *universe* who ever really cared about someone else, which I'm *not* by the way, then I'd be honored to be that person, and I'd try to do it justice."

There was a long silence.

"You truly do care about that girl," the man's dim outline said softly. "You care about her in the way that none of *them* are capable of caring for their own lives, let alone each other." The Defense Professor's voice had become strange, filled with some indecipherable emotion. "I do not understand it, but I know the lengths you will go to because of it. You will challenge death itself, for her. Nothing will sway you from that."

"I care enough to make an actual effort," Harry said quietly. "Yes, that is correct."

The starlight slowly began to fracture, the world shining through the cracks; slashes through the night showing tree trunks and leaves glowing in the sunlight. Harry raised a hand, blinking hard, as the returning brightness smashed into his dark-adjusted eyes; and his eyes automatically went to the Defense Professor, just in case an attack occurred while he was blinded.

When all the stars had gone and only daylight remained, Professor Quirrell was still sitting on the grass. "Well, Mr. Potter," he said in his normal voice, "if that is so, then I shall give you what help I can, while I can."

"You'll what?" Harry said involuntarily.

"My offer as I made it yesterday still stands. Ask and I will answer. Show me the same science books you deemed suitable for Mr. Malfoy, and I shall look them over and tell you what comes to mind. Don't look so surprised, Mr. Potter, I would hardly leave you to your own devices."

Harry stared, tear ducts still watering from the sudden light.

Professor Quirrell looked back at him. Something strange glinted in the pale eyes. "I have done what I can, and now I fear I must take my leave of you. Good —" and the Defense Professor hesitated. "Good day, Mr. Potter."

"Good —" Harry began.

The man sitting on the grass fell over, his head impacting the ground with a light thud. At the same time the sense of doom diminished so sharply that Harry leapt to his feet, his heart suddenly in his throat.

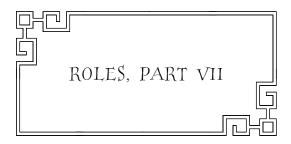
But the figure on the ground slowly pushed back up to a crawling position. Turned to look at Harry, eyes empty, mouth slack. Tried to stand, fell back to the ground.

Harry took a step forward, sheer instinct telling him to offer a hand, although that was incorrect; the apprehension that rose up in him, however faint, spoke of continued danger.

But the fallen figure flinched away from Harry, and then slowly began crawl to away from him, in the general direction of the distant castle.

The boy standing amid the forest gazed after.

## CHAPTER NINETY-SIX



The fourth meeting: (April 17th, 1992, 4:38 pm)

he man wearing the worn, warm coat, with three faint scars etched forever into his cheek, observed Harry Potter as closely as he could while the boy looked around politely at the rows of cottages. For someone whose best friend had died yesterday, Harry Potter seemed strangely composed, though not in any way reminiscent of unfeelingness, or normality. *I don't wish to talk about that*, the boy had said, with you or anyone. Saying 'wish' and not 'want', as though to emphasize that he was able to use grownup words and make grownup decisions. There had been only one thing Remus Lupin had thought of that might help, after he'd received the owls from Professor McGonagall and that strange man Quirinus Quirrell.

"There's a lot of empty houses," the boy said, glancing around again.

Godric's Hollow had changed, in the decade since Remus Lupin had been a frequent visitor. Many of the old, peaked cottages looked deserted, with green leafy vines growing across their windows and their doors. Britain had contracted noticeably, in the aftermath of the Wizarding War, having lost not only the dead but the fled. Godric's Hollow had been hard-hit. And afterward still more families had moved elsewhere, to Hogsmeade or magical London, the deserted houses too uncomfortable a reminder.

Others had remained. Godric's Hollow was older than Hogwarts, older than Godric Gryffindor whose name it had taken, and there were families which would reside here until the end of the world and its magic.

The Potters had been one such family, and would be again, if the last Potter so chose.

Remus Lupin tried to explain all that, simplifying it as best he could for the young boy. The Ravenclaw nodded thoughtfully and said nothing, as though he had understood it all without need of questions. Perhaps that was so; the child of James Potter and Lily Evans, the Head Boy and Head Girl of Hogwarts, would hardly be stupid. The child had certainly seemed highly intelligent, for the little time that they had spoken in January, though at that time Remus had done most of the talking.

(There was also that business with the Wizengamot which Remus had heard rumors about, but Remus didn't believe a single word of that, any more than he'd believed it about James betrothing his son to Molly's youngest.)

"There's the monument," Remus said, pointing ahead of them.

Harry walked beside Mr. Lupin toward the black marble obelisk, thinking silently. It seemed to Harry that this adventure was essentially misguided; he had no use for grief counseling, that was not Harry's chosen path. So far as Harry was concerned, the five stages of grief were Rage, Remorse, Resolve, Research, and Resurrection. (Not that the usual 'five stages of grief' had any experimental evidence whatsoever that Harry had ever heard about.) But Mr. Lupin had seemed too sincere to refuse; and visiting James and Lily's home was something Harry felt he ought not to turn down. So Harry walked, feeling oddly detached; walking silently through a play whose script he was not interested in reading.

Harry had been told that he wasn't to wear the Cloak of Invisibility for this journey, so that Mr. Lupin could keep track of him.

Harry was morally certain that Dumbledore, or both Dumbledore and Mad-Eye Moody, were following them invisibly to see if anyone tried for the bait. There was no way Harry would have been let out of Hogwarts with only Remus Lupin for a guard. Harry didn't expect anything to happen, though. He'd seen nothing to contradict the hypothesis that all the danger centered on

Hogwarts and only Hogwarts.

As the two of them walked closer toward the center of town, the marble obelisk transformed into —

Harry drew in a breath. He'd been expecting a heroic pose of James Potter with wand leveled against Lord Voldemort, and Lily Potter with arms outstretched in front of the crib.

Instead there was a man with untidy hair and glasses, and a woman with her hair let down and a baby in her arms, and that was all.

"It looks very ... normal," Harry said, feeling an odd catch in his throat.

"Madam Longbottom and Professor Dumbledore put their foot down hard," said Mr. Lupin, who was looking more at Harry than at the monument. "They said that the Potters should be remembered as they had lived, not as they had died."

Harry looked at the statue, thinking. Very strange, to see himself as a baby of stone, with no scar upon his forehead. It was a glimpse at an alternate universe, one where Harry James Potter (no Evans-Verres to his name) became an intelligent but ordinary wizarding scholar, maybe Sorted into Gryffindor like his parents. A Harry Potter who grew up a proper young wizard, knowing little of science for all that his mother was Muggleborn. Ultimately changing... not much. James and Lily wouldn't have raised their son with what Professor Quirrell would have called *ambition* and what Professor Verres-Evans would have called *the common endeavor*. His birth parents would have loved him very much, and that would not have been much help to anyone in the world except Harry. If someone had undone their death —

"You were their friend," Harry said, turning to look at Lupin. "For a long time, since you were children."

Mr. Lupin nodded silently.

Professor Quirrell's voice resounded in Harry's approximate memory: The most likely difference is not that you care more. Rather it is that, being a more logical creature than they, only you are aware that the role of Friend ought to require this of you...

"When Lily and James died," Harry said, "did you think at all of whether there might be some magical way to get them back? Like Orpheus and Eurydice? Or the, what was it, Elrin brothers?"

"There is no magic which can undo death," Mr. Lupin said quietly. "There are some mysteries which wizardry cannot touch."

"Did you do a mental check of what you thought you knew, how you thought you knew it, and how high the probability was of that conclusion?"

"What?" said Mr. Lupin. "Could you repeat that, Harry?"

"I'm saying, did you think about it anyway?"

Mr. Lupin shook his head.

"Why not?"

"Because it was already done, and over," Remus Lupin said gently. "Because wherever James and Lily are now, they would wish me to act for the sake of the living, not the dead."

Harry nodded silently. He'd been pretty sure of the answer to that question before he'd asked. He'd already read that script. But he'd asked anyway, just in case Mr. Lupin had spent a week obsessing about it, because Harry could have been wrong.

The soft voice of the Defense Professor seemed to speak in Harry's mind. Surely, if Lupin truly cared, he would not need special instruction for something as simple as thinking for five minutes before giving up...

Yes, he would, Harry answered the mental voice. Human beings wouldn't suddenly obtain a skill like that just because they cared. I learned about it because I'd read library books, produced by a huge scientific edifice —

And that other part of Harry said, in that soft voice, *But there is also another hypothesis*, *Mr. Potter, and it fits the data in a much less complicated way*.

No it doesn't! How would people even know what to pretend, if nobody had ever cared?

They don't know. That is what you observe.

The two of them walked onward toward a certain house, past a long row of occupied wizard cottages and other cottages overgrown with vines.

Coming finally to the house with half its top blown off, and green leaves growing over into the inside; behind a shoulder-high wild-growing hedge lining the sidewalk, and a narrow metal gate (Mr. Hagrid had probably stepped right over it, being unable to fit through). The gap in the roof was like a giant mouth had taken a circular bite from the house, leaving spines of wood, what had maybe been support beams, sticking out. To the right side a single chimney still stood upright, uneaten by the giant bite, but leaning dangerously without its former support. Windows were shattered. Where there should have been a front door were only splinters of wood.

To this place Lord Voldemort had come, silently, making less noise than the

dead leaves slithering along the pavement...

Remus Lupin put a hand upon Harry's shoulder. "Touch the gate," Mr. Lupin urged.

Harry reached out a hand and did so.

Like a fast-growing flower a sign burst from the tangled weeds in the ground behind the gate, a wooden sign with golden letters, and it said:

On this spot, on the night of 31 October 1981,
Lily and James Potter lost their lives.
They were survived by their son, Harry Potter,
the only wizard ever to withstand the Killing Curse,
the Boy-Who-Lived, who broke You-Know-Who's power.
This house has been left in its ruined state,
as a monument to the Potters,
as a reminder of their sacrifice.

In a blank space below the golden letters were written other messages, dozens of them, magical ink that rose to the surface and gleamed brightly enough to be read before fading and giving way to other messages.

So my Gideon is avenged.

Thank you, Harry Potter. Fare well wherever you are.

We will always be in the Potters' debt.

Oh James, oh Lily, I am sorry.

I hope you're alive, Harry Potter.

There is always a price.

I wish our last words had been kinder, James. I'm sorry.

There is always a dawn after the night.

Rest well, Lily.

Bless you, Boy-Who-Lived. You were our miracle.

"I guess —" Harry said. "I guess that's what people do — instead of trying to make it better —" Harry stopped. The thought seemed unworthy of this place. He looked up, and saw Remus Lupin gazing at him with a look so gentle that Harry wrenched his eyes away to the blasted and broken roof.

You were our miracle. Harry had always heard the word 'miracle' in the

context of how, in the natural universe, there was no such thing. And yet looking at the ruined house, he suddenly knew exactly what the word meant, the note of grace all unexplained, the blessing inexplicable. The Dark Lord had almost won, and then in one night all the darkness and terror had ended, salvation without justification, a sudden dawn from out of the darkness and even now nobody knew *why* —

If Lily Potter had lived beyond her confrontation with Lord Voldemort, she would have felt that way when she saw her baby alive, afterward.

"Let's go," whispered the baby boy, ten years later.

They went.

The graveyard's entrance was guarded by a lockless gate of the sort that kept out animals, with a place to stand while you moved the door from one side of the standing-place to the other. Remus took out his wand (Harry was already holding his) and there was a brief blur as they stepped through.

Some of the stones rising up from the ground looked as old as the wall in Oxford that his father had said was around a thousand years old.

Hallie Fleming, said the first stone that Harry saw, in a carving almost invisibly faded with the erosion of time. Vienna Wood, said another.

It had been a long time since Harry had visited a graveyard. His mind had still been childlike the last time he'd come to one, long before he'd seen within Death's shadow. Coming here now was... strange, and sad, and puzzling, and this has been happening for so long, why haven't wizards tried to stop it, why aren't they putting all their strength into that like Muggles do with medical research, only more so, wizards have more reason to hope...

"The Dumbledores lived in Godric's Hollow too?" Harry said, as they walked past a pair of relatively new stones saying *Kendra Dumbledore* and *Ariana Dumbledore*.

"For a long, long time," Mr. Lupin said.

They walked further into the graveyard, far toward the end, past many deaths that had been mourned.

Then Mr. Lupin pointed at a linked double headstone, of marble still white and unaged.

"Are there going to be messages there?" Harry said. He didn't want to deal any more with the way that other people dealt with death.

Mr. Lupin shook his head.

They walked toward the linked white stones.

And stood before —

"What is this?" Harry whispered. "Who ... who wrote this?"

# JAMES POTTER BORN 27 MARCH 1960 DIED 31 OCTOBER 1981

"Wrote what?" said Mr. Lupin, puzzled.

# LILY POTTER BORN 30 JANUARY 1960 DIED 31 OCTOBER 1981

"This!" Harry cried. "The inscription!" There were tears welling up in Harry's eyes, at the brightness out of place and unexplained, the touch of grace where no grace should have been, the mysterious blessing, tears welling up at

## THE LAST ENEMY THAT SHALL BE DESTROYED IS DEATH

"That?" Mr. Lupin said. "That's the ... motto, I suppose you could call it, of the Potters. Though I don't think it was ever something as formal as that. Just a saying handed down from long, long ago ..."

"This — that —" Harry scrambled down to kneel beside the grave, touched the inscription with a trembling hand. "How? Things like that can't just be, be genetic —"

Then Harry saw what tears had blurred, the faint carving of a line, within a circle, within a triangle.

The symbol of the Deathly Hallows.

And Harry understood.

"They tried," Harry whispered.

The three Peverell brothers.

Had they lost someone precious to them, was that where it had begun?

"With all their lives, they tried, and they made progress -"

The Cloak of Invisibility, that could defeat the Dementors' sight.

" — but their research wasn't finished —"

Hiding from Death's shadow is not defeating Death itself. The Resurrection

Stone couldn't really bring anyone back. The Elder Wand couldn't protect you from old age.

"— so they passed on the mission to their children, and their children's children."

Generation after generation.

Until it came to me.

Could Time echo like that, rhyming, between this far into the future, and that far in the past? It *couldn't* be coincidence, could it? Not this message, not in this place.

My family.

You really were, my mother and my father.

"It doesn't mean resurrecting the dead, Harry," Mr. Lupin said. "It means accepting death, and so being beyond death, mastering it."

"Did James tell you that?" Harry said, his voice strange.

"No," said Mr. Lupin, "but —"

"Good."

Harry rose up slowly from where he had been kneeling, feeling as though he were pushing up a sun upon his shoulders, raising the dawn above the horizon.

Of course other wizards have tried. I am not unique. I was never alone. These feelings in my heart, they're not so special, not in the wizard world or the Muggle one.

"Harry, your wand!" There was a sudden excitement in Mr. Lupin's voice, and when Harry raised his wand to look at it closely, he saw that it was gleaming ever so faintly with a silver light, welling out of the wood.

"Cast the Patronus Charm!" urged Mr. Lupin. "Try casting it again, Harry!" Oh, right. So far as Mr. Lupin knows, I can't —

Harry smiled, and even laughed a little. "I'd better not," Harry said. "If I tried to cast the spell in this state of mind, it'd probably kill me."

"What?" said Mr. Lupin. "The Patronus Charm doesn't do that!"

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres raised his left hand, still laughing, and wiped away some more tears.

"You know, Mr. Lupin," Harry said, "it really takes a *baroque* interpretation to think that somebody would be walking around, pondering how death is just something we all have to accept, and communicate their state of mind by saying, 'The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.' Maybe someone

else thought it sounded poetic and picked up the phrase and tried to interpret it differently, but whoever said it first didn't like death much." Sometimes it puzzled Harry how most people didn't seem to even *notice* when they were twisting something around to the 180-degree opposite of its first obvious reading. It couldn't be a raw brainpower thing, people could see the obvious reading of most other English sentences. "Also 'shall be destroyed' refers to a change of future state, so it can't be about the way things are now."

Remus Lupin was staring at him with wide eyes. "You certainly are James and Lily's child," the man said, sounding rather shocked.

"Yes, I am," Harry said. But that wasn't enough, he had to do something more, so Harry raised his wand in the air and said, his voice as steady as he could make it, "I am Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, the son of Lily and James, of the house of Potter, and I accept my family's quest. Death is my enemy, and I will defeat it."

Thrayen beyn Peverlas soona ahnd thrih heera toal thissoom Dath bey yewoonen.

"What?" Harry said aloud. The words had popped up into his stream of consciousness as though from his own thoughts, unexplained.

"What was that?" said Remus Lupin at the same time.

Harry turned, scanning the graveyard, but he didn't see anything. Beside him, Mr. Lupin was doing the same.

Neither of them noticed the tall stone worn as though from a thousand years of age, upon it a line within a circle within a triangle glowing ever so faintly silver, like the light which had shone from Harry's wand, invisible at that distance beneath the still-bright Sun.

#### SOME TIME LATER:

"Thank you again, Mr. Lupin," Harry said, the tall, faintly scarred man was about to depart once more. "Though I really wish you hadn't —"

"Professor Dumbledore said that I was to Portkey us back to Hogwarts if anything unusual happened, whether or not it seemed like an attack," Mr. Lupin said firmly. "Which is eminently sensible."

Harry nodded. And then, having carefully saved this question for last, "Do

you have any idea of what the words meant?"

"If I did, I wouldn't tell you," Mr. Lupin said, looking rather severe. "Certainly not without Professor Dumbledore's permission. I can understand your eagerness, but you should not go trying to uncover any ancestral secrets of the Potters until you are an adult. That means after you've passed your NEWTs, Harry, or at least your OWLs. And I still think you've picked up entirely the wrong idea of what your family motto is meant to say!"

Harry nodded, sighing internally, and bid Mr. Lupin farewell.

Harry went back through Hogwarts, to the Ravenclaw Tower, feeling strange, and strengthened. He would not have expected any of that, but it had been all to the good.

He was passing through the Ravenclaw common room, on the way to his dorm.

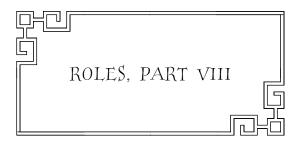
That was when the shining creature came to him, gleaming soft white beneath the candlefires of the Ravenclaw common room, as it slithered out from nowhere, the silver snake.

Pregen béon Pefearles suna and prie hira tól þissum Déað béo gewunen.

Three shall be Peverell's sons and three their devices by which Death shall be defeated.

Spoken in the presence of the three Peverell brothers, in a small tavern on the outskirts of what would later be called Godric's Hollow.

## CHAPTER NINETY-SEVEN



or the second time that day, Harry's eyes filled with tears. Heedless of the puzzled eyes of the Ravenclaws in the common room, he reached out to the silver creature which Draco Malfoy had sent, cradling it in his arms like a live thing; and stumbled off in the direction of his dorm room, heading half-blindly for the bottom of his trunk, as the silver snake waited silently in his arms.

The fifth meeting: (Sunday, April 19th, 10:12 am.)

The debtor's meeting which Lord Malfoy had demanded from Harry Potter, who owed Lucius Malfoy a debt of some 58,203 Galleons, was held within the Gringotts Central Bank, in accordance with the laws of Britain.

There had been some pushback from Chief Warlock Dumbledore, trying to prevent Harry Potter from leaving the security of Hogwarts (a phrase that caused Harry Potter to raise his fingers and silently make quote marks in the air). For his own part, the Boy-Who-Lived had seemingly pondered quietly, and then assented to the meeting, strangely compliant in the face of his enemy's demand.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts, who acted as Harry Potter's legal guardian in the eyes of magical Britain, had overruled his ward's assent.

The Debts Committee of the Wizengamot had overruled the Headmaster of Hogwarts.

The Chief Warlock had overruled the Debts Committee.

The Wizengamot had overruled the Chief Warlock.

And so the Boy-Who-Lived had departed under the heavy guard of Mad-Eye Moody and an Auror trio for the Gringotts Central Bank; with Moody's bright-blue eye rotating wildly in every direction, as though to signal to any possible attacker that he was On Guard and Constantly Vigilant and would cheerfully incinerate the kidneys of anyone who sneezed in the general direction of the Boy-Who-Lived.

Harry Potter watched more keenly than before, as they marched through the wide-open front doors of Gringotts, beneath the motto *Fortius Quo Fidelius*. On Harry's last three visits to Gringotts he had merely admired the marble pillars, the gold-burning torchlights, the architecture not quite like the human parts of magical Britain. Since then had come the Incident at Azkaban and other things; and now, on his fourth visit, Harry was thinking about the Goblin Rebellions and goblins' ongoing resentment at not being allowed to own wands and certain facts which hadn't been in the first-year History textbook, which Harry had guessed at by pattern-matching and which Professor Flitwick had confirmed in a very quiet voice. Lord Voldemort had killed goblins as well as wizards — an incredibly stupid move on Lord Voldemort's part, unless Harry was really missing something — but what goblins thought of the Boy-Who-Lived, Harry had no idea. Goblins had a reputation for paying what they owed and taking what they thought owed them, along with a reputation for interpreting those accounts in a somewhat prejudiced fashion.

Today, the guards standing upright in armor at regular intervals around the bank were staring at the Boy-Who-Lived with blank faces, and glaring at Moody and the Aurors with flashes of bitter contempt. At the stands and counters of the bank's foyer, goblin tellers stared with equal contempt at the wizards whose hands they were filling with Galleons; one teller smiled a sharp-toothed grin at a witch who was looking angry and desperate.

If I understand human nature correctly — and if I'm right that all the humanoid magical species are genetically human plus a heritable magical effect — then you're not likely to become friends with a wizard just because I'm polite to you, or say

that I'm sympathetic. But I wonder if you would back the Boy-Who-Lived in a bid to overthrow the Ministry, if I promised to revoke the Wand Law afterward... or if I quietly gave you wands, and spellbooks, in exchange for your support... is that why the secret of wand-making is restricted to people like Ollivander? Though if you really are human, just plain human, then the goblin nation probably has its own internal horrors, its own Azkabans, for that is also human nature; in which case sooner or later I must overthrow or reform your own government as well. Hm.

An aged goblin appeared before them, and Harry inclined his head with careful courtesy, a gesture that the aged goblin returned with an abrupt half-nod. There was no wild train ride; instead the aged goblin ushered them into a short hallway that terminated in a small waiting room, with three goblin-sized benches and one wizard-sized chair, within which nobody sat.

"Do not sign anything that Lucius Malfoy gives you," Mad-Eye Moody said. "Nothing, do you understand me, lad? If Malfoy hands you a copy of *The Wonderful Adventures of the Boy-Who-Lived* and asks you for an autograph, tell him that you've sprained a finger. Don't pick up a quill for a single second while you're in Gringotts. If someone hands you a quill, break the quill and then break your own fingers. Do I need to explain further, son?"

"Not particularly," Harry said. "We also have lawyers in Muggle Britain, and they'd think your lawyers are cute."

A short time later Harry Potter handed his wand over to an armored goblin guard who frisked him with all manner of interesting-looking probes, and gave his pouch to Moody to keep.

And then Harry stepped through another door, and a brief waterfall of Thief's Downfall, which evaporated from his skin as soon as he stepped out.

On the other side of the door was a larger room, richly paneled and appointed, with a great golden table stretching across it; two huge leather chairs on one side of the table, and a small wooden stool on the other, the debtor's perch. Two goblins in full armor, wearing ornate earpieces and glasses, stood watch around the room. Neither side would have wands or any other device of magic, and the goblin guards would attack immediately if anyone dared to use wandless magic within this peaceable meeting supervised by Gringotts Bank. The ornate earpieces would prevent the goblin guards from hearing the conversation unless directly addressed, the eyepieces would leave the wizards' faces as blurs. It was, in short, something along the lines of *actual* security, at

least if you were an Occlumens.

Harry climbed up onto his uncomfortable wooden stool, thinking *Subtle* in a tone of some mental sarcasm, and awaited his creditors.

It was only a brief interval later, much shorter than the time a debtor could legally be made to wait, when Lucius Malfoy entered into the room, taking up his leather chair with motions worn smooth by practice. His snake-headed cane was missing from his hands, his long white mane drifted behind him the same as ever, his face could not be read.

Quietly following behind him was a young boy with white-blonde hair, now wearing black robes far finer than any Hogwarts uniform, who followed in his father's footsteps with a controlled face. A boy who was also Harry's creditor to the tune of forty Galleons, and also of House Malfoy, and therefore, technically, covered by the Wizengamot resolution enabling this meeting.

*Draco*. Harry didn't say it aloud, didn't let his own expression change. He could not think of what to say. Not even *I'm sorry* seemed appropriate. Harry hadn't dared say any of that to Draco's Patronus either, when they had set up this meeting in a few brief exchanges; and not only because Lucius might be listening. It had been enough to know that Draco's happy thought was still happy, and that he had still been able to want Harry to know it.

Lucius Malfoy spoke first, his voice level, his face set. "I do not understand what is happening at Hogwarts, Harry Potter. Would you care to explain it to me?"

"I don't know," Harry said. "If I understood these events I would not have let them happen, Lord Malfoy."

"Then answer me this question. Who are you?"

Harry gazed evenly at the face of his creditor. "I'm not You-Know-Who, like you thought I was," Harry said. Not being a *complete* idiot, he'd eventually worked out who Lucius Malfoy had thought he was talking to in front of the Wizengamot. "Obviously I'm not a normal boy. Equally obviously, that probably has *something* to do with the Boy-Who-Lived business. But I don't know what, or why, any more than you do. I asked the Sorting Hat and it didn't know either."

Lucius Malfoy nodded distantly. "I could not think of any reason why you would pay a hundred thousand Galleons to save a Mudblood's life. No reason save one, which would account for her power and bloodthirst alike; but then she died at the hands of a troll, and yet you lived. And also my son has told me

much of you, Harry Potter, which did not make the tiniest bit of sense, I have heard the ravings of the mad in St. Mungo's and they were more sensible by far than the events which my son told me under *Veritaserum* that you enacted, and that portion of this raving lunacy, which you personally carried out, I would have you explain to me, and now."

Harry turned to look at Draco, who looked back at him with a face that was screwing up, being controlled, and then tensing up again.

"I'd also," Draco Malfoy said in a high and wavering voice, "like, to know, why, Potter."

Harry closed his eyes, and spoke without looking. "A boy raised by Muggles who thought he was clever. You saw me, Draco, and you thought of how very useful it would be if the Boy-Who-Lived, out of all the other children in your year, could be shown the truth of things, if we could be friends. And I thought the same thing about you. Only, you and I believed different things were true. Not that I'm saying that there are different truths, I mean, there's different beliefs but there's only one reality, only one universe that can make those beliefs true or false —"

"You lied to me."

Harry opened his eyes and looked at Draco. "I would prefer to say," Harry said, not quite with a steady voice, "that the things I told you were true from a certain point of view."

"A certain point of view?" Draco Malfoy looked every bit as angry as Luke Skywalker'd had the right to be, and not in a mood to accept Kenobi's excuses, either. "There's a word for things that are true from a certain point of view. They're called *lies!*"

"Or tricks," Harry said evenly. "Statements which are technically true but which deceive the listener into forming further beliefs which are false. I think it's worth making that distinction. What I told you was a self-fulfilling prophecy; you believed that you couldn't deceive yourself, so you didn't try. The skills you've learned are real, and it would have been very bad for you to start fighting against them internally. People can't make themselves believe that blue is green by an act of will, but they *think* they can, and that can be almost as bad."

"You used me," said Draco Malfoy.

"I only used you in ways that made you stronger. That's what it means to be used by a friend." "Even I know that's not what friendship is!"

Now Lucius Malfoy spoke again. "For what purpose? To what end?" Even the elder Malfoy's voice was not quite steady. "Why?"

Harry regarded him for a moment, and then turned to Draco. "Your father's probably not going to believe this," Harry said. "But you, Draco, should be able to see that everything which has happened is compatible with this hypothesis. And that any more cynical hypothesis wouldn't explain why I didn't press you harder when you thought I had leverage, or why I taught you so much. I thought that the heir of House Malfoy, who'd been publicly seen to grab a Muggleborn girl to stop her falling off the roof of Hogwarts, would be a good compromise candidate to lead magical Britain after the reformation."

"So you would have me believe," Lucius Malfoy said in a thin voice, "that you are claiming to be mad. Well, let us leave all that aside. Tell me who set that troll on Hogwarts."

"I don't know," Harry said.

"Tell me who you suspect, Harry Potter."

"I have four suspects. One of them is Professor Snape —"

"Snape?" Draco burst out.

"The second, of course, is the Defense Professor of Hogwarts, just because he's the Defense Professor." Harry would have left him out, not wanting to bring Professor Quirrell to the Malfoys' attention if he was innocent, but Draco might have called him on that. "The third, you wouldn't believe me about. The fourth is a catchall category called Everything Else." And the fifth, Lord Voldemort, I do not think I should name to you.

Lucius Malfoy's face contorted in a snarl. "Do you think I cannot recognize bait upon your hook? Tell me about this third possibility, Potter, the one you wish me to believe is the *true* answer, and leave aside games."

Harry regarded Lord Malfoy steadily. "I once read a book I wasn't supposed to read, and it told me this: Communication is an event that takes place between equals. Employees lie to their bosses, who, in turn, expect to be lied to. I'm not playing coy, I'm observing that it's simply not possible, in our present situation, for me to tell you about the third suspect, and have you believe that my story was anything but a lure."

Draco spoke then. "It's Father, isn't it?"

Harry gave Draco a startled look.

Draco spoke evenly. "You suspect that Father sent the troll into Hogwarts

to get at Granger, don't you? That's what you're thinking, isn't it!"

Harry opened his mouth to say, *Actually*, *no*, and then managed to think ahead and stop himself for once in his life.

"I see..." Harry said slowly. "That's what this is about. Lucius Malfoy publicly says that Hermione won't get away with what she's done, and lo and behold, a troll kills her." Harry smiled then, in a way that bared his teeth. "And if I deny that here, then Draco, who isn't an Occlumens, can then testify under Veritaserum that the Boy-Who-Lived does not suspect Lucius Malfoy of having sent a troll into Hogwarts to kill Hermione Granger, sworn to the Noble House of Potter, whose blood debt was recently purchased for a hundred thousand Galleons et cetera." Harry leaned back slightly, though his wooden stool had no back with which to do it properly. "But now that it's been pointed out, I see that it's very reasonable. Obviously you killed Hermione Granger, just like you threatened to do in front of the whole Wizengamot."

"I did not," Lucius Malfoy said, expressionless once more.

Harry bared his teeth again in that non-smile. "Well then, in *that* case, there must be someone *else* out there who killed Hermione and messed with the Hogwarts wards, the same person who *earlier* tried to *frame Hermione for Draco Malfoy's murder*. Either you killed Hermione Granger after being paid for her life, or you blamed your son's attempted murder on an innocent girl and took all my family's money under false pretenses, one of those two things must be true."

"Perhaps *you* killed her in hopes of your money being returned." Lucius Malfoy had leaned forward, and was staring hard at Harry.

"Then I would not have given away my money for her in the first place. As you already know. Don't insult my intelligence, Lord Malfoy — no, wait, sorry, you just had to say that in case Draco had to testify to it, never mind."

Lucius Malfoy sat back in his chair and stared.

"I tried to tell you, Father," Draco said under his breath, "but nobody can imagine Harry Potter until they've actually *met* him..."

Harry tapped a finger on his cheek. "So people are starting to figure out the blatantly obvious? I'm surprised, actually. I wouldn't have predicted that would happen." Harry had by now caught the general rhythm of Professor Quirrell's cynicism and was able to generate it independently. "I wouldn't think a newspaper would be able to report on a concept like 'Either X or Y must be true, but we don't know which.' I would only expect journalists to

report stories consisting of series of atomic propositions, like 'X is true', 'Y is false', or 'X is true and Y is false'. Not more complex logical connectors like 'If X is true then Y is true, but we don't know whether X is true'. And all your supporters ought to be rapidly switching between 'You can't prove that Lord Malfoy killed Granger, it could've been someone else' and 'You can't prove there was someone else to frame Granger', so long as it's uncertain they should be trying to have it both ways at once... wait, don't you *own* the Daily Prophet?"

"The Daily Prophet," Lucius Malfoy said thinly, "which I certainly do not own, is far too respectable to publish any such scurrilous nonsense. Unfortunately, not all wizards of influence are so reasonable."

"Ah. Got it." Harry nodded.

Lucius glanced at Draco. "The rest of what he said — was any of it important?"

"No, Father, it was not."

"Thank you, son." Lucius returned his gaze to Harry. His voice, when he spoke, was something closer to his usual drawl, cool and confident. "It is possible that I could be persuaded to show you some favor, if you admitted before the Wizengamot what you clearly know, that I was not responsible for this deed. I would be willing to reduce your remaining debt to House Malfoy quite significantly, or even adjust the terms to allow later repayment."

Harry regarded Lucius Malfoy steadily. "Lucius Malfoy. You are now perfectly aware that Hermione Granger was, in fact, framed using your son as bait, that she was False-Memory-Charmed or worse, and that House Potter held nothing against you before that. My counterproposal is that you return my family's money, I announce before the Wizengamot that House Potter holds House Malfoy no animus, and we present a united front against whoever's doing this. We decide to screw the roles we're supposed to play, and ally with each other instead of fighting. It could be the one thing the enemy doesn't expect us to do."

There was a brief silence in the room, except for the two goblin guards who went on breathing regardless.

"You are mad," Lucius Malfoy said coldly.

"It's called justice, Lord Malfoy. You cannot possibly expect me to cooperate with you while you are holding the wealth of House Potter under what you now know to be false pretenses. I understand how it looked to you at the time,

but you know better now."

"You have nothing to offer me worth a hundred thousand Galleons."

"Don't I?" Harry said distantly. "I wonder. I think it quite probable that you care more about the long-term welfare of House Malfoy than about whichever political issue the last generation's failed Dark Lord made his personal hobbyhorse." Harry glanced significantly at Draco. "The next generation is drawing its own battle lines and forming new alliances. Your son can be frozen out of that, or he can go straight to the top. Is that worth more to you than forty thousand Galleons you weren't particularly expecting and don't particularly need?" Harry smiled thinly. "Forty thousand Galleons. Two million Muggle pounds sterling. Your son knows some things about the size of the Muggle economy that might surprise you. They'd find it amusing, that the fate of a country was revolving around two million pounds sterling. They'd think it was cute. And I think much the same, Lord Malfoy. This isn't about me being desperate. This is about you getting a fair chance to be fair."

"Oh?" said Lord Malfoy. "And if I refuse your fair chance, what then?"

Harry shrugged. "Depends what sort of coalition government gets put together without the Malfoys. If the government can be reformed peacefully and it would disturb the peace to do otherwise, I'll pay you the money out of petty cash. Or maybe the Death Eaters will be retried for past crimes and executed as a matter of justice, as a result of due legal process, of course."

"You truly are mad," Lucius Malfoy said quietly. "You have no power, no wealth, and yet you say such things to me."

"Yes, it's silly to think I could scare you. After all, you're not a Dementor."

And Harry went on smiling. He'd looked it up, and apparently a bezoar would heal almost any poison if you shoved it into someone's mouth fast enough. Maybe that wouldn't repair radiation damage from Transfigured polonium, but then again, maybe it would. So Harry had looked up the freezing points of various acids, and it turned out that sulfuric acid would freeze at just ten degrees Celsius, which meant Harry could buy a liter of acid on the Muggle market, freeze it solid, and Transfigure it down to a tiny little unnoticable water-ice chip to be flipped into someone's mouth and ingested. No bezoar would compensate for that, once the Transfiguration wore off. Harry had no intention of saying it out loud, of course, but now that he'd failed decisively to prevent any deaths during his quest, he had no further intention of being restrained by the law or even the code of Batman.

Last chance to live, Lucius. Ethically speaking, your life was bought and paid for the day you committed your first atrocity for the Death Eaters. You're still human and your life still has intrinsic value, but you no longer have the deontological protection of an innocent. Any good person is licensed to kill you now, if they think it'll save net lives in the long run; and I will conclude as much of you, if you begin to get in my way. Whoever sent the troll after Granger must have targeted you too and hit you with some curse that makes former Death Eaters melt into a pile of goo. Very sad.

"Father," Draco said in a small voice. "I think you should consider it, father."

Lucius Malfoy looked at his son. "You jest."

"It's true. I don't think Potter just made up his books, nobody could have written all that and there were things in them that I could check for myself. And if even half of all that is true, he's right, a hundred thousand Galleons won't mean much. If we give it to him he really will be friends with House Malfoy again — the way *he* thinks of being friends, anyway. And if we don't, he'll be your enemy, whether it's in his own interests or not, he'll just go after you. Harry Potter really does think like that. It's not about money to him, it's about what he thinks is honor."

Harry Potter inclined his head, still smiling.

"But let's get one part of it straight," Draco said, now staring directly at him. There was a fierce light in his eyes. "You wronged me. And you owe me."

"Acknowledged," Harry said quietly. "Conditional on the rest of it, of course."

Lucius Malfoy opened his mouth to say who-knew-what and then closed it again. "Mad," he said again.

There was a long father-and-son argument during which Harry managed to keep his mouth shut.

When it seemed that even Draco wouldn't be able to persuade his father, Harry spoke up again, and proposed his intended next steps, if the Houses of Potter and Malfoy could cooperate.

Then came more argument between Lucius and Draco, during which Harry again stayed silent.

Finally Lucius Malfoy's eyes turned to gaze at Harry. "And you believe," Lucius Malfoy said, "that you can persuade Longbottom and Bones to go along with this notion, even if Dumbledore opposes it."

Harry nodded. "They'll be suspicious of your involvement, of course. But I'll tell them that it was my plan to start with, and that should help."

"I suppose," Lucius Malfoy said after a pause, "that I could have a contract drawn up, absolving you of *almost* all the remaining debt, if by some chance I do go along with this mad idea. It shall need more guarantees, of course —"

Harry promptly reached into his robes and drew out a parchment, unfolding it and spreading it across the golden table. "I've taken the liberty myself, actually," Harry said. He'd spent some careful hours in the Hogwarts library with the law books available. Thankfully, so far as Harry could tell, the laws of magical Britain were charmingly simple by Muggle standards. Writing that the original blood debt and payment was canceled, the Potters' wealth and all other vault items would be returned, and the remaining debt annulled, all with no fault to the Malfoys, was only a few more lines than it took to say out loud. "I had to promise my keepers not to sign anything you gave me. So I made sure to compose this myself, and sign it before I left."

Draco emitted a choked laugh.

Lucius read through the contract, smiling humorlessly. "How charmingly straightforward."

"I also promised not to touch a quill while I was in Gringotts," Harry said. He reached into his robes again and drew out a Muggle pen, along with a sheet of normal paper. "Will this wording be all right?" Harry rapidly scribbled down a legal-sounding statement to the effect that House Potter didn't hold House Malfoy responsible in any way for Hermione Granger's murder and didn't believe they had anything to do with it, then held up the paper in the air for Lord Malfoy's inspection.

Lord Malfoy looked at the paper, rolled his eyes slightly, and said, "Good enough, I suppose. Though to have the proper meaning, you should use the legal term *indemnify* rather than *exonerate*—"

"Nice try, but no. I know exactly what that word means, Lord Malfoy." Harry took his parchment and began copying down his original wording more carefully.

When Harry was done, Lord Malfoy reached across the golden table and took the pen, looking at it thoughtfully. "One of your Muggle artifacts, I suppose? What does this do, son?"

"It writes without needing an inkwell," Draco answered.

"I can see that. I suppose some might find it an amusing trinket." Lucius

smoothed the parchment contract over the table, then set his hand by the line for signatures, tapping the pen thoughtfully on the starting spot.

Harry wrenched his eyes away, up to Lucius Malfoy's face, forcing himself to breathe regularly, not quite able to stop his muscles from tensing.

"Our good friend, Severus Snape," said Lucius Malfoy, still tapping the pen on the line awaiting his signature. "The Defense Professor, calling himself Quirrell. Now I ask again, who is your third suspect, Harry Potter?"

"I would strongly advise that you sign first, Lord Malfoy, if you're going to do so anyway. You will benefit from this information more if you do not think I am trying to persuade you of something."

Another humorless smile. "I shall take my chances. Speak, if you wish this to continue."

Harry hesitated, then said evenly, "My third suspect is Albus Dumbledore."

The tapping pen stilled on the parchment. "A strange allegation," Lucius drawled. "Dumbledore lost much face when a Hogwarts student died within his tenure. Do you suppose that I will believe anything of him, only because he is my enemy?"

"He is one suspect among several, Lord Malfoy, and not necessarily the most plausible. But the reason I was able to kill a full-grown mountain troll was that I had a weapon which Dumbledore gave to me, at the start of the school year. It's not strong evidence, but it's suspicious. And if you're thinking that murdering one of his students is not Dumbledore's style, well, the same thought had occurred to me."

"It's not his style?" Draco Malfoy said.

Lucius Malfoy shook his head in a measured, careful movement. "Not quite, my son. Dumbledore is particular in his evils." Lord Malfoy leaned back into his chair, and then sat quite still. "Tell me of this weapon."

"I am not yet certain I should go into details about that in your presence, Lord Malfoy." Harry took a breath. "Let *me* be clear on this. I am not trying to sell you on the idea that Dumbledore is behind this, just raising the possibility —"

Then Draco Malfoy spoke. "The device Dumbledore gave you — was it something to kill trolls? I mean, *just* trolls? Can you tell us that?"

Lucius turned his head to look at his son with some surprise.

"No..." Harry said slowly. "It wasn't specifically a sword of anti-troll slaying, or anything like that."

Draco's eyes were intent. "Would the device have worked against an assassin?"

Not if they had shields raised. "No."

"A fight in school?"

An expanding rock in the throat is inherently lethal. "No. I don't think it was meant for use against humans."

Draco nodded. "So just magical creatures. Would it have been a good weapon against an angry Hippogriff, or something like that?"

"Does the Stunning Hex work on Hippogriffs?" Harry said slowly.

"I don't know," said Draco.

"Yes," said Lucius Malfoy.

Compared to trying to target a Wingardium Leviosa and Finite Incantatem — "Then a Stunning Hex would be a better way of dealing with a Hippogriff." Put that way, it did seem increasingly like a Transfigured rock was an optimal weapon *only* against a flesh-and-blood magical creature with spell-resistant skin. "But... I mean, it might not have *been* intended as a weapon at all, I used it in a strange way, it could have just been a crazy whim —"

"No," Lucius Malfoy said lowly. "Not a whim. Not coincidence. Not Dumbledore."

"Then it's him," Draco said. Slowly Draco's eyes narrowed, and he gave a vicious nod. "It's been him *since the beginning*. The court Legilimens *said* that someone had used Legilimency on Granger. Dumbledore *admitted* that it was him. And I bet the wards *did* go off when Granger cursed me and Dumbledore just *ignored* them."

"But —" Harry said. He looked at Lucius, wondering if it was really to his advantage to question this idea. "What would be his *motive?* Are we going to say he's evil and leave it at that?"

Draco Malfoy jumped out of his chair and began pacing around the room, black robes swishing behind the young boy, the goblin guards staring at him in some surprise through their enchanted goggles. "To figure out a strange plot, look at what happens, then ask who benefits. Except that Dumbledore didn't plan on you trying to save Granger at her trial, he tried to stop you from doing that. What would've happened if Granger *had* gone to Azkaban? House Malfoy and House Potter would've hated each other forever. Of all the suspects, the only one who wants *that* is Dumbledore. So it fits. It *all* fits. The one who really committed the murder is — Albus Dumbledore!"

"Um," Harry said. "But why give *me* an anti-troll weapon? I said it was suspicious, I didn't say that it made any sense."

Draco nodded thoughtfully. "Maybe Dumbledore thought you'd stop the troll before it got Granger and then he could blame Father for sending it. A lot of people would be very angry if they thought Father had even *tried* to do something like that, in Hogwarts. Like Father said, Dumbledore must've lost face when people found out that a student had actually died in Hogwarts, being safe is what Hogwarts is famous for. So that part probably wasn't supposed to happen."

Harry's mind involuntarily flashed back to the horror in Dumbledore's eyes when he'd seen Hermione Granger's body.

Would I have gotten there in time, if the Weasley twins hadn't had their magic map stolen? Could that have been the plan? And then, though Dumbledore didn't know it, somebody stole their map, and I was too late... but no, that doesn't make much sense, I found out too late, how could Dumbledore have guessed that I'd use a broomstick... well, he did know I had one...

There was no way a plan like that could work.

And it hadn't.

But someone going a little bit senile might *expect* it to work, and a phoenix might not know the difference.

"Or," Draco Malfoy continued, still pacing energetically, "maybe Dumbledore had an enchanted troll around, and he expected you to defeat it some other time, for some other plot, and then he used the troll on Granger instead. I can't imagine Dumbledore had this *all* planned since the first week of lessons —"

"I can imagine," Lucius Malfoy said in low tones. "I have seen such, from Dumbledore."

Draco nodded decisively. "Then I was never *supposed* to die in the first plot. Dumbledore knew Professor Quirrell was checking on me, or Dumbledore planned to have someone else find me in time — I couldn't have testified against Granger if I was dead, and he'd have lost face if I'd died. But my leaving Hogwarts and not being around to lead Slytherin would be just right for him. And then the next time Harry was supposed to stop the troll before it got Granger and everyone was supposed to blame you, Father, only that time it didn't go the way Dumbledore planned."

Lucius Malfoy lifted his grey eyes, from where he'd been gazing with open surprise at his son. "If this is true — but I wonder if Harry Potter is only

playing at being reluctant to believe it."

"Maybe," Draco said. "But I'm pretty sure he isn't."

"Then, if it is true..." Lucius Malfoy's voice trailed off. A slow fury was lighting in his eyes.

"What would we do, exactly?" Harry said.

"That, too, is clear to me," Draco said. He whirled on them and raised a finger high in the air. "We shall find the proof to convict Dumbledore of this crime, and bring him to justice!"

Harry Potter and Lucius Malfoy looked at each other.

Neither of them quite knew what to say.

"My son," Lucius Malfoy said after a time, "truly, you have done very well this day."

"Thank you, Father!"

"However, this is not a play, we are not Aurors, and we do not put our trust in trials."

Some of the light went out of Draco's eyes. "Oh."

"I, ah, do have a sentimental fondness for trials," Harry interjected. *I cannot believe I am having this conversation*. He needed to go home and take a sheet of paper and a pencil and try to figure out whether Draco's reasoning *actually* made sense. "And evidence."

Lucius Malfoy turned his gaze to Harry Potter then, and his eyes simmered in pure grey fury.

"If you have deceived me," Lucius Malfoy said in tones of low anger, "if all this is a lie, then I will not forgive. But if this is not deception... Bring me the proof to convict Dumbledore of this murder before the Wizengamot, or evidence enough to have him cast down, and there is nothing that House Malfoy will not do for you, Harry Potter. Nothing."

Harry took a deep breath. He needed to sort all this out and figure out the actual probabilities, but he didn't have *time*. "If it *is* Dumbledore, then removing him from the gameboard leaves a huge hole in Britain's power structure."

"So it does," Lucius Malfoy said with a grim smile. "Did you have ambitions of filling it yourself, Harry Potter?"

"Some of your opposition might not like that. They could fight."

"They will lose," Lucius Malfoy said, now with a face hard like iron.

"So this is what I'd want House Malfoy to do for me, Lord Malfoy, if Dum-

bledore gets removed because of me. When the opposition is most frightened — that's when they'll be offered a last-minute arrangement to avoid a civil war. Some of your allies might not prefer it, but there'll be a lot of neutrals who'll be glad to see stability. The bargain will be that instead of you taking over right away, Draco Malfoy will take power when he comes of age."

"What?" Draco said.

"Draco has testified under Veritaserum that he tried to help Hermione Granger. I bet there'd be a lot of people in the opposition who'd take a chance on him rather than fight. I'm not sure how exactly you'd enforce it — Unbreakable Vows or Gringotts contracts or what — but there'll be some sort of enforceable compact about power going to Draco after he graduates Hogwarts. I'll throw any support the Boy-Who-Lived has behind that bargain. Try to persuade Longbottom and Bones and so on. Our first plan paves the way for that later, if you're careful to act honorable when you deal with Longbottom and Bones this time around."

"Father, I swear I didn't —"

Lucius's face twisted into a grim smile. "I know you didn't, son. Well." The white-haired man stared across the mighty golden table at Harry Potter. "Those terms are acceptable to me. But fail in any part of our agreement, whether our first bargain, or the second, and there shall be consequences for you, Harry Potter. Clever words will not halt that."

And Lucius Malfoy signed the parchment.

Mad-Eye Moody had been staring at the bronze door of the Gringotts meeting room for what seemed like hours, insofar as a man could stare at any one thing when his gaze always saw in all directions.

The trouble with trying to be suspicious of a man like Lucius Malfoy, Moody thought, was that you could spend an entire day thinking of everything he might be up to, and still not have finished.

The door cracked open and Harry Potter trudged out, small beads of sweat still on his forehead.

"Did you sign anything?" Mad-Eye demanded upon the instant.

Harry Potter looked at him silently, then reached into his robes and drew out a folded parchment. "The goblins are already executing this," said Harry Potter. "They made three copies before I left."

"MERLIN DAMN IT SON —" Moody paused as his Eye caught sight of the second half of the document as Harry Potter slowly, as though reluctantly, began to unfold the top upward. A glance sufficed to take in the paragraphs drawn in careful handwriting, Lucius Malfoy's elegant signature below Harry Potter's. And then Moody exploded, even as the top half of the document also began to enter his Sight. "You exonerate House Malfoy of any involvement in Hermione Granger's death? Do you have any idea what you've done, you little fool? Why in Merlin's name would you do something like WHAT —"

#### CHAPTER NINETY-EIGHT



SUNDAY, APRIL 19TH, 6:34 PM.

aphne Greengrass walked quietly toward the Greengrass room below the Slytherin dungeons, the privilege of an Ancient House; on her way to drop off her trunk from the Hogwarts Express, before she joined the other students for dinner. The whole private area had been hers alone ever since Malfoy had gone. Her hand, held behind her, made repeated come-along gestures at her huge emerald-studded trunk, which seemed hesitant to follow. Maybe the enchantments on the sturdy old family device needed to be reapplied; or maybe her trunk was reluctant to follow her into Hogwarts, which was no longer safe.

There'd been a long talk between Mother and Father, after they'd been told about Hermione; with Daphne hiding around a doorway to listen, choking back her tears and trying not to make sounds.

Mother had said that the sad fact was that if only one student died every year, well, that still made Hogwarts safer than Beauxbatons, let alone Durmstrang. There were more ways for a young witch to die than being murdered. Beauxbatons's Transfiguration Master just wasn't on the same level as McGonagall, Mother had said.

Father had soberly remarked how important it was for the Greengrass heir to stay at Hogwarts where all the other Noble families sent their children to school (it was the reason for the old tradition of the Noble families synchronizing the birth of their heirs, to put them in the same year of Hogwarts, if they could). And Father had said that being heiress to a Most Ancient House meant you couldn't always stay away from trouble.

She could have done without hearing that last part.

Daphne gulped hard, as she turned the doorknob, and opened the door.

"Miss Greengrass —" whispered a shadowy, silvery-robed figure.

Daphne screamed and slammed the door and drew her wand and turned to run.

"Wait!" cried the voice, now higher and louder.

Daphne paused. That couldn't *possibly* be who it had sounded like.

Slowly, Daphne turned, and opened the door again.

"You!" Daphne said in astonishment, as she saw the face beneath the hood. "I thought you were —"

"I come back to you now," the silvery-robed figure said in a strong voice, "at the turn of the —"

"What are you doing in my bedroom?" shrieked Daphne.

"I heard you can cast the mist form of the Patronus Charm. Can I see?"

Daphne stared, and then her blood began to burn. "Why?" she said, keeping her wand level. "So you can *kill* everyone in Slytherin who casts un-Slytherin spells? We all *know* who it was had Hermione killed!"

The figure's voice rose. "I testified under Veritaserum that I tried to help Miss Granger! I really was trying to help her, when I grabbed her hand on the roof, when I helped her off the floor —"

Daphne kept her wand level. "Like your father couldn't tamper with the Aurors' record, if he wanted to! I wasn't born yesterday, Mister *Malfoy!*"

Slowly, as if not to cause alarm, the silver-robed figure drew a wand from his robes. Daphne's hand tightened on her own wand, but then she recognized the position of the fingers on the wand, the stance the figure was assuming, and she drew a shocked breath —

"Expecto Patronum!"

Silver light leapt from the end of the other's wand — and condensed, forming a shining serpent that seemed to coil in the air as though nesting there. She just gaped.

"I did try to help Hermione Granger," Draco Malfoy said with a level voice. "Because I know the sickness at the heart of Slytherin's House, the

reason why so many of us can't cast the Patronus Charm any more, is hate. Hate of Muggleborns, or just anyone really. People think that's all Slytherin is about now, not cunning or ambition or honorable nobility. And I even know, because it's obvious if you just look, that Hermione Granger wasn't weak at magic."

Daphne's mind had gone completely blank. Her eyes darted around nervously, just to check that there wasn't blood coming from under the doors, like the last time Something had Broken.

"And I've also figured out," Draco Malfoy said quietly, as the silver snake went on shining with unmistakable light and warmth, "that Hermione Granger never really tried to kill me. Maybe she was False-Memory-Charmed, maybe she was Legilimized, but now that she's been murdered, it's obvious that Miss Granger was the target in the first place, when somebody tried to set her up for murdering me —"

"D-do-do you know what you're *saying?*" Daphne's voice broke. If Lucius Malfoy heard his heir saying that — he'd *skin* Draco and turn him into *trousers!* 

Draco Malfoy smiled, metallic robes gleaming in the light of his full corporeal Patronus; it was a smile both arrogant and dangerous, like being turned into a pair of leather pants was beneath his concerns. "Yes," said Draco, "but it doesn't matter now. House Malfoy is returning House Potter's money and canceling the debt."

Daphne walked over to her bed and then fell on it, hoping she could wake up from the dream once she was in bed.

"I'd like you to join a conspiracy," said the figure in the shining robes. "Everyone in Slytherin who can cast the Patronus Charm, and everyone who can learn. That's how we'll know to trust each other, when the Silvery Slytherins meet." With a dramatic gesture, Draco Malfoy cast back his hood. "But it won't work without *you*, Daphne Greengrass. You and your family. Your mother will negotiate it with Father, but I'd like the Greengrasses to hear the proposal from you, first." Draco Malfoy's voice lowered grimly. "There is much we must speak of, before we eat dinner."

Harry Potter had, apparently, taken to being invisible; they'd glimpsed his hand only briefly, when he was handing them the list, written on strange not-parchment. Harry had explained that, all things considered, he didn't really think it was smart for him to be *findable* except on special occasions, so he was just going to deal with people as a disembodied floating voice from now on, or as a brilliant silver light that hid behind corners where nobody could see it, and which could always find his friends no matter where they tried to hide. It was, in all honesty, one of the creepiest things which Fred and George had ever heard, over a lifetime which had included filling the shoes of every student in second-year Slytherin with Transfigured live millipedes. Fred and George didn't think this could possibly be good for anyone's sanity, but they didn't know what to say. It couldn't be denied, they'd seen with their own four eyes, that Hogwarts...

... wasn't safe ...

"I don't know who you went to for the False Memory Charm on Rita Skeeter," said the sourceless voice of Harry Potter. "Whoever it is... probably won't be able to fill this order directly, but they may know someone who can get things from the Muggle world. And — I know it may cost extra, but as few people as possible should know that Harry Potter is related to this." Another flash of a small boy's hand, and a bag hit the ground with the clinking noise. "Some of these items are expensive even in the Muggle world, and your contact may have to go outside Britain; but one hundred Galleons will be enough to pay for it all, I hope. I'd tell you where the Galleons came from, but I don't want to spoil tomorrow's surprise."

"What *is* this stuff?" said Fred or George, as they looked over the list. "Our father is a Muggle expert —"

- " and we don't recognize half this stuff -"
- " why, we don't recognize any of it -"
- " just what are you planning to do?"

"Things have become serious," Harry's voice said softly. "I don't know what I'll have to do. I may need the power of the Muggles, not just the wizards, before this is done — and I might need it right away, with no time to prepare. I'm not planning to use any of this. I just want it around in case of . . . contingencies." Harry's voice paused. "Obviously I owe you more than I can ever repay and you won't let me give you any of what you deserve, I don't even know how to say thank you properly, and all I can do is hope that someday when you grow up you'll be more sensible about this whole thing and would you please take a ten percent commission —"

"Shut up, you," said George or Fred.

"For God's sake, you went after a troll for me and Fred had his ribs broken!" They both just shook their heads. Harry had stayed behind when they'd told him to run, and stepped forward to distract the troll from eating George. Harry was the kind of person, they knew, who'd think that something like that didn't cancel out what he owed the Weasley twins, that his own deed wasn't properly commensurate. But what the Weasleys knew, and Harry wouldn't understand until he was older, was that it meant that nothing was owed, or ever could be owed between them. It was a strange kind of selfishness, they thought, that Harry could understand kindness within himself — never dreaming of asking of money from anyone he'd helped more than they'd helped him, or calling that a debt — while being apparently unable to conceive that others might want to act the same way toward him.

"Remind me to buy you a copy of the Muggle novel *Atlas Shrugged*," the sourceless voice said. "I'm starting to understand what sort of person can benefit from reading it."

Monday, April 20th, 7:00 pm.

It happened without any intervention or sign from the Head Table, as the students had finished their subdued dinner; it happened with no permission or forgiveness asked from the Professors or the Headmaster.

Shortly after the dessert dishes had appeared, a student stood up from the Slytherin Table and calmly made his way, not to the front of the Head Table, but toward the opposite side of the Four Tables of Hogwarts. A few whispers broke out at the sight of the white-blonde short-cropped hair, as Draco Malfoy stood there, silently regarding all of Hogwarts. Draco Malfoy had said almost nothing since his surprise return. The Slytherin had condescended neither to confirm nor deny that he had returned because, with Hermione Granger dead at his family's hand, he no longer had anything to fear.

Then Draco Malfoy took up a spoon in one hand, and a glass of water in the other, and began tapping, producing a clear ringing sound.

Ting.

Ting.

Ting.

It produced more excited babble at first. At the Head Table, the various Professors looked in puzzlement toward the Headmaster in his great chair, but the Headmaster gave no sign, and so the faculty did nothing.

Draco Malfoy continued tapping the spoon upon his glass, until the room fell silent, waiting.

Then another student arose from the Ravenclaw table, and made his way to where Draco Malfoy was standing, turning to face Hogwarts at his side. Breaths were drawn in surprise; those two should have been the bitterest of enemies —

"I, and my Father, the Lord of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy," Draco Malfoy said in a clear voice, "have come to realize that there are ill forces at work in Hogwarts. That these ill forces, did wish Hermione Granger harm. That Hermione Granger was perhaps compelled, against her will, to raise her hand against our House; or perhaps she and I were both Memory-Charmed. We now say that whoever dared use the heir of Malfoy so, is the enemy of House Malfoy, upon whom we shall have our vengeance. And that honor be served, we have returned all moneys taken from House Potter, and canceled all debt."

Then Harry Potter spoke. "House Potter acknowledges that it was an honest mistake, and holds House Malfoy no ill will. We believe and publicly say that House Malfoy was not at fault in Hermione Granger's death. Whoever harmed Hermione Granger is the enemy of House Potter, upon whom we shall have our vengeance. Both of us."

Then Harry Potter began to walk back to the Ravenclaw table, and the babble of sheer, utter, reality-crashing bewilderment began to explode —

Draco Malfoy resumed tapping his spoon against his glass of water, creating a clear ringing chime.

Ting.

Ting.

Ting.

And other students arose, from other tables, making their way to where Draco Malfoy stood, arranging themselves at his side, or behind him, or before him.

There was a dread silence in the Great Hall, a sense of the world shifting, of realigning Powers, almost tangible in the air.

"My father, Owen Greengrass, with the consent and full backing of my mother, the Lady of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Greengrass," Daphne Greengrass spoke.

"And my forefather, Charles, of the House of Nott," said the former Lieutenant Nott, once Theodore of Chaos, now standing behind Draco Malfoy.

"And my grand-aunt, Amelia, of the House of Bones, also Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement," said Susan Bones, who stood next to Daphne Greengrass, beside whom she had fought.

"And my grandmother, Augusta, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Longbottom," said Neville Longbottom, who had returned for this one night.

"And my father, Lucius, the Lord Malfoy, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy!"

"Together with Alanna Howe constituting a majority of the Hogwarts Board of Governors!" Daphne Greengrass said clearly. "Have, to ensure the safety of all students, including their own children, passed the following Educational Decrees upon the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!"

"First!" Daphne said. Daphne was trying to keep her trembling under control, as she faced the Four Houses at the forefront of the five. There was only so far her parents' lessons in speech-making could take her. Daphne's eyes darted down quickly to her hand, upon which, written with a quill in faint red ink, cues to her lines had been written. "Students are not to go anywhere alone, not even to the toilets! You will travel in groups of at least three, and every group must have a sixth-year or seventh-year student!"

"Second!" Susan Bones said from behind her, voice almost firm. "To further ensure the students' safety, nine Aurors have been dispatched to Hogwarts to form an Auxiliary Protective Force!" Susan took a small, round glass object from within her robes, one of the communicators that the DMLE used, which they'd all been given. Susan raised it to her mouth and said, her voice now higher, "Auror Brodski, this is Susan Bones. *Enter!*"

The doors to the Hall slammed open, and in marched nine Aurors in the reinforced leather gear they used when on duty. At once they spread out, two Aurors taking up station by each of the four tables, and the last took up watch at the Head Table. There were more gasps.

"Third!" said Draco Malfoy, his voice commanding. Malfoy had apparently memorized his own lines, since there was nothing written on his hand that Daphne could see. "In the face of a common enemy who does not balk at killing students from any House, the four Houses of Hogwarts must come together and act as one! To emphasize this, the House Points system is temporarily suspended! *All* Professors will encourage solidarity between Houses, by decree of the Hogwarts Board of Governors!"

"Fourth!" recited Neville Longbottom. "All students not already in the Defense Professor's after-school classes, will receive special training in self-defense by Auror instructors!"

"Fifth!" Theodore Nott yelled in a menacing tone. "All fighting in the corridors or anywhere outside of Defense lessons will be dealt with severely! Fight together or don't fight at all!"

"Sixth!" said Daphne Greengrass, and took a deep breath. When she'd found out what was planned, she'd made her own little extra request to Mother through the Floo. Even with Lucius Malfoy going along with Amelia Bones — a thought her mind was still having trouble grasping — the Greengrass swing vote had still been vital, since Jugson and his own faction had refused to back Malfoy. Not to mention that Bones didn't trust Malfoy, and Malfoy didn't trust Bones. So Mother had demanded, and the Greengrasses had received —"Since Memory Charms have been used on students without setting off wards, it is possible that someone on the Hogwarts faculty may be implicated. Therefore! The Auxiliary Protective force reports directly to my father, Lord Greengrass!" And this part was only symbolic, she knew, there'd be no reason anyone wouldn't just contact the Aurors directly; but it might turn into more, someday, which was why she'd asked Mother to demand it —"And if anyone wants to report something to the Auxiliary Protectors, they can talk to the Aurors, or go through me —" Daphne's arm swept behind her to indicate the gathered students. "The duly appointed President of the Auxiliary Protective Special Committee!"

And Daphne paused dramatically. They'd all rehearsed this part.

"We don't know who the enemy is," said Neville, whose voice did not squeak.

"We don't know what the enemy wants," said Theodore, still looking menacing.

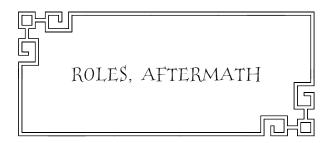
"But we know who the enemy is attacking," said Susan, as fierce as when she'd taken on three seventh-year students.

## ROLES, FINAL

"The enemy is attacking Hogwarts students," said Draco Malfoy, clear and commanding, like all this was his natural element.

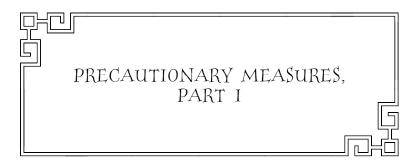
"And Hogwarts," spoke Daphne of Greengrass, feeling her blood burn like it never had before in her life, "is going to *fight back*."

## CHAPTER NINETY-NINE



T en days later, the first dead unicorn was found in the Forbidden Forest.

## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED



Мау 13тн, 1992.

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

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

Draco kept a firm grip on his wand.

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

"You just follow me," said Argus Filch.

Draco was feeling rather annoyed with the whole affair. The Silvery Slytherins ought to be recognized school business. There was no reason why a secret conspiracy shouldn't have permission to meet after curfew, if it was for the greater good of Hogwarts. If this happened one more time he'd talk to Daphne

Greengrass and Daphne would talk to her father and then Filch would learn the wisdom of looking the other way where Malfoys were concerned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Draco's eyes narrowed, before he caught himself. As a Silvery Slytherin he wasn't supposed to be Prejudiced against any sentient being, especially not where other people might see him. "What's this?" said the figure, in the loud gruff voice of the half-giant. His umbrella lit up with a white glow, brighter than Filch's dim lamp. In his other hand he held a crossbow; a quiver of short bolts was strapped to his upper arm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The five of them set off into the woods.

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

"Werewolves!" said Tracey.

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

"Oh, right," said Tracey.

"No weres in the Forest," said Hagrid. "They're plain wizards most o' the time, 'member. Couldn't be wolves either, they're not near fast enough ter catch a unicorn. Powerful magical creatures, unicorns are, I never knew one ter be hurt before."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Unicorn's blood," Hagrid said. The huge man's voice was sad.

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

A strange choking sensation rose in Draco's throat.

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

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

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

"An alicorn's a unicorn's horn," Hagrid said, now louder. "Don't know where yeh all started thinking it meant a unicorn with wings, 'ere's no such

thing I ever heard. It's just like naming a dog Fang," indicating the huge wolf-like dog that barely came to his knees. "What'd you have called 'er? Hannah, or some such? I gave 'er a name as would've meant summat ter 'er. Common courtesy, I call it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who?" said Hagrid.

"Just some of the best Dark Wizards from the last two centuries," Tracey said. "They're probably *the* best from Hogwarts who weren't from Slytherin."

Her voice fell, lost its enthusiasm. "Miss Granger always told me I should read up on anything I —"

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

"So yeh're saying," Hagrid said, "that most Dark Wizards are Slytherins... but..."

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

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

Hagrid seized Draco and Tracey and hoisted them off the path behind a towering oak. He pulled out a bolt and fitted it into his crossbow, raising it, ready to fire. The three of them listened. Something was slithering over dead leaves nearby: it sounded like a cloak trailing along the ground. Hagrid was squinting up the dark path, but after a few seconds, the sound faded away.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Draco and Tracey stood looking at each other, until they heard nothing but

the rustling of leaves around them. Tracey looked scared, but trying to hide it. Draco was feeling more annoyed than anything else. Apparently Rubeus Hagrid, when he had formed his plans for tonight, had not spent even five seconds visualizing the consequences if something actually went wrong.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't mention it, Miss Davis."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- blurring, twisting form —
- feeding on an open wound on the unicorn's side, like it was drinking from it —
- Draco couldn't understand, somehow couldn't recognize what he was seeing
  - it was looking at them.

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

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

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

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

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

Tracey tugged at his sleeve and then turned to run, run from something that could hunt down unicorns. Before she could take three steps there came another terrible hiss, burning his ears, and Tracey fell to the ground and did not move.

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

Running hadn't worked.

Magic hadn't worked.

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

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

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

"Get out of here!" roared Professor McGonagall —

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"GO!" shouted Harry.

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

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

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

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

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

Just how high did the power ladder go?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry had been studying Obliviations, these last couple of weeks — though he couldn't have helped cast the spells, unless he was willing to exhaust himself almost completely, and for some reason they wanted an Auror to lose every single life memory involving the color blue. But Harry had some idea, now, of the concentration which the far more difficult False Memory Charm entailed. You had to try to live the other person's entire life inside your own head, at least if you wanted to create the False Memories with less than a sixteen-to-one slowdown as you separately crafted sixteen major tracks of memory. It might have been quiet, there might have been no outward sign; but Harry knew

something of the difficulties now, and he knew to be impressed.

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

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

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

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

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

After Captain Brodski had learned that Draco Malfoy was in the Forbidden Forest, seemingly in the company of Rubeus Hagrid, Brodski had begun inquiring to find out who had authorized this, and had still been unable to find out when Draco Malfoy had missed check-in. Despite Harry's protests, the Auror Captain, who was authorized to know about Time-Turners, had refused to allow deployment to before the time of the missed check-in; there were

standard procedures involving Time. But Brodski had given Harry written orders allowing him to go back and deploy an Auror trio to arrive one second after the missed check-in time. There had been a Patronus Charm to locate Draco, which Harry had successfully willed to take the form of a ball of pure silver light, and the flight of Aurors had arrived on time to the second.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- dead.

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

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

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

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

"Because there are permanent side effects," Professor Quirrell said quietly. "Side effects? Side effects? What kind of side effect is medically worse than DEATH?" Harry's voice rose on the last word until he was shouting.

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

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

"Yes, that would work."

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The wisdom of wizards," the centaur said.

"Muggle wisdom, actually."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry allowed himself to relax a little; being addressed as 'son of Lily' implied that the centaur thought of him as more than a random intruder in the forest. Besides, attacking a Hogwarts student would probably bring some kind of huge reprisal upon the non-wizard centaur tribe in the forests, and the centaur probably knew that... "What Muggles have learned is that there is a power in the truth, in all the pieces of the truth which interact with each other, which you can only find by discovering as many truths as possible. To do that you can't defend false beliefs in any way, not even by saying the false belief is useful. It might not seem to matter whether your predictions are really based on the stars or if it's an innate talent being projected. But if you wanted to

really understand Divination, or for that matter the stars, the real truth about centaur predictions would be a fact that matters to other truths."

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

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

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

"I... don't understand."

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

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

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

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

"I am sorry, Harry Potter," the centaur said, and then looked up with widened eyes. The spear spun about and came up, intercepting a red spellbolt. Then the centaur dropped the spear and leapt away desperately, a green flash of light went past him and another green flash of light followed in its wake, then a third green flash hit the centaur straight-on.

The centaur fell and did not move again.

It took a long time for Harry to catch his breath, to stagger to his feet, to pick up his wand, to croak, "What?"

By that time the sense of doom, of power almost tangible in the air, had approached once more.

"P-Professor Quirrell? What are you doing here?"

"Well," the man in the black cloak said thoughtfully, "you needed to fly into a rage and have a loud tantrum in the Forbidden Forest in the middle of the night, and I needed to go just outside your ability to detect me and keep watch. One does not leave a student alone in the Forbidden Forest. That

should be obvious in retrospect."

Harry stared at the fallen centaur.

The horse-form wasn't breathing.

"You — you killed him, that was Avada Kedavra —"

"I do not always understand how other people imagine morality to work, Mr. Potter. But even I know that on conventional morality, it is acceptable to kill nonhuman creatures which are about to slay a wizard child. Perhaps you do not care about the nonhuman part, but he was about to *kill* you. He was hardly innocent —"

The Defense Professor stopped, looking at Harry, who had raised one trembling hand to his mouth.

"Well," the Defense Professor said then, "I have made my point, and you may think on it. Centaur spears can block many spells, but no one tries to block if they see that the spell is a certain shade of green. For this purpose it is useful to know some green stunning hexes. Really, Mr. Potter, you should understand by now how I operate."

The Defense Professor came nearer the centaur's body, and Harry took an involuntary step back, then another, at the terrible rising sense of *STOP*, *DON'T*—

The Defense Professor knelt and pressed his wand to the centaur's head.

The wand stayed there for a time.

And the centaur rose, eyes blank, breathing once more.

"Remember nothing of this time," the Defense Professor commanded. "Wander away and forget everything about this night."

The centaur walked away, the four horse-legs moving in strange synchrony.

"Happy now?" the Defense Professor said, sounding rather sardonic about it.

Harry's brain still felt broken. "He was trying to kill me."

"Oh, for Merlin's sake — yes, he was trying to kill you. Get used to it. Only boring people never have that experience."

Harry's voice emerged, hoarse. "Why — why did he want to —"

"Any number of reasons. I would be lying if I said I'd never considered killing you myself."

Harry stared at where the centaur had wandered into the trees.

His brain still felt half-broken, like an engine misfiring, but Harry did not see how this could possibly be a good sign.

The news of Draco Malfoy nearly being eaten by a horror had been sufficient to summon back Dumbledore from wherever he'd gone, to wake Lord Malfoy and the Lady Greengrass's handsome husband, to bring forth Amelia Bones. The supposed presence of the horror had provoked skepticism even from Dumbledore, and the possibility of False Memory Charms had been raised. Harry had said (after some internal debate about the consequences of people believing a demon was on the loose) that he didn't actually remember making the same effort he'd put forth to frighten the Dementor, the dark thing had just left; which was what you would expect someone to create as a False Memory, if they hadn't actually known how Harry had done it. The names of Bellatrix Black, Severus Snape, and Quirinus Quirrell had been mentioned in connection with wizards strong enough to subdue everyone present and cast False Memory Charms, and Harry had known that Lucius was thinking of Dumbledore. There had been Aurors testifying, and discussions going in circles, and glares of accusation, and cutting remarks at 2 AM in the morning. There had been motions, and votes, and consequences.

"Do you believe," Headmaster Dumbledore said quietly to Harry, when all of it was done, and the two of them alone, "that the Hogwarts you have wrought is an improvement?"

Harry sat with his elbows on his knees, his face resting on his palms, in the conference room from which all the others had now departed. Professor McGonagall, who did not use a Time-Turner as routinely as the two of them, had departed swiftly for her bed.

"Yes," Harry answered after too long a hesitation. "From my perspective, Headmaster, things in Hogwarts are finally, finally normal. This is how things should be, when four children get sent into the Forbidden Forest at night. There should be a huge fuss, constables showing up, and the responsible party getting sacked."

"You believe it is good," Dumbledore said quietly, "that the man who you call responsible was, as you put it, sacked."

"Yes, in fact, I do."

"Argus Filch has served this institution for decades."

"And when given Veritaserum," Harry said tiredly, "Argus Filch revealed that he had sent an eleven-year-old boy into the Forbidden Forest, hoping

something awful would happen to him, because he thought the boy's father had been responsible for the death of his cat. The three other students in Draco's company don't seem to have fazed him. I would have argued for jail time, but your concept of jail in this country is Azkaban. I'll also note that Filch was remarkably unpleasant to the children in Hogwarts and I expect the school's hedonic index to be improved by his departure, not that it matters to you, I suppose."

The Headmaster's eyes were impenetrable behind the half-moon glasses. "Argus Filch is a Squib. His work at Hogwarts is all he has. Had, rather."

"The purpose of a school is not to provide work for its employees. I know you probably spent more time around Filch than around any individual student, but that shouldn't make Filch's inner experiences loom larger in your thoughts. Students have inner lives too."

"You don't care at all, do you Harry?" Dumbledore's voice was quiet. "About those you hurt."

"I care about the innocent," Harry said. "Like Mr. Hagrid, who you'll note I argued should not be considered malicious, just oblivious. I was fine with Mr. Hagrid working here so long as he didn't take anyone into the Forbidden Forest again."

"I had thought that with Rubeus vindicated, he might teach Care of Magical Creatures after Silvanus departs the position. But much of that teaching is done in the Forbidden Forest. So that too shall not be, in the wake of your passage."

Harry said slowly, "But — you told us that Mr. Hagrid has a blind spot when it comes to magical creatures threatening wizards. That Mr. Hagrid had a cognitive deficit and couldn't really imagine Draco and Tracey getting hurt, which was why Mr. Hagrid didn't see anything wrong with leaving them alone in the Forbidden Forest at night. Was that not true?"

"It is true."

"Then wouldn't Mr. Hagrid be the worst possible teacher for Magical Creatures?"

The old wizard gazed down at Harry through the half-moon glasses. His voice was thick when he spoke. "Mr. Malfoy himself saw nothing awry. It was not so implausible a trick which Argus played, Harry Potter. And Rubeus might have grown into his position. It would have been — all Rubeus wished, his one greatest desire —"

"Your mistake," Harry said, looking down at his knees, feeling at least ten

percent as exhausted as he'd ever been, "is a cognitive bias we would call, in the trade, scope insensitivity. Failure to multiply. You're thinking about how happy Mr. Hagrid would be when he heard the news. Consider the next ten years and a thousand students taking Magical Creatures and ten percent of them being scalded by Ashwinders. No one student would be hurt as much as Mr. Hagrid would be happy, but there'd be a hundred students being hurt and only one happy teacher."

"Perhaps," the old wizard said. "And your own error, Harry, is that you do not feel the pain of those you hurt, once you have done your multiplication."

"Maybe." Harry went on staring at his knees. "Or maybe it's worse than that. Headmaster, what does it mean if a centaur doesn't like me?" What does it mean when a member of a race of magical creatures known for Divination gives you a lecture on people who are ignorant of consequences, apologizes, and then tries to stab you with a spear?

"A centaur?" the Headmaster said. "When did you — ah, the Time-Turner. You are the reason why I could not travel back to before the event, on pain of paradox."

"Am I? I guess I am." Harry shook his head distantly. "Sorry."

"With very few exceptions," Dumbledore said, "centaurs do not like wizards, at all."

"This was a bit more specific than that."

"What did the centaur say to you?"

Harry didn't reply.

"Ah." The Headmaster hesitated. "Centaurs have been wrong many times, and if there is anyone in the world who could confuse the stars themselves, it is you."

Harry looked up, and saw the blue eyes once more gentle behind the half-circle glasses.

"Do not fret too much about it," said Albus Dumbledore.

## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED AND TWO



June 3rd, 1992.

nofessor Quirrell was very sick.

He'd seemed better for a while, after drinking his unicorn's blood in May, but the air of intense power which had surrounded him afterward hadn't lasted even a day. By the Ides of May, Professor Quirrell's hands had been trembling again, though subtly. The Defense Professor's medical regimen had been interrupted too early, it seemed.

Six days ago Professor Quirrell had collapsed at dinnertime.

Madam Pomfrey had tried to forbid Professor Quirrell from teaching classes, and Professor Quirrell had shouted at her in front of everyone. The Defense Professor had shouted that he was dying regardless, and would use his remaining time as he chose.

So Madam Pomfrey, blinking hard, had forbidden the Defense Professor from doing anything *except* teaching his classes. She'd asked for a volunteer to help her take Professor Quirrell to a room in the Hogwarts infirmary. More than a hundred students had risen to their feet, only half wearing green.

The Defense Professor no longer sat at the Head Table during mealtimes. He didn't cast spells during lessons. The oldest students who had the most Quirrell points helped him to teach, the seventh-years who had already sat their Defense N.E.W.T.s in May. They took turns floating him from his room

in the infirmary to his classes, and brought him food at mealtimes. Professor Quirrell proctored his Battle Magic classes from a chair, sitting.

Watching Hermione die had hurt more than this, but that had ended much more quickly.

This is the true Enemy.

Harry had already thought that, after Hermione had died. Being forced to watch Professor Quirrell die, day by day, week by week, had not done much to change his mind.

This is the true Enemy I have to face, Harry thought in Wednesday's Defense class, watching Professor Quirrell leaning far to one side of his chair before that day's seventh-year assistant caught him. Everything else is just shadows and distraction.

Harry had been turning over Trelawney's prophecy in his mind, wondering if maybe the true Dark Lord had nothing to do with Lord Voldemort at all. *Born to those who have thrice defied him* seemed to strongly invoke the Peverell brothers and the three Deathly Hallows — though Harry didn't exactly see how Death could have marked him as an equal, which seemed to imply some sort of deliberate action on Death's part.

This alone is the true Enemy, Harry thought. After this will come Professor McGonagall, Mum and Dad, even Neville in his time, unless the wound in the world can be healed before then.

There was nothing Harry could do. Madam Pomfrey was already doing for Professor Quirrell what magic could do, and magic seemed strictly superior to Muggle techniques when it came to healing.

There was nothing Harry could do.

Nothing he could do.

Nothing.

Nothing at all.

Harry raised his hand, and knocked upon the door, in case the person there could no longer detect him.

"What is it?" came a strained voice from the infirmary room.

"It's me."

There was a long pause. "Come in," said that voice.

Harry slipped inside and closed the door behind him, and cast the Quieting Charm. He stood as far away from Professor Quirrell as he could, just in case his own magic was making the Professor feel uncomfortable.

Though the sense of doom was fading, fading with each passing day.

Professor Quirrell was lying back in his infirmary bed, only his head propped up by a pillow. A coverlet of cottony material, red with black stitching, covered him to his chest. A book hovered before his eyes, outlined in a pale glow which also surrounded a black cube lying by the bed. Not the Defense Professor's own magic, then, but a device of some kind.

The book was *Thinking Physics* by Epstein, the same book Harry had lent to Draco a few months back. Harry had stopped fretting about its possible misuse several weeks earlier.

"This —" Professor Quirrell said, and coughed, it didn't sound quite right. "This is a fascinating book ... if I'd ever realized ... "A laugh, mixed with another cough. "Why did I assume the Muggle arts ... must not be mine? That they would be ... of no use to me? Why did I never bother trying ... to test it experimentally ... as you would say? In case ... my assumption ... was wrong? It seems sheerly foolish of me ... in retrospect ..."

Harry was having more trouble speaking than Professor Quirrell was. Wordlessly, Harry reached into his pocket, and laid a kerchief on the floor; which he unfolded to reveal a small white pebble, smooth and round.

"What's that?" said the Defense Professor.

"It's a, it's a, Transfigured, unicorn."

Harry had checked the books, had learned that since he was too young to have sexual thoughts he would be able to approach a unicorn without fear. The same books had said nothing about unicorns being smart. Harry had already noticed that every intelligent magical species was at least partially humanoid, from merfolk to centaurs to giants, from elves to goblins to veela. All had essentially humanlike emotions, many were known to interbreed with humans. Harry had already reasoned out that magic didn't create new intelligence but just changed the shape of genetically human beings. Unicorns were equinoid, were not even partially humanoid, didn't talk, used no tools, they were almost certainly just magical horses. If it was right to eat a cow to feed yourself for a day, then it *had* to be right to drink a unicorn's blood in order to stave off death for weeks. You couldn't have it both ways.

So Harry had gone into the Forbidden Forest wearing his Cloak. He had

searched the Grove of Unicorns until he saw her, a proud creature with a pure white coat and violet hair, with three blue blotches on her flank. Harry had gone over, and the sapphire eyes had stared at him inquisitively. Harry had tapped out the sequence 1–2–3 on the ground several times with his shoes. The unicorn had shown no sign of responding in kind. Harry had reached over, taken her hoof in his hand, and tapped the same sequence with the unicorn's hoof. The unicorn had only looked at him curiously.

And something about feeding the unicorn the sleeping-potion-laced sugar cubes had still felt like murder.

That magic gives their existence a weight of meaning which no mere animal could possess... to slay something innocent to save oneself, that is a very grave sin. Those two phrases, from Professor McGonagall, from the centaur, had both run through Harry's mind, over and over as the white unicorn had yawned, laid down on the ground, and closed its eyes for what would be the last time. The Transfiguration had lasted an hour, and Harry's eyes had watered repeatedly as he worked. The unicorn's death might not have come then, but it would come soon enough, and it was foreign to Harry's nature to try to refuse responsibility of any kind. Harry would just have to hope that, if you didn't kill the unicorn to save yourself, if you did it to help a friend, it would be acceptable in the end.

Professor Quirrell's eyebrows had climbed toward his hairline. His voice was less soft, had something of his normal sharpness, as he said, "I forbid you from doing that again."

"I wondered if you'd say that," Harry said. He swallowed again. "But this unicorn is already, already doomed, so you might as well take it, Professor..."

"Why have you done this?"

If the Defense Professor really didn't understand that, he was slower on the uptake than anyone Harry had ever met. "I kept thinking there was nothing I could do," Harry said. "I got tired of thinking it."

Professor Quirrell closed his eyes. His head leaned back into the pillow. "You were lucky," the Defense Professor said in a soft voice, "that a unicorn in Transfigured form... did not set off the Hogwarts wards, as a strange creature... I shall have to... take this outside the grounds, to make use of it... but that can be managed. I shall tell them that I wish to look upon the lake... I will ask you to sustain the Transfiguration before you go, and it should last long enough, after that... and with my last strength, dispel whatever death-alarms were placed to watch over the herd... which, the unicorn being not yet dead,

but only Transfigured, will not yet have triggered... you were very lucky, Mr. Potter."

Harry nodded. He started to speak, then stopped again. Words seemed to stick in his throat once more.

You already calculated the expected utilities, if it works, if it goes wrong. You assigned probabilities, you multiplied, and then you threw out the answer and went with your new gut feeling, which was the same. So say it.

"Do you know," Harry said unsteadily, "of any way at all, by which your life might be saved?"

The Defense Professor's eyes opened. "Why ... do you ask me that, boy?" "There's ... a spell I heard of, a ritual —"

"Be silent," said the Defense Professor.

An instant later a snake lay in the bed.

Even the snake's eyes were dull.

It did not rise.

Sspeak on, whissed that snake, its flickering tongue its only motion.

"There is ..." It here is a ritual, I heard of from the sschoolmasster, by which he thinkss the Dark Lord might have lived on. It is called — and Harry stopped, as he realized that he did know how to say the word in Parseltongue. Horcrux. It requiress a death, I have heard. But if you are dying in any casse, you might try to adapt the ritual, even at great rissk for the new sspell, sso that it can be done with a different ssacrifice. It would change the whole world, if you ssucceed — though I don't know anything about the sspell — the sschoolmasster thought it tore off a piece of ssoul, though I don't ssee how that could be true——

The snake was hissing laughter, strange sharp laughter, almost hysterical. Syou tell me of that sspell? Me? You musst learn more caution in the future, boy. But it matterss not. I learned of the Horcrux sspell ssince long ago. It iss meaninglesss. L.

"Meaningless?" Harry said aloud in surprise.

soul? That iss lie. Missdirection to hide true ssecret. Only one who doess not believe in common liess will reasson further, ssee beneath obsscuration, realisse how to casst sspell. Required murder iss not ssacrificial ritual at all. Ssudden death ssometimes makess ghosst, if magic burssts and imprintss on nearby thing. Horcrux sspell channelss death-bursst through casster, createss your own ghosst insstead of victim'ss, imprintss ghosst in sspecial device. Ssecond victim pickss up Horcrux device, device

imprintss your memoriess into them. But only memoriess from time Horcrux device wass made. You ssee flaw? ...

The burning sensation was back in Harry's throat. M no continuity of -L there wasn't a snake word for consciousness M – sself, you would go on thinking after making the Horcrux, then sself with new memoriess diess and iss not resstored -L

passing through ssuch a device, ssince it iss not truly alive. Dark Wizardss who think to return thuss are weaker, eassily disspatched. None have perssissted long by ssuch meanss. Perssonalitiess change, mix with victim'ss. Death iss not truly gainssaid. Real sself is losst, as you ssay. Not to my pressent tasste. Admit I conssidered it, long ago. L.

A man was lying in the infirmary bed once more. The Defense Professor breathed, then made a wretched coughing sound.

"Can you give me a full recipe for the spell?" Harry said, after a moment's deliberation. "There might be some way to improve on the flaws, with enough research. Some way to do it ethically and have it work." Like doing the transfer into a clone body with a blank brain, instead of an innocent victim, which might also improve the fidelity of the personality transfer... though that still left the other problems.

Professor Quirrell made a short sound, under his breath, that might have been laughter. "You know, boy," Professor Quirrell whispered, "I had thought... to teach you everything... the seeds of all the secrets I knew... from one living mind to another... so that later, when you found the right books, you would be able to understand... I would have passed on my knowledge to you, my heir... we would have begun as soon as you asked me... but you never asked."

Even the grief surrounding by Harry like thick water gave way to that, to the sheer magnitude of the missed opportunity. "I was supposed to -? I didn't know I was supposed to -!"

Another coughing chuckle. "Ah yes... the unknowing Muggleborn... in heritage if not in blood... that is you. But I thought... better of it... that you should not walk my path... it was not a good path, in the end."

"It's not too late, Professor!" Harry said. A part of Harry yelled that he was being selfish, and then another part shouted that down; there would be other people to help.

"Yes, it is too late... and you shall not... persuade me otherwise... I have... thought better of it... as I said... I am too full... of secrets better left unknown... look at me."

Harry looked, almost despite himself.

He saw a still-unwrinkled face, looking old and pained, beneath a head rapidly losing its hair, even the sides looking wispy now; Harry saw a face he'd always thought was sharp, now revealed as *thin*, muscle and fat fading away from the face, as from the arms beneath it, like the skeletal form of Bellatrix Black he'd seen in Azkaban —

Harry's head wrenched aside, unthinkingly.

"You see," whispered the Professor. "I dislike to sound cliched... Mr. Potter... but the truth is... the Arts called Dark... really are not good for a person... in the end."

Professor Quirrell breathed in, breathed out. There was quiet for a time in the infirmary, the two of them watched only by the elaborately ornamented stone of the walls.

"Is there anything left ... unsaid between us?" said Professor Quirrell. "I am not dying today ... mind you ... not right now ... but I do not know how long ... I shall be able to converse."

"There's," Harry said, swallowed again. "There's a lot of things, way too many things, but... it might be the wrong thing to ask, but I don't want — this one question unanswered — snake?"

A snake lay on the bed.

MI learned how the Killing Cursse workss. Requiress true hate to casst, not much hate, but musst want target dead, they ssay. In prisson with life-eaterss, you casst Killing Cursse at guard — ssaid you did not want him dead — wass that lie? Here, now, at thiss disstance — you may sspeak truth — even if you fear it reflectss poorly on you — it sshould not matter now, teacher. I wissh to know. Musst know. Will not abandon you, either way. L.

A man lay on the bed.

"Listen carefully," Professor Quirrell whispered. "I will tell you a conundrum... a riddle of a dangerous spell... when you know the answer to that puzzle... you will also know... the answer to your question... are you listening?"

Harry nodded.

"There is a limitation . . . to the Killing Curse. To cast it once . . . in a fight . . .

you must hate enough... to want the other dead. To cast Avada... Kedavra twice... you must hate enough... to kill twice... to cut their throat with your own hands... to watch them die... then do it again. Very few... can hate enough... to kill someone... five times... they would... get bored." The Defense Professor breathed several times, before continuing. "But if you look at history... you will find some Dark Wizards... who could cast the Killing Curse... over and over. A nineteenth-century witch... who called herself Dark Evangel... the Aurors called her A. K. McDowell. She could cast the Killing Curse... a dozen times... in one fight. Ask yourself... as I asked myself... what is the secret... that she knew? What is deadlier than hate... and flows without limit?"

A second level to the Avada Kedavra spell, just like with the Patronus Charm... "I don't really care," Harry answered.

The Defense Professor chuckled wetly. "Good. You are... learning. So you see..." A pause of transformation. "I did not wissh guard dead, after all. Casst Killing Cursse, but not with hate." And then a man.

Harry swallowed hard. It was both better, and worse, than what Harry had suspected; and characteristic enough of Professor Quirrell. A cracked soul, for certain; but Professor Quirrell had never claimed to be whole.

"Any else ... to say?" said the man in the bed.

"Are you absolutely sure," Harry said, "that there is nothing you've ever heard of that might save you, Professor? In all your lore? Finding and uniting all three Deathly Hallows, an ancient artifact that Merlin sealed behind a riddle nobody's ever figured out? You've seen some of what I can do. That I'm good at solving riddles. You know I can figure things out, sometimes, that other wizards can't. I —" Harry's voice broke. "I have a strong preference for your life, over your death, Professor Quirrell."

There was a long pause.

"One thing," whispered Professor Quirrell. "One thing... that might do it ... or it might not ... but to obtain it ... is beyond your power, or mine..."

Oh, it was just the setup for a subquest, said Harry's Inner Critic.

All the other parts screamed for that part to shut up. Life didn't work like that. Ancient artifacts could be found, but not in a month, not when you couldn't leave Hogwarts and were still in your first year.

Professor Quirrell took in a deep breath. Exhaled. "I'm sorry... that came out... too dramatic. Do not... get your hopes up... Mr. Potter. You

asked . . . for anything . . . no matter how unlikely. There is . . . a certain object . . . called . . . "

A snake lay on the bed.

... The Philossopher'ss Sstone, L. hissed the snake.

If there'd been a mass-manufacturable means of safe immortality this entire time and nobody had bothered, Harry was going to snap and kill everyone.

I read of it in a book, L. Harry hissed. Sconcluded it wass obviouss myth. No reason why ssame device would provide immortality and endlesss gold. Not unlesss ssomeone wass jusst inventing happy sstoriess. Not to mention, every ssame persson sshould have been ressearching wayss to make more Sstoness, or kidnapping maker to produce. Thought of you sspecifically, teacher. L.

A hissing of cold laughter. \*\*SReassoning iss wisse, but not wisse enough. Like with Horcrux sspell, abssurdity hidess true ssecret. True Sstone iss not what that legend ssayss. True power iss not what sstoriess claim. Sstone's ssuppossed maker wass not one who made it. One who holdss it now, wass not born to name now ussed. Yet Sstone iss powerful healing device in truth. Have you heard it sspoken of?\*\*L.

Jusst in the book. L.

MOne who holdss Sstone iss repossitory of much lore. Taught sschoolmasster many ssecretss. Sschoolmasster hass ssaid nothing of Sstone'ss holder, nothing of Sstone's No hintss?

₩Not that I can eassily recall, L. Harry replied honestly.

JAh, well. w. hissed the snake. JAh, well. w.

⊶SCould assk sschoolmasster — ↓

...\$No! Do not assk him, boy. He would not take quesstion well. ఒ

*SBut if the Sstone only healss* **−***tw* 

Sschoolmasster doess not believe that, would not believe that. Too many have ssought Sstone, or ssought holder's lore. Do not assk. Musst not assk. Do not try to obtain Sstone yoursself. I forbid.

A man lay on the bed once more. "I am at ... my limit ..." said Professor Quirrell. "I must regain ... my strength ... before I go ... to the forest ... with your gift. Leave now ... but sustain the Transfiguration ... before you go."

Harry reached out, touched the white pebble lying within the kerchief, renewing the Transfiguration on it. "It should last for one hour and fifty-three minutes after this," Harry said.

"Your studies . . . do well."

It was far longer than Harry's Transfigurations had lasted at the start of the school year. Second-year spells came to him easily now, without strain; which wasn't surprising, since he would be twelve in less than two months. Harry could even have cast a Memory Charm, if it had been good for someone to forget every memory involving their left arm. He was climbing the power ladder, slowly, from very far down.

The thought came with a potential for sadness, a thought of one door opening as another closed; which Harry also rejected.

The door to the infirmary closed behind Harry, as the Boy-Who-Lived walked swiftly and with purpose, shrugging on his Invisibility Cloak as he moved. Soon, presumably, Professor Quirrell would call for assistance; and an older student trio would guide the Defense Professor into some quiet place, maybe the forest, with an excuse of viewing the lake or some such. Someplace the Defense Professor could eat a unicorn undetected, after Harry's Transfiguration wore off.

And then Professor Quirrell would be healthier, for a time. His power would return to him as strong as he'd ever been, for a much shorter time.

It wouldn't last.

Harry's fists clenched as he strode, the tension radiating up his arm muscles. If the Defense Professor's treatment regimen hadn't been interrupted, by Harry and the Aurors that *he* had brought to Hogwarts...

It was stupid to blame himself, Harry knew it was stupid and somehow his brain was doing it anyway. Like his brain was searching, carefully finding and selecting some way for this to be his fault, no matter how far it had to stretch.

As if having things be his fault were the only way that his brain knew how to grieve.

A trio of seventh-year Slytherins passed Harry's invisible form in the hallway, heading for the healer's offices where the Professor waited, looking deeply serious and concerned. Was that how other people grieved?

Or did they, on some level, not really *care*, as Professor Quirrell thought? *There is a second level to the Killing Curse*.

Harry's brain had solved the riddle instantly, in the moment of first hearing it; as though the knowledge had always been inside him, waiting to make itself

known.

Harry had read once, somewhere, that the opposite of happiness wasn't sadness, but boredom; and the author had gone on to say that to find happiness in life you asked yourself not what would make you happy, but what would excite you. And by the same reasoning, hatred wasn't the true opposite of love. Even hatred was a kind of respect that you could give to someone's existence. If you cared about someone enough to prefer their dying to their living, it meant you were thinking about them.

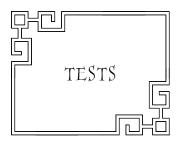
It had come up much earlier, before the Trial, in conversation with Hermione; when she'd said something about magical Britain being Prejudiced, with considerable and recent justification. And Harry had thought — but not said — that at least she'd been let into Hogwarts to be spat upon.

Not like certain people living in certain countries, who were, it was *said*, as human as anyone else; who were *said* to be sapient beings, worth more than any mere unicorn. But who nonetheless wouldn't be allowed to live in Muggle Britain. On that score, at least, no Muggle had the right to look a wizard in the eye. Magical Britain might discriminate against Muggleborns, but at least it allowed them inside so they could be spat upon in person.

What is deadlier than hate, and flows without limit?

"Indifference," Harry whispered aloud, the secret of a spell he would never be able to cast; and kept striding toward the library to read anything he could find, anything at all, about the Philosopher's Stone.

## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED AND THREE



June 4th, 1992.

aphne Greengrass was in the Slytherin common room, writing a letter to her Lady Mother (who was surprisingly intransigent about power-sharing, despite not even *being* in Hogwarts to exercise control) when she saw Draco Malfoy stagger in through the portrait door carrying what must have been a dozen books, Vincent and Gregory behind him each carrying a dozen more. The Auror who'd accompanied Malfoy stuck his head in briefly, then withdrew to who-knew-where.

Draco looked around, then seemed to be struck by a bright idea as he staggered toward her, Vincent and Gregory following after.

"Can you help me read these?" said Draco, sounding slightly out of breath as he approached.

"What." Lessons were over, only the exams were left now, and since when did *Malfoys* ask *Greengrasses* for help with their homework?

"These," Draco Malfoy said importantly, "are all the library books Miss Granger borrowed between April 1st and April 16th. I thought I'd go through them in case there are any Clues there, only then I thought, maybe *you* should help because you knew Miss Granger better."

Daphne stared at the books. "The General read all that in *two weeks?*" A twinge of pain went through her heart, but she suppressed it.

"Well, I don't know if Miss Granger finished them all," Draco said. He held up a cautioning finger. "In fact, we don't know if she read any of them, or if she really borrowed them, I mean, all we've *observed* is that the library ledger says she checked them out —"

Daphne suppressed a groan. Malfoy had been talking like this for weeks. There were some people who clearly were not meant to be involved with mysterious murders because it did *strange things to their minds*. "Mr. Malfoy, I couldn't read all these if I spent my whole summer doing nothing else."

"Then just skim through them, please?" Draco said. "Especially if there's, you know, mysterious words scribbled in her handwriting, or a bookmark left inside, or —"

"I've seen those plays too, Mr. Malfoy." Daphne rolled her eyes. "Don't we have *Aurors* now for —"

"We're doomed!" shrieked Millicent Bulstrode, as she burst up from the lower chambers into the Slytherin common room.

People paused to look at her.

"It's Professor Quirrell!"

A sudden air of attentiveness, as of long-standing disputes about to be settled. "Well, finally," someone said, as Millicent tried to catch her breath. "He's only got, what, ten days left to go bad?"

"Eleven days," said the seventh-year who was running the betting pool.

"He's gotten a little better suddenly and he's going to summon the first-years for our Defense final! By surprise! In fifty minutes!"

"A Defense final?" Pansy said blankly. "But Professor Quirrell doesn't give exams."

"The Ministry Defense final!" shrieked Millicent.

"But Professor Quirrell doesn't teach anything from the Ministry curriculum," objected Pansy.

Daphne was already fleeing to her room, racing for the first-year Defense textbook that she hadn't touched since September and screaming curses inside her mind.

One desk back of her, someone was crying, their soft sobs providing a background chant of despair for the classroom. Daphne looked back, expecting

to see a Hufflepuff and hoping it wasn't Hannah, and was surprised at first (though not on further reflection) to see it was a Ravenclaw.

Before them were set the exam parchments, turned over, waiting for the bell.

Fifty minutes hadn't been nearly enough preparation time, but it was something, and Daphne was now feeling ashamed that she hadn't thought to send messengers to warn the Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor Houses. They'd started giving House Points again just three days ago, at the beginning of June, but the Auxiliary Protective Special Committee still ought to promote House unity.

Another Ravenclaw, sitting four desks to her left, also started to cry. That was Katherine Tung of Dragon Army, if she recalled correctly, whom she'd once seen take on three Sunshine Soldiers simultaneously without a flinch.

Daphne had calmed down after the first couple of minutes of frantic reading. It was just a test, not a *murder* or anything; and if almost all the first-year students turned in mostly blank parchments then it stood to reason that nobody would be shamed. But Daphne could understand, if not exactly sympathize, that Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs might not see it that way.

"He's evil," another Ravenclaw witch said in a shaking voice. "One hundred percent pure Dark Wizard to the bone. The Dark Lord Grindelwald wouldn't do this, not to children, he's worse than You-Know-Who."

Daphne looked reflexively at where Professor Quirrell was sitting, slumped to one side but his eyes alert; and she thought she saw the Defense Professor smile for one tiny instant. No, that had to be her imagination, there was no way the Defense Professor could have heard that.

The bell rang.

Daphne flipped the parchment over.

The top was stamped with the seals for the Ministry, the Hogwarts Board of Governors, and the Department of Magical Education, and runes to detect cheating. Below that was a line for her to write her name, and a list of exam rules with a picture of Lindsay Gagnon, the Director of the Department of Magical Education, shaking an admonishing finger at everyone.

Halfway down the page was the first exam question.

It was, Why is it important for children to stay away from strange creatures? There was a stunned pause.

One student began laughing, she thought it was from the Gryffindor section

of the class. Professor Quirrell made no motion to censor it, and the laughter spread.

Nobody spoke aloud, but the students looked around at each other, exchanging glances as the laughter died down, and then as if by some unspoken agreement they all looked at Professor Quirrell, who was smiling down at them benevolently.

Daphne bent over her exam, wearing a defiant evil smile that would have done proud to either Godric Gryffindor or Grindelwald; and she wrote down, Because my Stunning Hex, my Most Ancient Blade, and my Patronus Charm won't work against everything.

Harry Potter turned over the last page of his Defense exam.

Even Harry had needed to quash a small bit of nervousness, some tiny remnant of his childhood, upon reading the first real question ('How can you make a Shrieking Eel be silent?'). Professor Quirrell's lessons had spent roughly zero time on the surprising yet useless trivia that some idiot had imagined a 'Defense class' should look like. In principle, Harry could have used his Time-Turner to read through the first-year Defense book after being notified of the surprise exam; but that might have unfairly skewed the grading curve for others. After staring at the question for a couple of seconds, Harry had written down 'Quieting Charm', and included the casting directions in case the Ministry grader didn't believe that Harry knew it.

Once Harry had decided to just answer all the questions *correctly*, the exam had gone by very quickly. The most realistic answer to more than half the questions was 'Stunning Hex', and many of the other questions had optimal solutions along the lines of 'Turn around and walk in the opposite direction' or 'Throw away the cheese and buy a new pair of shoes.'

The last question on the test was "What would you do if you suspected there might be a Bogeysnake underneath your bed?" The Ministry-approved answer, Harry could in fact recall from his read-through of the textbook at the start of the year, was *Tell your parents*. The problem with this had occurred to Harry right away, which was why Harry had remembered it.

After some pondering, Harry wrote down:

Dear Ministry grader: I'm afraid the real answer to that is a secret, but rest

assured that a Bogeysnake would present no more trouble to me than a mountain troll, a Dementor, or You-Know-Who. Please inform your superiors that I find your standard answer prejudicial to Muggleborns, and that I expect this failing will be corrected at once without any need for my direct intervention.

Sincerely, the Boy-Who-Lived.

Harry signed the last parchment with a broad flourish, turned it over into his stack, put down his quill, and sat up.

Looking around, Harry saw that Professor Quirrell seemed to be looking in his rough direction, though the Defense Professor's head had nodded to one side. The other students were still writing. Some of them were silently crying, but they were still writing. *Continuing to fight* was also a lesson Professor Quirrell had taught.

Interminably later, the official exam time was up. A seventh-year student went from desk to desk, collecting the exams in Professor Quirrell's place.

The last exam parchment was collected, and Professor Quirrell sat up straight.

"My young students," he said softly. The seventh-year student had her wand trained on the Defense Professor's mouth, so that they all heard his voice seeming to come from right beside them. "I know ... that probably seemed very fearsome to some of you... it is a different kind of fear from facing the enemy's wand... you must conquer it separately. So I... shall tell you this now. It is the custom of Hogwarts... that grades are given in the second week of June. But for my case . . . they can make an exception, I think." The Defense Professor smiled his familiar dry smile, tinged now as though by a suppressed grimace. "I know you are worried... that you were not prepared for this exam... that my lessons have not covered this material... and I quite forgot to mention... that it was approaching... though you should have known... it would come in time. But I have just now magically checked... the answers you have given on that ... terribly, terribly important final exam ... though of course only the Ministry grade is official ... and assigned your full-year grades taking the results into account ... and magically written your full grades down on these parchments," Professor Quirrell tapped a stack of parchments on the side of his desk, "which will now be handed out ... an incredible spell ... is it not?"

A few students on the Ravenclaw side were looking indignant, but for the most part the students just looked relieved, and some Slytherins were chuckling. Harry would have laughed too, if not for the pain of watching Professor Quirrell gasp out the words.

The seventh-year student standing beside Professor Quirrell pointed her wand and spoke an incantation in magical pseudo-Latin. The parchments rose up and started to drift through the air, separating in mid-flow to drift toward each student.

Harry waited until his parchment had arrived on his desk, and then unfolded it.

The parchment said EE+, which stood for Exceeds Expectations. It was the second-highest grade letter, the highest being Outstanding.

In another world, a distant vanished world, a little boy named Harry would have shouted with indignation about receiving only the second-highest grade. This Harry sat quietly and thought. Professor Quirrell was making some point, and it wasn't as though the exact grade letter mattered in any other way. Was Professor Quirrell saying that Harry had done relatively well, but not lived up to his full potential? Or was the grade meant to be read literally, that Harry had in fact exceeded the Defense Professor's expectations?

"All of you... pass," Professor Quirrell said, as the students all looked at their final grades, as sighs of relief rose from desks and Lavender Brown raised her parchment in a clenched fist held high with triumph. "Every student in first-year Battle Magic has passed... except for one."

A number of students looked up in sudden terror.

Harry sat there silently. He had seen the point immediately, and even if it was a wrong point, he knew Professor Quirrell would never, ever be talked out of making it.

"All of you in this room... have received grades of at least Acceptable. Neville Longbottom... who took this test in the Longbottom home... received a grade of Outstanding. But the other student who is not here... has had a Dreadful grade entered on her record... for failing the only important test... that was given her this year. I would have marked her even lower... but that would have been in poor taste."

The room was very quiet, though a number of students were staring angrily at the Professor.

"You may think that a grade of Dreadful... is not fair. That Miss Granger was faced with a test... for which her lessons... had not prepared her. That she was not told... that the exam was coming on that day."

The Defense Professor drew in a shaking breath.

"Such is realism," said Professor Quirrell. "The only important test... may come at any time... be better prepared for it... than she was. As for the rest of you... those who have received Exceeds Expectations or above... have received my letters of recommendation... to certain organizations beyond Britain's shores... where your training might be completed. They will contact you... when you are old enough... if you still appear worthy... and if you have not failed an important test. And remember... from this day... you must train yourselves... you cannot rely... on future Defense professors. Your first year of Battle Magic is over... you are dismissed."

Professor Quirrell sat back with his eyes closed, seeming to ignore the excited babble that broke out around him.

In time most of the students had departed, and one remained, staying a prescribed distance from the Defense Professor.

The Defense Professor opened his eyes.

Harry raised the parchment with its *EE*+, still silent.

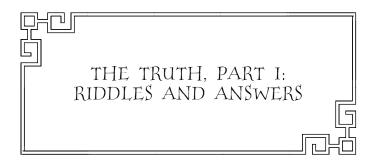
The Defense Professor smiled, and it went all the way to those tired eyes.

"It is the same grade . . . that I received in my own first year."

"Th, th," Harry couldn't make the words *thank you* come out, they were stuck in his suddenly closed throat, the Defense Professor tilting his head and giving him an inquiring stare, so Harry just bowed jerkily and then left the room.

Nine days yet remained.

## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED AND FOUR



June 13th, 1992.

t was the last week of school in Hogwarts, and Professor Quirrell was still alive, barely. The Defense Professor himself would be in a healer's bed, this day, as he'd been for almost the last week.

Hogwarts tradition said that exams were given in the first week of June, that exam results were released the second week, and that in the third week, there would be the Leave-Taking Feast on Sunday and the Hogwarts Express transporting you to London on Monday.

Harry had wondered, a long time ago when he'd first read about that schedule, just what exactly the students did during the *rest* of the second week of June, since 'waiting for exam results' didn't sound like much; and the answer had surprised him when he'd found out.

But now the second week of June was done as well, and it was Saturday; there was nothing left of the year but the Leave-Taking Feast on the 14th and the Hogwarts Express ride on the 15th.

And nothing had been answered.

Nothing had been resolved.

Hermione's killer hadn't been found.

Somehow Harry had been thinking that, surely, all the truth would come out by the end of the school year; like that was the end of a mystery novel and the mystery's answer had been promised him. Certainly it had to be known by the time the Defense Professor ... died, it couldn't be allowed for Professor Quirrell to *die* without knowing the answer, without everything being neatly resolved. Not exam grades, certainly not death, it was only truth that finished a story ...

But unless you bought Draco Malfoy's latest theory that Professor Sprout had been assigning and grading less homework around the time of Hermione being framed for attempted murder, thereby proving that Professor Sprout had been spending her time setting it up, the truth remained unfound.

And instead, like the world had priorities that were more like other people's way of thinking, the year was going to end with a climactic Quidditch match.

In the air above the stadium, distant figures on broomsticks swooped and pirouetted and spun around each other. The red-purplish truncated tetrahedron that was the Quaffle was caught, tossed, blocked, and occasionally thrown through floating hoops, accompanied by stadium-rocking cries of triumph or dismay. Blue and green and yellow and red-trimmed robes shouted with the enthusiasm that people felt so easily when no action would be required from them personally.

It was the first Quidditch match Harry had attended at Hogwarts, and he'd already decided that it would be the last.

"Davies has the Quaffle!" shouted the amplified voice of Lee Jordan. "That's another ten points for Ravenclaw in seven . . . six . . . five . . . holy smokes, he's done it already! Smack through the center of the central hoop! I've never seen such a winning streak — I'm calling it right now for Davies becoming Captain next year after Bortan steps down —"

Lee's voice cut out abruptly and Professor McGonagall's own amplified voice said, "That's the Ravenclaw team's own business, Mr. Jordan. Confine yourself to the match, please."

"And the Slytherins take possession — Flint hands off the Quaffle to the lovely —"

"Mr. Jordan!"

"To the merely acceptable Sharon Vizcaino, whose hair trails behind her like a comet as she blazes toward the Ravenclaw defense — now with two Bludgers in close pursuit! Pucey's on Sharon's tail — what are you doing, Inglebee? — and she swerves in midair to avoid — IS THAT THE SNITCH? GO, CHO CHANG, GO, HIGGS IS ALREADY — WHAT ARE YOU TWO DOING?"

"Calm down, Mr. Jordan!"

"HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO CALM DOWN? THAT WAS THE WORST MISSED PLAY I'VE EVER SEEN! And the Snitch is gone — maybe gone for good, after being missed that badly — Pucey's heading off towards the goal posts, Inglebee's nowhere near him —"

In a distant era of history, maybe in another world entirely, Professor Quirrell had undertaken that the House Cup would be awarded to either Slytherin or Ravenclaw. Or possibly, somehow, both; for he had promised that three wishes would be granted. So far it was looking good on two out of three.

If you just went by the current score, Hufflepuff was leading the race for the House Cup by something like five hundred points, thanks to Hufflepuff's students doing their homework and *staying out of trouble*. It appeared that Professor Snape had been strategically taking quite a lot of points from Hufflepuffs for, er, the last seven years or so. Slytherin House, reigning champion for the last seven years, still had to its advantage a certain *generosity* of its Head of House in handing out points; and this was sufficient to put it neck-and-neck with Ravenclaw House, home of the academic achievers. Gryffindor was far behind in the last place, as befit the House of nonconformists; Gryffindor had Slytherin's profile when it came to academics and mischief, only without the advantage of Professor Snape. Even Fred and George had barely broken even on the year.

Ravenclaw House and Slytherin House both needed a lot of points from *somewhere* if either wanted to catch up with Hufflepuff in the next two days.

And so far as anyone knew, Professor Quirrell hadn't done a single thing leading to the obvious result. It was happening all by itself, now that one lone Professor in Hogwarts had taught a class with creative problem-solving.

The final Quidditch match of the year was between Ravenclaw and Slytherin. Earlier in the year, Gryffindor's initial Quidditch lead had vanished after their new Seeker, Emmett Shear, fell off a possibly malfunctioning broomstick during his second game. This had also required some hasty rescheduling of the remaining games.

This, the final game of the year, wouldn't end until the Snitch was caught. Quidditch scores added directly onto the House points total.

And what did you know, today it seemed that both the Slytherin and Ravenclaw Seekers just could... not... catch... the... Snitch.

"THE SNITCH WAS PRACTICALLY ON TOP OF YOU, YOU DIM-EYED DIMWIT!"

"Language, Mr. Jordan, or I'll remove you from this game! Though it was a terrible play, I admit."

Harry had to admit that Lee Jordan and Professor McGonagall had a wonderful comedic routine, with Jordan as the banana-man and Professor McGonagall as the straight-woman; Harry now felt a little sorry to have missed it at the earlier Quidditch matches. It was a side of Professor McGonagall he hadn't seen before.

A few seats down from where Harry sat in the Hufflepuff section of the Quidditch bleachers, there lurked the hulking form of Cedric Diggory. The Super Hufflepuff had observed the most recent near-air-collision between Cho Chang and Terence Higgs with the keen eye of a wizard who was a Seeker and a Quidditch Captain in his own right.

"The Ravenclaw Seeker is new," Cedric said. "But Higgs is in his seventh year. I've played against him. He's better than that."

"You think it's a strategy?" asked one of the Hufflepuffs sitting next to Cedric.

"It would make sense if Slytherin needed some extra points to lead for the Quidditch Cup," Cedric said. "But Slytherin already has us beat for the title. What are they thinking? They could've won right there!"

The game had started at six o' clock in the afternoon. A typical game would have gone until seven or so, at which point it would have been time for dinner. June in Scotland meant plenty of daylight; sunset wasn't until ten.

It was at 8:06 PM, according to Harry's watch, when Slytherin had just scored another 10 points bringing the score to 170–140, when Cedric Diggory leapt out of his seat and shouted "*Those bastards!*"

"Yeah!" cried a young boy beside him, leaping to his own feet. "Who do they think they are, scoring points?"

"Not that!" cried Cedric Diggory. "They're — they're trying to steal the Cup from us!"

"But we're not in the running any more for —"

"Not the Quidditch Cup! The House Cup!"

The word spread, with cries of outrage.

That was Harry's cue.

Harry politely asked a Hufflepuff witch sitting next to him, and another Hufflepuff sitting one row above him, if they could move aside. Then Harry drew forth from his pouch a huge scroll, and unfurled it into a 2-meter-tall banner which stuck in place in midair. The enchantment had been done courtesy of a sixth-year Ravenclaw who had a reputation for knowing less about Quidditch than Harry did.

In huge, glowing purple letters, the sign read:

## JUST BUY A CLOCK 2:06:47

Beneath it was a Snitch, with a blinking red X over it.

Second, after second, the time counter incremented.

As that counter rose higher, there seemed to be an awful lot of Hufflepuffs who'd decided that they wanted to sit next to Harry's banner.

As the game dragged on past nine, there also seemed to be a lot of Gryffindors.

As the sun set and Harry started using Lumos to read his books — he'd given up on the actual game a long time ago — there were a noticeable number of Ravenclaws who'd betrayed patriotism for sanity.

And Professor Sinistra.

And Professor Vector.

And as the stars began to come out, Professor Flitwick.

The climactic final Quidditch game of the year... dragged on.

One of the things Harry hadn't planned on, when he'd decided to do this, was that he would still be out here at — Harry glanced at his watch —

eleven-oh-four at night. Harry was now reading a sixth-year Transfiguration textbook; or rather he'd weighted the book open, illuminated by a Muggle glowstick, while he did one of the exercises. Last week, when the graduating Ravenclaws were discussing their N.E.W.T. scores, Harry had overheard that upper-year Transfiguration practice involved several 'shaping exercises' that relied more on control and precise thinking than raw power; and Harry had promptly set out to learn those, whacking himself hard on the forehead for not trying to read all the later-year textbooks earlier. Professor McGonagall had approved Harry doing a shaping exercise that involved controlling the way in which a Transfiguring object approached its final form — for example, Transfiguring a quill so that the shaft grew out first, then the barbs. Harry was doing an analogous exercise with pencils, growing out the lead first, then surrounding it with wood and finally having the eraser form on top. As Harry had suspected, focusing his attention and magic into a particular part of the pencil's ongoing transformation had proven similar to the mental discipline used in partial Transfiguration — which could indeed have been used to fake the same effect, by partially Transfiguring only the outer layers of the object. This way was proving relatively easier, though.

Harry finished his current pencil and looked up at the Quidditch game, which was, check, still fantastically boring. Lee Jordan was commentating in a tone of dull disgust, "Another ten points — yay — whoopee — and now someone takes possession of the Quaffle again — ask if I care who."

Almost nobody remaining in the stands was paying attention either, since everyone who'd remained in the stadium seemed to have discovered a new and more interesting sport, the debate about how to amend the House Cup rules and/or Quidditch. The argument had become heated to the point where all of the nearby Professors were barely keeping order at a level short of open combat. This argument, unfortunately, had considerably more than two factions. Some darned busybodies were proposing sensible-sounding alternatives to eliminating the Snitch entirely, and this was threatening to split the vote and sap the momentum for reform.

In retrospect, Harry thought, it would have been nice to have Draco unfurl his own banner from the Slytherin side saying 'SNITCHES ARE AWESOME', to set the polarity of the debate. Harry had squinted over at the Slytherin section earlier, but he hadn't been able to spot Draco anywhere in the stands. Severus Snape, who could also have been sympathetic enough to play the

villainous opposition, was likewise nowhere to be seen.

"Mr. Potter?" said a voice next to him.

Beside Harry's seat was standing a short but older Hufflepuff boy, someone who'd never before come to Harry's attention, holding out a blank parchment envelope with wax dripped on the front. The wax was also blank, without impression.

"What is it?" said Harry.

"It's *me*," said the boy. "With the envelope you gave me. I know you said not to talk to you, but —"

"Then don't talk to me," Harry said.

The boy tossed the envelope at Harry and walked away, looking offended. It made Harry wince a little, but it probably hadn't been the *wrong* decision considering the temporal issues...

Then Harry broke the unsigned wax seal and drew out the envelope's contents. It was parchment instead of the Muggle paper that Harry would have expected, but the writing on it was his own handwriting, if done with a quill instead of a pen. The parchment said:

Beware the constellation, and help the watcher of stars. Pass unseen by the life-eaters' confederates, and by the wise and the well-meaning. Six, and seven in a square, in the place that is prohibited and bloody stupid.

Harry took it in at a glance, then folded the paper again and put it back into his cloak with another exhaled sigh. 'Beware the constellation', really? Harry would have expected a riddle left by himself, to himself, to have been easier to interpret... though some parts were obvious enough. Clearly future-Harry had been worried about this paper being intercepted, and while present-Harry wouldn't ordinarily have thought of the local Aurors as 'the ones in league with the Dementors of Azkaban', maybe that had been the best way to say 'Auror' without potentially tipping off anyone else who read the parchment and did their own best to decrypt it. Translating the idiom back out of the Parseltongue he'd used during the Incident with Azkaban... that worked, Harry supposed.

The note had said that Professor Quirrell needed help, and that whatever was going on needed to pass unnoticed from the Aurors, and from Dumbledore and McGonagall and Flitwick. Since Time-Turning was involved already, the obvious solution was to leave for the bathroom, travel back in time, and return to the game right after he'd left.

Harry started to rise from his seat, then hesitated. His Hufflepuff side was remarking something about leaving the Auror escorts behind and not telling Professor McGonagall anything, and wondering if his future self was being *stupid*.

Harry unfolded the parchment again, and took another glance at the contents.

On closer examination, the riddle-verse didn't say that Harry couldn't bring *anyone* along. Draco Malfoy... was he missing from the Quidditch game because future-Harry, hours in the past, had brought Draco with him as backup? But that didn't make sense, there wasn't much marginal improvement in safety from bringing along another first-year...

... Draco Malfoy would certainly have been present, regardless of his personal feelings about Quidditch, to watch Slytherin clinch the House Cup. Had something happened to him?

Suddenly Harry didn't feel as tired anymore.

A trickle of adrenaline was starting to rise in Harry, but no, this wouldn't be like the troll. The message had *told* Harry when to arrive. Harry wouldn't be too late, not this time.

Harry glanced over at where Cedric Diggory was looking back and forth, visibly torn between a clutch of Ravenclaws arguing that the Snitch had to be kept because it was traditional and rules were rules, and a pack of Hufflepuffs saying that it wasn't fair for the Seeker to be more important than the other players.

Cedric Diggory had been an excellent dueling tutor to Harry and Neville, and Harry had thought they'd established a good relationship. More importantly, a student taking literally all of the electives would have his own Time-Turner. Maybe Harry could try to get Cedric to go back in time with him? The Super Hufflepuff seemed like a good spare wand to have by your side in any sort of sticky situation...

**∞∞∞**∞

## LATER, AND EARLIER:

Harry's watch now said 11:45, which translated into 6:45 PM after looping back five hours.

"It's time," Harry murmured to the empty air, and began walking down the third-floor corridor above the grand staircase, on the right-hand side.

'The place that is prohibited' would ordinarily mean the Forbidden Forest; that was probably what someone intercepting the message was meant to think. But the Forbidden Forest was huge, and there was more than one distinguished location inside it. No obvious Schelling Point at which to rendezvous, or find some event that needed intervention.

But when you added the 'bloody stupid' modifier, there was only one prohibited place in Hogwarts that fit.

And so Harry set forth on that outlawed path where, if rumor spoke true, all the first-year Gryffindors had gone before. The third-floor corridor, on the right-hand side. A mysterious door leading to a series of rooms filled with dangerous and potentially lethal traps that nobody could possibly get through, especially if they were only in their first year.

Harry didn't know himself what sort of traps awaited. Which, on reflection, meant that the students who'd gone through had been surprisingly scrupulous about not ruining the puzzle for others. Maybe there was a sign down there saying *Don't give it away, just as a favor to me, sincerely Headmaster Dumbledore*. All Harry knew so far was that the outer door would open to *Alohomora*, and that the final room contained a magic mirror that would show your reflection in some situation you found highly appealing, which was apparently the big payoff.

The third-floor corridor was illuminated by dim blue light that seemed to come from nowhere, and the arches were covered with cobwebs, as though the corridor hadn't been used in centuries rather than just the last year.

Harry's pouch was loaded with useful Muggle things, and useful wizarding things, and everything he'd found that could possibly be a quest item. (Harry had asked Professor McGonagall to recommend someone who could expand the pouch's capacity, and she'd just done it herself.) Harry had applied the Charm he'd learned for battles that made his eyeglasses stick to his face, regardless of how his head moved. Harry had refreshed the Transfigurations he was maintaining, both the tiny jewel in the ring on his hand and the other one, in

case he was knocked unconscious. He wasn't literally ready for anything, but Harry was as ready as he thought he could be.

The five-sided floor tiles creaked beneath Harry's shoes and vanished behind him like the future becoming the past. It was almost 6:49 - six, and seven in a square. Obvious if you thought in Muggle math, otherwise not so much.

Just as Harry was about to round another corner, something tickled at the back of his mind, and he heard a soft voice talking.

"... sensible person... wait until later... after certain faculty had departed..."

Harry stopped, then crept forward as lightly as he could, not going around the corner, trying to hear Professor Quirrell's voice better.

There came a louder cough, and then the soft voice spoke again from around the corner. "But if they were also . . . to depart themselves . . . at that time . . . " murmured the voice, "they might think . . . this final game . . . makes for the best distraction . . . left in this year . . . a predictable distraction. So I looked . . . to see what people of significance . . . were not at the game . . . and I saw the Headmaster missing . . . but for all my magic can tell me . . . he could be in another . . . realm of existence . . . I also saw your own absence . . . so I decided to go . . . where you were. That is what I am doing here . . . now . . . what are *you* doing here?"

Harry breathed shallowly, and listened.

"And just how did you know where I was?" drawled the voice of Severus Snape, so much louder that Harry nearly jumped.

A small, coughing laugh. "Check your wand... for Trace."

Severus said something in magical pseudo-Latin, and then, "You dared tamper with my wand? You *dared?*"

"You are a suspect... just like myself... so your false indignation is wasted... however finely crafted it may be... now tell me... what are you doing?"

"I am watching this door," said the voice of Professor Snape. "And I will ask you to be off from it!"

"On whose authority . . . are you ordering me . . . my fellow Professor?"

There was a pause, then, "Why, the Headmaster's," came the smooth voice of Severus Snape. "I was ordered by him to watch this door during the Quidditch match, and as a Professor I must obey his whims. I shall have words about it with the Board of Governors later, but for now I am doing as I must.

Now be off with you, as the Headmaster desires."

"What? You mean I am to believe ... that you abandoned your Slytherins ... during their most important ... game of the year ... and leapt up like a dog ... at Dumbledore's word? Well that ... I must say ... is entirely plausible. Even so ... I think it would be wise ... if I kept my own watch over you ... while you watch this fine door." There was a sound of rustling cloth and a soft thud, as if someone had sat down hard upon the ground, or maybe just fallen.

"Oh, for the love of Merlin —" Severus Snape's voice now sounded angry. "Get up, you!"

"Ba-blu-a-bu-bluh —" said the Defense Professor's zombie-mode.

"Get up!" said Severus Snape, and there was a soft thud.

Help the watcher of stars —

Harry stepped around the corner, though it was possible that he'd have done so even without an intertemporal message. Had Professor Snape just *kicked* Professor Quirrell? That would have been foolhardy if Professor Quirrell had been dead and *buried*.

A round-topped door of dark wood was framed within a stone arch, set within the dusty marble bricks of Hogwarts. Where a Muggle would have set a doorknob there was only a handle of polished metal; there were no visible locks, or visible keyholes. Set upon the wall to either side, a pair of torches burned, sending forth an ominous orange glow. Before the door stood the Potions Master in his customary stained robes. Beside the door, to the left side beneath the orange torch, slumped the form of the Defense Professor, back against the wall, head staring out at the surroundings. The eyes seemed to flicker, as if halfway between awareness, and emptiness.

"What," said the towering form of the Potions Master, "are you doing here, Potter?"

Going by facial expressions and tone of voice, the Potions Master was quite angry with Harry; and certainly was not Harry's co-conspirator in councils to which the Defense Professor had never been invited.

"I'm not sure," Harry said. He wasn't sure what role he should be playing, and was, in desperation, falling back on simple honesty. "I think perhaps I'm supposed to be keeping an eye on the Defense Professor."

The Potions Master stared at him coldly. "Where's your *escort*, Potter? Students are not to wander these halls alone!"

Harry's mind was genuinely blank. The game was afoot, and nobody had

told him the rules. "I'm not sure how to answer that..."

The cold expression on Professor Snape's face flickered. "Perhaps I should call the Aurors," he said.

"Wait!" Harry blurted.

The Potions Master's hand hovered about his robes. "Why?" said the Potions Master.

"I... I just think you probably shouldn't call them..."

In a blur, the Potions Master's wand was in his hand. "Nullus confundio!" A black jet darted out and hit Harry, striking in the direction Harry had already started to evade. There followed four other spells, containing words like Polyfluis and Metamorphus; and for those Harry politely stood still.

After all of those spells had failed to produce any effect, Severus Snape was staring at Harry with a dark glitter that now seemed genuine. "I suggest," the Potions Master said softly, "that you explain yourself, Potter."

"I can't explain myself," Harry said. "I don't have the Time, not yet."

Harry looked directly into the Potions Master's gaze as he said the words *myself* and *time*, widening his own eyes to try to convey the key information, and the Potions Master hesitated.

Harry was frantically trying to work out who was pretending to be what. Since Professor Quirrell wasn't in on Dumbledore's conspiracy, Severus was pretending to be the evil Potions Master of Hogwarts, who'd been sent here by the Headmaster... and might or might not have actually been sent here by Dumbledore... but Professor Quirrell either thought, or was pretending to think, that someone needed to keep an eye on Professor Snape... and Harry himself had been sent here by future-Harry and had no idea why... and why were they all standing outside the Headmaster's forbidden door in the first place?

And then . . .

From behind where Harry stood...

Came the growing sound of another set of footsteps, rapid and manyfold. Professor Snape stabbed his wand once, creating a burst of darkness that shrouded where the Defense Professor was lying. "Muffliato," the Potions Master hissed. "Mr. Potter, if you must be here, then hide! Put on your invisibility cloak! My duty is to guard this door in case he comes here. And there has been — a disturbance, meant to draw the Headmaster, he thinks —"

"Who -"

Severus took a long stride forward and snapped his wand against the side of Harry's head. There was a trickling sensation like an egg had been cracked over him, the feeling of a Disillusionment Charm; and Harry's hands faded out, followed by the rest of him.

The darkness shrouding one side of the wall dissipated like slow mist, and there was again visible the huddled form of the Defense Professor, who said nothing.

Harry tiptoed away quietly as he could, then turned to watch.

The approaching footsteps rounded the corner —

"What are you doing here?" came many simultaneous cries.

Trimmed in three sets of Slytherin green and one Hufflepuff yellow stood Theodore Nott, Daphne Greengrass, Susan Bones, and Tracey Davis.

"Where," said Professor Snape with mounting wrath, "are your escorts, children? First-years must be accompanied by a sixth or seventh-year student at all times! Especially you!"

Theodore Nott raised his hand. "We're, um," said Theodore Nott. "We're doing what the Chaos Legion calls a team-building exercise... see, we realized just now that none of us had tried the Headmaster's forbidden chamber yet, and there wasn't much time left... and Harry Potter has authorized it, Professor, he said specifically that *you* mustn't interfere."

Severus Snape turned to glance over at where Harry Potter had tiptoed; a storm seemed to be gathering on his brow, and a dark fury in his eyes.

*I... maybe?* There was still one hour left on Harry's Time-Turner, so it was possible.

"Harry Potter does not have that authority," the Potions Master said in a deceptively mild tone. "Explain yourselves, now."

"Really?" said the form of Susan Bones. "Really? You're telling Professor Snape that Harry Potter authorized the mission, that's your idea of a bluff?" The young Hufflepuff turned to Professor Snape and spoke, her voice strangely firm. "Professor, this is the truth and it's urgent. Draco Malfoy is missing and we think he went down there —"

"If Mr. Malfoy is missing," said Professor Snape, "why have the Aurors not been notified?"

"Because of, because of *reasons!*" cried Daphne Greengrass. "There's no time, you've got to let us through!"

Professor Snape's voice was now as sardonic as Harry had ever heard it.

"Are you four morons under the impression that you are on some sort of adventure? Well, you are mistaken. I assure you that Mr. Malfoy has not passed through this door."

"We think Mr. Malfoy has an invisibility cloak," Susan Bones said rapidly. "Do you remember the door seeming to open for no reason?"

"No," the Potions Master said. "Now be gone from here. This place is off-limits for today."

"This is *Dumbledore's* forbidden corridor," Tracey said. "The Headmaster himself said nobody was to come here. Who do you think you are, forbidding it too?"

"Miss Davis," said the Potions Master, "you need to stop associating with Gryffindors, especially those named Lavender Brown. And if you are still here in one minute, I will file papers requesting your transfer into that House."

"You wouldn't dare!" shrieked Tracey.

"Hm," Susan Bones said, her face screwed up in concentration. "Professor Snape, do you occasionally open the door yourself, to check on whatever's inside?"

Professor Snape froze in place. Then he spun and put his right hand on the metal knocker —

Harry was watching the hand on the knocker, so he didn't notice what Professor Snape was doing with his left hand until he heard the sudden outcry.

"No, in fact," said Professor Snape, now holding the choking head of Draco Malfoy by his collar, though the rest of Draco was still underneath his invisibility cloak. "A fine try, though."

"What?" cried Tracey and Daphne.

Susan Bones hit herself in the forehead. "I can't believe I fell for that."

"So, Mr. Malfoy," Professor Snape said. His voice had lowered. "You sent your friends here on a ruse... just in the hopes that you could pass through this door? Now why would you do that?"

"I think we should trust him —" said Theodore Nott. "Mr. Malfoy, we've *got* to trust him, he's the one Professor who would take our side!"

"No!" cried Draco's floating head, from where Professor Snape was still grasping his collar. "You mustn't say anything! Stop!"

"We've got to take the chance!" yelled Theodore. "Professor Snape, Mr. Malfoy finally worked out what's been going on this whole year, and why — Dumbledore is trying to get the Philosopher's Stone away from Nicholas

Flamel! Because Dumbledore doesn't think anyone ought to have immortality! So Dumbledore tried to convince Flamel that the Dark Lord was coming back and needed the Stone to revive, and asked Flamel to give it to him, but Flamel wouldn't, and instead Flamel put the Stone in the magic mirror that's down there, and Dumbledore is finding out right now how to get it, and then he'll come for it and we've got to get to it first! Dumbledore really will be all-powerful if he gets the Philosopher's Stone!"

"What?" said Tracey. "That's not what you said before!"

"It —" Daphne said. She looked frightened, but determined. "It doesn't matter — Professor Snape, please, you *have* to believe me. I looked at the books Hermione checked out of the library, and she was researching the Philosopher's Stone just before someone killed her. Her notes said that something dangerous might happen if the Stone stays inside the mirror too long. We have to get it out of the castle right away."

Susan Bones now had both hands over her face. "I'm not with them, I just came along to prevent anything even stupider from happening."

Severus Snape was staring at Theodore Nott and the others. Then he turned his head to look at Draco Malfoy. "Mr. Malfoy," the Potions Master drawled. "How did you come to discover Dumbledore's plot?"

"I deduced it from evidence!" said Draco Malfoy's floating head.

Professor Snape's head swiveled back to Theodore Nott. "How did you intend to obtain this Stone from inside a magic mirror that could supposedly baffle Dumbledore himself? Answer me at once!"

"We're going to take the whole mirror and send it back to Flamel," said Theodore Nott. "It's not like we want the Stone for ourselves, we just need to stop Dumbledore from stealing it."

Professor Snape nodded, as though confirming something, and turned his head to look at the other students. "Tell me, have any of you noticed one of the others behaving in an unusual fashion? Especially if there is a peculiar object that they have in their possession, or they can use spells a first-year should not know?" Professor Snape's right hand now pointed his wand at Susan Bones. "I see that Miss Greengrass and Miss Davis are trying not to look at you, Miss Bones. If there is a mundane explanation, you would be wise to offer it *immediately*."

Susan Bones's hair turned bright red, though her face didn't change. "I suppose there's not much point keeping it mum any longer," she said, "since

I'm graduating in two days anyway."

"Double witches get to graduate *six years* early?" said Tracey Davis. "That's not fair!"

"Bones is a double witch?" cried Theodore.

"No, she is Nymphadora Tonks, a Metamorphmagus," Professor Snape said. "Masquerading as another student is extremely against regulation, as you are well aware, Miss Tonks. It is not too late to expel you from Hogwarts two days before your graduation, which would be a dreadful tragedy — from your perspective, that is. From my perspective it would be hilarious. Now tell me what exactly you are doing here."

"That explains it," said Daphne Greengrass. "Um, is there *actually* a Susan Bones, or is the House dying out so they had you secretly —"

The red-haired form of Susan Bones had a palm to her face. "Yes, Miss Greengrass, there's a real Susan Bones. She only sends me in when you lot are about to get into ridiculous amounts of trouble. Professor Snape, the reason I'm here is because Draco Malfoy was missing, and this lot *insisted* on trying to find him instead of calling the Aurors. For reasons the real Miss Bones said there was no time to explain to me, which I now realize were stupid. But young students must never go alone, and must be accompanied by a sixth or seventh year at all times. And now we found Draco Malfoy and we can all go back. Please? Before this gets any more ridiculous?"

"What in Merlin's name is going on here?"

"Ah," said Professor Snape, who was still pointing the wand at the redhaired form of Susan Bones, his other hand still grasping the collar below the disembodied head of Draco Malfoy, standing next to the crumpled form of the Defense Professor. "Professor Sprout, I perceive."

"It's not what it looks like," volunteered Tracey Davis.

The short, dumpy form of the Herbology Professor stormed forwards. She had, by this point, drawn her wand, though she wasn't pointing it at anyone. "I don't even know what this looks like! Down wands, all of you, right now! Including you, Professor!"

Distraction. The thought came to Harry with sudden clarity. Whatever he was watching now, from where he stood invisibly and well back of the action, it wasn't what was really going on, it wasn't the true thread of the story, it had been arranged. Professor Sprout's arrival had broken Harry's suspension of disbelief; things like that didn't happen just for the sake of comedic coincidence.

Someone was deliberately causing all this chaos, but what was the point?

Harry really hoped he hadn't gone back in time and done this, because it did seem like the sort of thing he would do.

Severus Snape lowered his wand. His other hand relaxed its grip on Draco Malfoy. "Professor Sprout," the Potions Master said, "I am here on the Headmaster's orders to watch this door. Everyone else present is *not* supposed to be here, and I ask you to see them cleared away."

"A likely story," snapped Professor Sprout. "Why would Dumbledore set you of all people to guard the door to his playground? It's not as if he wants to keep the students out, oh no, they need to go in and get stuck in *my* Devil's Snare! Susan, dear, you've got a communications mirror, don't you? Use it to call the Aurors."

The watching Harry nodded to himself. *That* was the point. The Aurors would take away everyone present at this terribly confusing situation, no excuses accepted, and then the door would be unguarded.

But was Harry meant to go into the forbidden corridor himself? Or watch, to see who finally came once all the others were gone?

A loud fit of hacking and coughing caused everyone to look at where the Defense Professor lay.

"Snape — listen —" said the Defense Professor between coughs. "Why — Sprout — here —"

The Potions Master looked down.

"Memory Charm — implies — Professor —" The Defense Professor began coughing again.

"What?"

And the logic unfolded in Harry's mind in crystalline dismay, all the steps already suspected, the dreadful realization coming as a repetition with greater confidence.

Someone had Memory-Charmed Hermione to believe she'd tried to kill Draco.

Only a Hogwarts Professor could have done it without alarm.

So all the true mastermind needed to do was Legilimise or Imperius a Hogwarts Professor.

And the last person anyone would suspect would be the Head of House Hufflepuff.

Snape's head snapped around, as Professor Sprout raised her wand, and

the Potions Master managed to raise a wordless translucent ward between them. But the bolt that shot from Professor Sprout's wand was a dark brown that produced a surge of awful apprehension in Harry's mind; and the brown bolt made Severus's shield wink out before they touched, clipping the Potions Master's right arm even as he dodged. Professor Snape gave a muffled shriek and his hand spasmed, dropping his wand.

The next bolt that came from Sprout's wand was a bright red the color of a Stunning Hex, seeming to grow brighter and move faster even as it left her wand, accompanied by another surge of anxiety; and that blew the Potions Master into the door, dropping him motionless to the ground.

By that time pink-haired-Susan-Bones was surrounded by a multifaceted blue haze and she was firing hex after hex at Professor Sprout. Professor Sprout was ignoring the hexes to summon plant tendrils that entangled the younger students as they tried to run, except Draco Malfoy, who had again vanished beneath his invisibility cloak.

Not-Susan-Bones stopped casting hexes. She leveled her wand, took a deep breath, and cried aloud an incantation that sent golden worms of light chewing into the shield around Professor Sprout. At that the Herbology Professor turned to face not-Susan, her expression vacant, a new set of plant tentacles rising in the air behind her. Those stalks were a darker green, and seemed to have shields of their own.

Harry Potter murmured to the seemingly empty air, "Attack Sprout. Help Bones. Nonlethal only."

"Yes, my lord," whispered Lesath Lestrange beneath Harry's Cloak of Invisibility, and the fifth-year Slytherin's presence moved off toward the fight.

Harry looked down at at his own hands, and saw with a jolt of unpleasant shock that his Disillusionment Charm wasn't as complete as it had been before. There were hints of distortion in the air, each time Harry moved...

Slowly, Harry stepped backward, until he came to a corner, and ducked behind a wall. Then he took out his communications mirror... which was blank and jammed. Of course. Harry levitated the mirror to where he could use it to see around the corner, and watch the end of the... distraction? What was happening, why?

Professor Sprout and the form of Susan Bones were dueling in flashes of light and leaves; and the blazing green of a Greater Drill Hex erupted from midair and chewed halfway through the outer layer of Professor Sprout's

shields. The Herbology Professor turned and fired a broad wash of yellow at where the Drill Hex had come from, but the spell didn't seem to hit anything.

Yellow blazes, blue facets, dark green plant-tendrils and swirling purple flower petals...

It was when Professor Sprout started firing arcs of crimson in all directions that one of the crimson blades caught something in midair, the Invisibility Cloak not concealing how the crimson arc was absorbed and winked out; and Lesath's presence beneath the Invisibility Cloak fell to the ground.

And that gave not-Susan-Bones time enough to stand still, catch her breath, and scream something that inspired in Harry another surge of dread; and the white spark that blazed out went through Professor Sprout's chewed shields and her plant-armor and dropped her.

Not-Susan-Bones went to her knees, panting, her robes soaked in sweat.

Her head turned to look around her, at the bodies lying stunned on the floor or wrapped in vines.

"What," said not-Susan. "What. What."

There was no reply. The victims entangled in Professor Sprout's vines weren't moving, though they did seem to be breathing.

"Malfoy..." said the pink-haired form of Susan, still gasping for breath. "Draco Malfoy, where are you? Are you there? Call the Aurors already! Merlin damn it — *Homenum Revelio!*"

And Harry found himself visible again, staring in his mirror at the form of Draco Malfoy half-visible beneath a shimmering cloak, standing behind not-Susan, pointing his wand at a gap in not-Susan's blue haze.

Harry's mind moved in flashes of insight, too slow and yet too fast; even as Harry's mouth opened and he inhaled in preparation to shout.

beware the constellation

there was a constellation named Draco

if you could control a Professor you could control a student

"Duck!" Harry shouted, but it was too late, a bolt of red light caught the back of not-Susan's head at point-blank, smashing her to the floor.

Harry stepped around the corner and said, "Somnium Somnium Somnium Somnium Somnium."

Draco Malfoy's shimmering form collapsed in a heap.

Harry took a moment to catch his breath. Then Harry said "Stupefy!" and

verified that, yes, the Stunning Hex did hit Draco Malfoy's form.

(You could be mistaken about whether a Somnium had really hit. Harry had seen enough horror movies, not to mention the business with the Sunshine Regiment, that he wasn't about to make *that* error again.)

After a further reflection on this, Harry cast another Stunning Hex into the prostrate form of Professor Sprout.

Harry gripped his wand, staring at the scene, breathing heavily from the exhaustion. He didn't have enough magic left to cast a messenger Patronus to Dumbledore and he *really really* should have thought of that possibility immediately this time around. Harry started to reach back to where his mirror had fallen, to see if it was now unjammed.

And then Harry hesitated.

His note to himself had said to avoid notice from Aurors, and Harry still did not know what was going on.

The crumpled form of Professor Quirrell gave another series of racking coughs, reached out a hand to the wall beside him, and slowly pulled himself to his feet.

"Harry," croaked Professor Quirrell. "Harry. Are you there?"

It was the first time Professor Quirrell had ever called him by his first name.

"I'm here," Harry said. Without any conscious thought, his feet were moving forward.

"Please," said Professor Quirrell. "Please, I haven't ... much time. Please take me ... to the mirror ... help me ... get the Stone."

"The *Philosopher's* Stone?" Harry said. He glanced around at the scattered bodies, but he couldn't see Draco anymore, the revealment had worn off. "You think Mr. Nott was *right?* I don't think Dumbledore would —"

"Not — Dumbledore," gasped Professor Quirrell. "Because — Sprout —"

"I understand," Harry said. If Dumbledore had been the one behind it all, he wouldn't have needed to mind-control a Professor in order to use Memory Charms.

"Mirror... ancient relic... could hide anything... Stone could be there... many others want Stone... one sent Sprout..."

Harry repeated rapidly, "The mirror down there is an ancient relic that can be used to hide things, and it would be one possible place to hide the Philosopher's Stone. If the Philosopher's Stone is inside the mirror then any number of people might want to get it. One of them is controlling Sprout and that would explain what their goal really is... only... that doesn't explain why Sprout's controller would go after Hermione?"

"Harry, please," Professor Quirrell said. His breathing was yet more labored now, his voice came with excruciating slowness. "It's the one thing... that can save my life... and I find, now... I don't want to die... please, help me..."

And somehow that tore it.

Somehow that was a little too much.

The sense of detachment that had come over Harry when Professor Sprout had arrived, the broken suspension of disbelief, was returning; his Inner Critic weighing up everything as though it were a set-piece. Timing, probability, so many people showing up at the same door, the Defense Professor's desperation... this whole situation didn't feel real. But he might be able to *solve it* if he just took time to think things through in advance, instead of running off at adventure's first call. All the accumulated experience from the last year had finally crystallized into something like a touch of battle hardening. An instinct born of past disaster was telling Harry that if he just rushed on ahead, he would end up afterward in a sad conversation, realizing that he'd been stupid. *Again*.

"Let me think," Harry said. "Let me think for a minute before we go." He turned away from the Defense Professor, looking at the unconscious bodies draped in various shapes over the floor. There'd been so many puzzle pieces already, this last year, maybe everything would just fall into place with one more piece...

"Harry..." the Defense Professor said in a faltering voice. "Harry, I'm dying..."

One more minute can't make the difference he's had the WHOLE YEAR to be sick it's IMPROBABLE that his life versus death would be precisely timed to rest on this last minute no matter what happened to Hermione —

"I know!" Harry said. "I'll think quickly!"

Harry stared at the bodies and tried to think. There was no time for doubts, for caveats, no brakes or second-guessing just take the first thoughts and *run* with them —

In the back of Harry's mind, fragments of abstract thought flitted past, heuristics of problem-solving that there was no time to rehearse in words. In wordless flashes they shot past, to set up the object-level problem.

- what do I notice I am confused by —
- the first place to look for a problem is whatever aspect of the situation seems most improbable —
- simple explanations are more probable, eliminate separate improbabilities that must be postulated —

Professor Snape had already been here then Professor Quirrell had arrived then Harry had arrived (via Time-Turner) then the adventuring party had arrived and Draco had been revealed (part of the party) then Professor Sprout had shown up.

Too many people had shown up *synchronously* and that was too much coincidence, it was *improbable* that so many different parties would show up at the same location within a five-minute window, there *had* to be hidden entanglements.

Label Sprout's controller as the mastermind who had ordered Hermione Memory-Charmed. The mastermind had sent Sprout.

Professor Snape had said that the Headmaster had sent him to guard the door after there'd been some sort of *disturbance*, if the mastermind had caused that as a distraction then that explained Severus's presence as well.

Harry wasn't sure any more that Draco had been controlled by the mastermind, that hypothesis had come to him in the spur of the moment, Draco might have just been trying to drop not-Susan so he could get into the corridor unhindered —

No that was the wrong way to think, turn it around, try to *explain* the timed presence of Draco and his adventuring party, no time for self-questioning, *run with the hypothesis*, therefore suppose Sprout's mastermind had sent Draco or triggered his coming.

That was three arrivals explained.

Harry had shown up because his note to himself had told him to do so. That could be attributed to time travel.

That left the Defense Professor who'd said he was following Snape, only that didn't *really* seem like an adequate reason for Professor Quirrell to show up it didn't really make Harry feel less confused and so maybe the mastermind had also controlled the timing of Professor Quirrell's presence somehow and even arranged for Harry himself to enter the time loop.

Harry's mind hit a stumbling-block, he couldn't see how to extend that reasoning further.

There was no time to stare blankly at stumbling-blocks.

Without any pause or braking Harry's mind attacked the problem from a new angle.

Professor Quirrell had deduced a controlled Hogwarts Professor from the need for some Professor to Memory-Charm Hermione which meant that Professor Sprout's controller had framed and then murdered Hermione which meant Professor Sprout's controller had detailed information about Hogwarts life and maybe a personal interest in the Boy-Who-Lived and his friends.

Harry's mind finally threw up the relevant memory, Dumbledore saying that Lord Voldemort's strongest road to life was hidden here inside Hogwarts run with the hypothesis so that resurrection tool was the Philosopher's Stone hidden inside the mirror why had Dumbledore put the mirror into a corridor first-years could get through no ignore this question it's not important right now and Professor Quirrell had said the Philosopher's Stone possessed great healing power so that part also fit.

But if it was the Philosopher's Stone that was hidden in the mirror to keep it away from the Dark Lord, that meant the mirror also contained the one thing in the world that could save the Defense Professor's life —

Harry's mind tried to hesitate, to flinch away, feeling a sudden apprehension as to where this was going.

But there was no time allowed for hesitation.

— and that was also far too much coincidence just too much improbability if your mind didn't write it off as an amazing plot twist like you were inside a story.

Could the putative Dark Lord also be manipulating Professor Quirrell so that Professor Quirrell would discover his supposed salvation at the right time so that Harry and Professor Quirrell would go get the resurrection tool from the mirror that might not even actually be the Philosopher's Stone and then the Dark Lord's avatar or some other servant would show up and seize it from them that would explain *all* the synchronies and negate every coincidence.

Or Professor Quirrell had known from the beginning that the one thing that could save his life was hidden inside this mirror and that was why he had agreed to teach Defense at Hogwarts and now he was finally trying to get it but then why wait until he was this sick to even try and why had Sprout shown up at the same time as Professor Quirrell —

Harry's mind faltered harder.

His inner eye was looking in a direction it was afraid to look.

The note I sent myself said to help the watcher of stars. I wouldn't send myself a note saying that, if I hadn't already worked out in the future that it was the right thing to do — maybe the note is just telling me to get on with it —

A small note of confusion was promoted to conscious attention.

The coded message on the parchment... one or two lines hadn't quite sounded right, hadn't sounded like the code Harry would expect himself to use...

"Harry," whispered the dying voice of Professor Quirrell from behind him. "Harry, please."

"I'm almost done thinking," Harry's voice said aloud, and Harry realized as he spoke the words that they were true.

Turn it around.

Look at it from the Enemy's perspective, from where the Enemy does their own intelligent planning, somewhere out of your sight.

There are Aurors in Hogwarts, and your target Harry Potter is now fully on guard. Harry Potter will call in Aurors at the first sign of trouble, or send a Patronus to Albus Dumbledore. Considering that as a puzzle, one creative solution is to —

— forge a supposedly Time-Turned message to Harry Potter from himself, telling Harry Potter *not* to call for help, telling him to be at the place and time you want him to be. You get the target himself to bypass all the protections he set up. You even bypass his protection of skepticism with the overriding authority of his own future self's judgment.

It isn't even difficult. You can Memory-Charm some random student into remembering Harry Potter handing over an envelope to be given back to himself later.

You can Memory-Charm that student because you are a Hogwarts Professor.

You don't go to the extra effort to steal a pencil and Muggle paper from Harry Potter's pouch. Instead you forge Harry Potter's handwriting on wizard parchment. You can forge Harry Potter's handwriting because you have seen it on Ministry-mandated exams you have graded.

You call Draco Malfoy 'the constellation' because you know Harry Potter is interested in astronomy and you are a wizard and you have taken Astronomy and memorized the names of all the constellations. But it's not the natural

code that Harry Potter would use to describe Draco Malfoy to himself, that would have been 'the apprentice'.

You call Professor Quirrell 'the watcher of stars', and tell Harry Potter to help him.

You know that life-eater is how you say 'Dementor' in Parseltongue and you expect Harry Potter to think of the Aurors as being in league with them.

You encode 6:49 as 'six, and seven in a square' because you have been reading a Muggle physics book that Harry Potter gave you.

Who are you, then?

Harry noticed his breathing had sped up, and with a burst of heartrate, Harry slowed his breath down again, Professor Quirrell was *watching him*.

What if hypothetically speaking Professor Quirrell was the mastermind and had faked Harry's message then that explained all five parties showing up the whole synchronous coordination of the comedy and then Professor Sprout was just controlled to give Professor Quirrell deniability let him blame someone else for the False Memory Charm after the dust settled but

But why would Professor Quirrell risk the fragile alliance Harry had with Draco via the attempted murder-frame

(that Professor Quirrell had 'detected' and 'stopped' allegedly via a tracer put on Draco)

Why would Professor Quirrell kill Hermione

(if his first attempt to remove her hadn't worked)

If Professor Quirrell was the bad guy then he might have lied about everything to do with Horcruxes and maybe it wasn't coincidence at all that the only thing that could save his life was the avenue that could resurrect the Dark Lord what if the Dark Lord had arranged that too somehow

(one day David Monroe had mysteriously disappeared, presumed dead at the Dark Lord's hands)

An awful intuition had come over Harry, something separate from all the reasoning he'd done so far, an intuition that Harry couldn't put into words; except that he and the Defense Professor were very much alike in certain ways, and faking a Time-Turned message was just the sort of creative method that Harry himself might have tried to bypass all of a target's protections —

And that was when Harry finally realized what should have been obvious from the very, very beginning.

Professor Quirrell was smart.

Professor Quirrell was smart in the same way as Harry.

Professor Quirrell was smart in exactly the same way as Harry's mysterious dark side.

If you had to guess when the Boy-Who-Lived had acquired his mysterious dark side, the obvious guess was the night of October 31st, 1981.

And

And

And Professor Quirrell had known a password that Bellatrix Black had thought identified the Dark Lord and his presence gave the Boy-Who-Lived a sense of doom and his magic interacted destructively with Harry's and his favorite spell was Avada Kedavra and and and —

The realization blasted through Harry like a vast dam breaking, releasing out all its water, bursting through his mind in an irresistible flood that swept everything away.

There is only one reality that generates all of the observations.

If different observations seem to point in incompatible directions, it means the true hypothesis is one you haven't thought of yet.

And in those cases, when you finally think of the correct hypothesis, everything aligns behind it, beyond denial or horror, tearing away every doubt and every emotion that might stand in its path.

— and then 'David Monroe' and 'Lord Voldemort' had just been one person playing both sides of the Wizarding War and that was why the Monroe family had been killed before they could meet 'David Monroe' just like Moody had suspected —

Reality settled down into a single known state, one coherent state-of-affairs that compactly generated the observation set.

Harry didn't jump, didn't change his breathing, tried not to show a single sign of the horror and agony flooding his mind.

The Enemy was behind him, watching him.

"All right," Harry said out loud, as soon as he dared trust his voice to

sound normal. He kept on staring at the bodies, looking away from Professor Quirrell, because Harry didn't trust his own face. Harry lifted a sleeve to wipe away the sweat on his forehead, trying to make the gesture look casual; Harry couldn't control the sweat, or the rapid hammering in his chest. "Let's go get the Philosopher's Stone."

All Harry needed was a single moment of distraction anywhere along the way to use his Time-Turner.

There was no reply from behind him.

The silence stretched.

Slowly, Harry turned around.

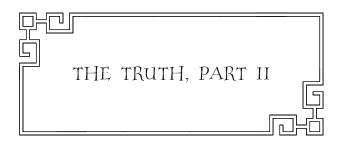
Professor Quirrell was standing upright and smiling.

In the Defense Professor's hand was a shape of black metal pointed at Harry's wand arm, held with the sure grip of someone who knew exactly how to use a semiautomatic handgun.

Harry's mouth was dry, even his lips were trembling with adrenaline, but he managed to speak. "Hello, Lord Voldemort."

Professor Quirrell inclined his head in acknowledgment, and said, "Hello, Tom Riddle."

## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED AND FIVE



T om Riddle.

The words seemed to echo inside Harry's head, sparking resonances that as quickly died away, broken patterns trying to complete themselves and failing.

Tom Riddle is a

Tom Riddle was the

Riddle

There were other priorities occupying Harry's attention.

Professor Quirrell was pointing a gun at him.

And for some reason Lord Voldemort hadn't fired it yet.

Harry's voice came out in more of a croak. "What is it that you want from me?"

"Your death," said Professor Quirrell, "is clearly not what I am about to say, since I have had plenty of time to kill you if I wished. The fateful battle between Lord Voldemort and the Boy-Who-Lived is a figment of Dumbledore's imagination. I know where to find your family's house in Oxford, and I am familiar with the concept of sniper rifles. You would have died before you ever touched a wand. I hope this is clear to you, Tom?"

"Crystal," Harry whispered. His body was still shaking, running programs more suited to fleeing a tiger than casting delicate spells or *thinking*. But Harry could think of one thing the person pointing a gun at him obviously wanted

him to do, a question that person was waiting for him to ask, and Harry did so. "Why are you calling me Tom?"

Professor Quirrell regarded him steadily. "Why am I calling you Tom? Answer. Your intellect is not everything I hoped for, but it should suffice for this."

Harry's mouth seemed to know the answer before his brain could manage to focus on the question. "Tom Riddle is your name. Our name. That's who Lord Voldemort is, or was, or — something."

Professor Quirrell nodded. "Better. You have already vanquished the Dark Lord, the one and only time that you will ever do so. I have already destroyed all but a remnant of Harry Potter, eliminating the difference between our spirits and enabling us to reside in the same world. Now that it is clear to you that the battle between us is a lie, you might act sensibly to advance your own interests. Or you might not." The gun jabbed slightly forward, causing prickles of sweat to appear on Harry's forehead. "Drop your wand. *Now*."

Harry dropped it.

"Step away from the wand," said Professor Quirrell.

Harry obeyed.

"Reach toward your neck," said Professor Quirrell, "and remove your Time-Turner, touching it by the chain only. Place the Time-Turner on the ground, then step away from it as well."

This also Harry did. Even in his state of shock, his mind still looked for a way to spin the Time-Turner in the process, a sudden move that would win; but Harry knew that Professor Quirrell would already be imagining himself in Harry's position, looking for the same possible opportunities.

"Remove your pouch and place it also on the ground, then step away." Harry did this.

"Very good," said the Defense Professor. "Now. It is time for me to obtain the Philosopher's Stone. I mean to bring along these four first-years here, suitably Obliviated of their most recent memories so that they still recall their original purpose. Snape I shall control and set to guard this door. After this day's work is done, I intend to kill Snape for the betrayals he has offered my other identity. The three heir-children I shall take with me afterwards, to shape their future loyalties. And know this, I have taken hostages. I have already set in motion a spell that will kill hundreds of Hogwarts students, including many you called friends. I can stop that spell using the Stone, if I obtain it

successfully. If I am interrupted before then, or if I choose not to stop the spell, hundreds of students will die." Professor Quirrell's voice was still mild. "Do you yet perceive any interests you have at stake, boy? I would smile to hear you say 'no', but that is too much to hope."

"I'd like," Harry managed to say, through the horror, and the heartbreak, and the knives slicing away at an emotional connection that hurt like living flesh as it was cut, "for you not to do those things, Professor." Why, Professor Quirrell, why, why did it have to turn out like this, I don't, I don't, I don't want this to be happening...

"Very well," Professor Quirrell said. "I grant you permission to offer me something I want." The gun gestured invitingly. "That is a rare privilege, child. Lord Voldemort does not usually negotiate for what he wants."

Some part of Harry's mind scrabbled frantically, looking for something, anything that might be of more value to Lord Voldemort or Professor Quirrell than child hostages or Severus's death.

Another part of him, the part that had never stopped thinking, already knew his answer.

"You already have an idea for what you want from me," Harry said, through the sickness and the bleeding wounds in his soul. "What is it?"

"Your help in obtaining the Philosopher's Stone."

Harry swallowed. He couldn't stop his eyes from going to the gun, then back up at Professor Quirrell's face.

He was aware that the hero in a storybook was supposed to say 'No', but now that he was actually in a situation like this, saying 'No' didn't seem to make sense.

"I am disappointed that you need to think about this," said Professor Quirrell. "It is straightforward that you should obey me for now, since I hold every advantage over you. I have taught you better than this; in this situation you should certainly pretend to lose. You can expect to gain nothing by resisting, except pain. You should have calculated that it was better to answer sooner, and not earn my distrust." Professor Quirrell's eyes studied him curiously. "Perhaps Dumbledore has filled your ears with nonsense about noble defiance? I find such morals amusing, since they are so easy to manipulate. I assure you that I can make defiance seem morally worse, and you would be well advised to submit before I demonstrate how." The gun stayed pointed at Harry; but with a wave of Professor Quirrell's other hand, Tracey Davis rose

up into the air, spun lazily, her limbs stretched out spreadeagle -

— then, even as new adrenaline hammered at Harry's heart, Tracey floated back down again.

"Choose," said Professor Quirrell. "This begins to try my patience."

I should have spoken just then, before he might've ripped off Tracey's legs, no, I shouldn't have, the Headmaster said I mustn't show Lord Voldemort that I'll do things if he threatens my friends because that will just make him threaten more of them — only what he said before isn't a threat it's just the sort of thing Lord Voldemort does —

Harry took a deep breath, several of them. Whatever part of him kept on running on full automatic was screaming at the remainder of his mind that it could not afford to stay in shock. Shocks were of finite duration, neurons kept firing regardless, the only reason Harry's mind would shut down while his brain kept running was if Harry's self-model *believed* his mind would shut down —

"I don't mean to try your patience," Harry said. His voice was cracking. That was good. Sounding like he was still in shock meant that Lord Voldemort might give him more time. "But if Lord Voldemort had a reputation for keeping his bargains, I don't know about it."

"An obvious concern," Professor Quirrell said. "There is a simple answer, and I would have enforced it upon you in any case. "Ssnakes can't lie".... And since I have a tremendous distaste for stupidity, I suggest you do not say anything like 'What do you mean?' You are smarter than that, and I do not have time for such conversations as ordinary people inflict on one another."

Harry swallowed. Snakes can't lie. "Two pluss two equalss four." Harry had tried to say that two plus two equaled three, and the word four had slipped out instead.

"Good. When Salazar Slytherin invoked the Parselmouth curse upon himself and all his children, his true plan was to ensure his descendants could trust one another's words, whatever plots they wove against outsiders." Professor Quirrell had adopted his lecturing pose from Battle Magic, like someone putting on a well-worn mask, but the gun remained pointed in his hand. "Occlumency cannot fool the Parselmouth curse as it can fool Veritaserum, and you may put that to the trial also. Now listen well. "Scome with me, promisse your besst aid in getting Sstone, and I sshall leave thesse children behind unharmed. Hosstagess are real, hundredss of sstudentss die tonight unlesss I sstop eventss already

also this, mark it well: "I cannot be truly sslain by any power known to me, and lossing Sstone will not sstop me from returning, nor sspare you or yourss my wrath." Any impetuous act you are contemplating cannot win the game for you, boy. I do credit your ability to annoy me, and suggest you avoid doing so."

"You said," Harry's voice was strange in his own ears, "that the Philosopher's Stone had different powers from what legend said. You said that to me in Parseltongue. Tell me what the Stone really does, before I agree to help you get it." If it was something along the lines of gaining total power over the universe, then *nothing* was worth an incrementally greater chance of Lord Voldemort getting the Stone.

"Ah," said Professor Quirrell, and smiled. "You are thinking. That is better, and as a reward I shall offer you a further incentive for cooperation. Eternal life and youth, the creation of gold and silver. Suppose these are true benefits of holding the Stone. Tell me, boy. What is the Stone's power?"

It might have been the adrenaline still in him, being actually useful for his brain for once. It might have been the power of being told that an answer existed, and that the evidence wasn't a lie. "It can make Transfigurations permanent."

Then Harry stopped, as he heard what his own mouth had just said.

"Correct," said Professor Quirrell. "Thus, whoever holds the Philosopher's Stone is able to perform human Transfiguration."

Harry's torn mind was knocked about yet again, as he realized what further incentive would be offered him.

"You stole Miss Granger's remains and Transfigured them into some innocuous-appearing target," said Professor Quirrell. "A Transfigured target that you must keep somewhere about your own person, in order to sustain the Transfiguration. Ah, I see your eyes going to that ring upon your hand, but of course Miss Granger would not be the little jewel set into the ring, would it? That would be too obvious. No, I expect you Transfigured Granger's remains into the ring itself, letting the aura of the Transfigured jewel mask the magic in the Transfigured ring."

"Yes," Harry said, forcing out the word. It was a lie, for once, and Harry's glance had been deliberate. Harry had expected someone to challenge him on the steel ring, he'd tried to provoke that challenge so he could prove to be innocent yet again, though nobody had taken him up on it — maybe

Dumbledore had just sensed that the steel by itself wasn't magical.

"Fine and good," said Professor Quirrell. "Now come with me, help me to obtain the Stone, and I will resurrect Hermione Granger on your behalf. Her death has had unfortunate effects on you, and I would not mind undoing them. That, as I understand you, is your greatest desire. I have done you many kindnesses, and I would not mind doing you this one more." A blank-eyed Professor Sprout had now risen from the ground and was pointing her own wand at Harry. "Help me obtain Sstone of Transsfiguration, and I sshall try my hardesst to ressurrect your girl-child friend to true and lassting life. That ssaid, boy, I am sswiftly running out of patience with you, and you sshall not like what comess next." This last line was hissed out in a voice that conveyed the impression of a snake rearing its head to strike.

Even then.

Even then, with all the world upturned, with shock after shock, even then Harry's brain did not stop being a brain, or completing the patterns its circuits had been wired to complete.

**∞**∞∞∞

Harry knew that this was too good an offer to make to someone at whom you were pointing a gun.

Unless you *desperately* needed their help to get the Philosopher's Stone out of the magic mirror.

And there wasn't any time left to plan, only the thought that, if Professor Quirrell really was going this far to get his help — what Harry wanted was to demand Professor Quirrell promise not to kill anyone in the future in exchange for his help now, but Harry had a strong sense that Professor Quirrell would reply 'Don't be ridiculous' and there wasn't time for ordinary conversation Harry had to guess the highest safe request in advance —

Professor Quirrell's eyes narrowed, his lips parted —

"If I help you," Harry's mouth said, "I want your promise that you aren't planning to turn on me when this is over. I want you to not kill Professor Snape or anyone else in Hogwarts for at least a week. And I want answers, the truth about everything that's been going on this whole time, everything you know about my nature."

The pale blue eyes regarded him dispassionately.

I really think we could have thought of something better to ask for than that, said Harry's Slytherin side. But I suppose we were legitimately out of time, and whatever we need to do next, answers will help.

Harry wasn't listening to that voice right now. Cold chills were still going down his spine from hearing the words that had just come out of his lips, addressed to the man with the gun.

"That is your condition for helping me to obtain the Stone?" said Professor Quirrell.

Harry nodded, unable to form words.

SAgreed, hissed Professor Quirrell. SHelp me, and you sshall have ansswerss to your quesstions, sso long ass they are about passt eventss, and not my planss for the future. I do not intend to raisse my hand or magic againsst you in future, sso long ass you do not raisse your hand or magic againsst me. Sshall kill none within sschool groundss for a week, unlesss I musst. Now promisse that you will not attempt to warn againsst me or esscape. Promisse to put forth your own besst efforts toward helping me to obtain the Sstone. And your girl-child friend sshall be revived by me, to true life and health; nor sshall me or mine ever sseek to harm her. A twisted smile. Spromisse, boy, and the bargain will be sstruck.

"I promise," whispered Harry.

WHAT? screamed other parts of his mind.

Um, he's still pointing a gun at us, pointed out Slytherin. We don't actually have a choice, we're just getting as much mileage out of this as possible.

You bastard, said Hufflepuff. Do you think this is what Hermione would have wanted? This is Lord Voldemort we're talking about, do we even know how many people he's killed, and will kill?

I deny that we are compromising with Lord Voldemort for Hermione's sake, said Slytherin. Since there is, in fact, a gun and we can't otherwise stop him. Also, Mum and Dad would want us to just go along and stay safe.

Professor Quirrell regarded him steadily. "Repeat the full promise in Parseltongue, boy."

efforts, my heart will not be in it, I fear. I intend to try. Sshall not do anything I think will annoy you to no good end. Sshall call no help if I expect them to be killed by you or for hosstagess to die. I'm ssorry, teacher, but it iss besst I can do. Larry's mind was settling, composing itself, as the decision was made. He would stay with Professor Quirrell, go with him to get the Stone, save the

student hostages, and ... and Harry didn't know, except that he'd go on thinking.

"You actually are sorry about that?" Professor Quirrell looked amused. "I suppose it shall have to do. Then keep two other things in mind: "I have plan to sstop even sschoolmasster, if he appearss before uss." And also this: I will occasionally ask you to say in Parseltongue whether you have betrayed me." "The bargain is sstruck."

After that, Professor Sprout picked up Harry's wand, and wrapped it in shimmering cloth; then she placed it on the floor, and again pointed her wand at Harry. Only then did Professor Quirrell lower his gun, which seemed to disappear into his hand, and pick up Harry's wrapped wand, tucking it into his robes.

The True Cloak of Invisibility was removed from the sleeping form of Lesath Lestrange, and Professor Quirrell took the Cloak, as well as Harry's pouch and Time-Turner.

Then Professor Quirrell cast a mass Obliviation followed by the mass version of the False Memory Charm, the one that just had the subject fill in the blanks using their own suggestibility, on all the students present. Afterwards Professor Sprout floated away the sleeping children, now wearing an expression that seemed annoyed and preoccupied, as if they'd been in some Herbology accident.

Professor Quirrell then turned back to where the Potions Master lay sprawled, bent over and placed his wand on Professor Snape's forehead. "Alienis nervus mobile lignum."

The Defense Professor stepped back, and began to move his left fingers in the air as though manipulating a puppet on strings.

Professor Snape pushed himself up from the ground by smooth motions, and stood once more before the corridor door.

"Alohomora," Professor Quirrell said, pointing his wand at the forbidden door. The Defense Professor looked rather amused. "Would you do the honors, boy?"

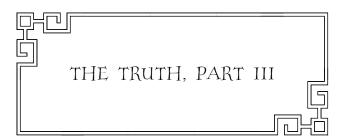
Harry swallowed. He was once again having second thoughts, and third thoughts.

It was strange how you could do something even while knowing it was the wrong thing, not the selfish thing but the *wrong thing to do* on some deeper level.

But the man behind him was holding the gun; it had once more appeared in his hand at Harry's hesitation.

Harry laid his hand on the door-knocker, and took several deep breaths, again composing his mind as best he could. Go through with it, don't get shot, don't let the hostages die, be there to optimize events, be there to watch for opportunities and stay capable of taking them. It wasn't a good choice, but all the other ones seemed worse.

Harry pushed open the forbidden door, and stepped through.



After a single step into Dumbledore's forbidden chamber, Harry shrieked and jumped back and collided with Professor Snape, sending the two of them down in a heap.

Professor Snape picked himself up and resumed standing in front of the door. His head tracked to look at Harry. "I am guarding this door at the Headmaster's orders," said Professor Snape in his usual sardonic tones. "Be off with you at once, or I shall deduct House Points."

This was bone-chillingly creepy, but Harry's attention was occupied by the gigantic three-headed dog which had lunged forward, only to be stopped meters from Harry by the chains upon its three collars.

"That — that — that —" Harry said.

"Yes," Professor Quirrell said from a ways behind him, "that is indeed the usual occupant of that chamber, which is off-limits to all students, especially first-years."

"That's not safe even by wizard standards!" Within the chamber, the enormous black beast gave a multi-voiced bellow, flecks of white saliva flying from three fanged mouths.

Professor Quirrell sighed. "It is enchanted not to eat students, just spit them back out through the door. Now, boy, how would you recommend that we deal with this dangerous creature?" "Uh," Harry stuttered, trying to think over the continued roaring of the chamber's guardian. "Uh. If it's like the Cerberus from the Muggle legend of Orpheus and Eurydice, then we have to sing it to sleep so we can pass —"

"Avada Kedavra."

The three-headed beast fell over.

Harry looked back at Professor Quirrell, who was giving him a look of extreme disappointment, as if to ask whether Harry had attended any of his classes, ever.

"I sort of *assumed*," Harry said, still trying to catch his breath, "that going through this challenge in any way except the one used by first-years, might perhaps trigger an *alarm*."

"That is a lie, boy, you simply did not remember your lessons when you faced the occasion in true life. As for alarms, I have spent months befuddling all the wards and tripsigns upon these chambers."

"Then why did you send me in first, exactly?"

Professor Quirrell just smiled. It looked significantly more evil than usual.

"Never mind," Harry said, and walked slowly into the chamber, his limbs still shaking.

The chamber was all of stone, illuminated by a pale blue light that shone from arched nooks carved into the wall; as if the light of a grey sky were passing through windows, though there were no windows. At the far end of the chamber was a wooden trapdoor upon the floor, with a single ring attached. In the middle of the chamber lay a gigantic dead dog with three lifeless heads.

Harry turned toward one of the arched nooks and looked inside it. There was nothing there but the sourceless blue glow, so he walked over and looked in the next one, also scrutinizing the wall as he passed.

"What," said Professor Quirrell, "are you doing?"

"Searching the room," Harry said. "There could be a clue, or an inscription, or a key we'll need later, or something —"

"Are you serious, or are you deliberately trying to slow us down? Answer in Parseltongue."

Harry looked back. Swass sseriouss, hissed Harry. Would have done ssame if came by mysself.

Professor Quirrell briefly massaged his forehead. "I confess," he said, "that your approach would serve you well in, say, exploring the tomb of Amon-Set, so I will not quite call you an idiot, but still. The false puzzle, the outer form

of the challenge, is a game meant for first-years. We simply go down through the trapdoor."

Beneath the trapdoor was a gigantic plant, something like an enormous dieffenbachia with wide leaves emerging from the central stem like a spiral staircase, but darker-colored than a normal dieffenbachia, with tendril-like vines emerging from the central stem and hanging down. The base spread out wide with bigger leaves and tendrils, as though promising to cushion anyone's fall. Beneath was another stone chamber like the first, with the same nooks like false arched windows, emitting the same grey-blue light.

"The obvious thought is to fly down on the broomstick in my pouch, or toss something heavy to see if those tendrils are traps," Harry said, peering down. "But I'm guessing you'll say that we just walk down the leaves." They certainly looked like they were meant to be a spiral staircase.

"After you," said Professor Quirrell.

Harry carefully put a foot down on a leaf and found that it indeed supported his weight. Then Harry took a last look around the room before departing, to see if there was anything worth noticing.

The enormous dead dog called enough attention to itself that it was hard to focus on anything else.

"Professor Quirrell," Harry said, omitting the phrase *your approach to dealing with obstacles has certain drawbacks*, "what if somebody looks in the door and sees that the Cerberus is dead?"

"Then they have probably already noticed something wrong with Snape," said Professor Quirrell. "But since you insist..." The Defense Professor walked over to the three-headed corpse and placed his wand against it. He began a Latin-sounding incantation that was accompanied by a sense of rising apprehension, the Boy-Who-Lived feeling the Dark Lord's power as he always had.

The last word spoken was "*Inferius*" and it was accompanied by a final surge of *STOP*, *DON'T*.

And the three-headed dog rose to a stand, its six eyes dull and blank, turning to watch the door once more.

Harry stared at the huge Inferius with a horrible sinking sensation in his stomach, the third-worst feeling he'd ever felt in his life.

He knew then that he'd seen and sensed this procedure before, only without the spoken Latin.

The centaur who'd confronted him in the Forbidden Forest was dead. The

Defense Professor had hit it with a real Avada Kedavra, not a fake one.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Harry had thought that if he could just get Hermione *back* then he could return to the code of nobody dying, the ethic of Batman. Most people went through their whole lives without anyone getting killed on whatever adventures they had.

And that was not to be.

He hadn't even noticed, the day he lost his last chance to win. Even if Hermione was resurrected, now, Harry wouldn't have come through the whole mess without anyone getting killed.

He hadn't even learned the centaur's name.

Harry said nothing aloud. The Defense Professor would either confirm the accusation in Parseltongue or lie in plain speech, and either way the Defense Professor would have more reason to suspect Harry's next actions. But Harry knew that — although he didn't know *how* he would stop Professor Quirrell, although he didn't dare any positive act of betrayal, maybe not even making the *decision*, until it was almost time to win — there would never be an amicable settlement between him and Lord Voldemort, for those two different spirits could not exist in the same world.

And it was like that resolution, that knowledge of opposition, invoked a strength from what Harry had thought of as his dark side. Harry had stopped trying to call deliberately on his dark side after the day he'd killed the troll. But his dark side had never been something separate from him. It had been something remembered from Tom Riddle. Harry didn't know how that had happened, but taking the assumption and running with it, whatever echoes of cognitive skill were in his dark side should be there for him to use. Not as a separate mode, as Harry had conceptualized at first, but just as neural patterns with a strong tendency to chain into one another since they had once formed part of a connected whole.

This unfortunately did not change that Professor Quirrell had the same skills with far more life experience backing them up, and also had the gun.

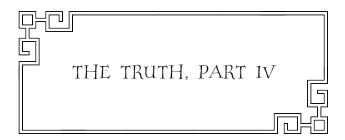
Harry turned, and set foot on the giant plant, and began to walk down the spiral staircase provided by the leaves. It had taken Harry too long this time, but he'd recovered himself to some degree, despite the grief still weighing him down like thick water. It wasn't a cold steel rod in his spine, but it was something straight and solid nonetheless. He was going to play this through, see Hermione returned to life first, and then, somehow, stop Professor Quirrell.

## THE TRUTH III

Or stop Professor Quirrell first and then get the Stone himself. There had to be something, some possibility, some opportunity that would present itself, some way to stop Voldemort *and* return Hermione to life...

Harry continued his descent.

Behind him, the three-headed dog waited, guarding the gate.



The spiraling leaves of the gigantic dieffenbachia felt like forest loam beneath Harry's shoes, not as unyielding as concrete, but supporting his weight. Harry kept a wary eye on the tendrils, but they remained passive.

When Harry reached the bottom of the leafy spiral staircase, the tendrils suddenly whipped out and grasped Harry's arms and legs.

After a brief struggle, Harry allowed himself to go limp.

"Interesting," said Professor Quirrell, as he floated down from above, not touching any of the plant's leaves or tendrils. "I notice that you seem to have no trouble losing to a plant."

Harry looked more closely at the Defense Professor, seeing him now without the lens of panic. Professor Quirrell was upright and moving, flying without apparent difficulty; the sense of doom about him was strong. But his eyes were still sunken in the skull, his arms thin and wasted. The sickness had *not* been bluff, and the obvious hypothesis was that the Defense Professor had recently eaten another unicorn to temporarily regain some strength.

And the Defense Professor was also speaking like the mask of Professor Quirrell, not like Lord Voldemort, which might not be a bad thing from Harry's perspective. Harry didn't know why — unless it was that the Defense Professor still needed him for something — but it certainly seemed to be in Harry's own interests to play along.

"You specifically let me walk into this trap, Professor," Harry answered, just the way he'd have spoken to Professor Quirrell. *Roles, masks, remind him of how it was between us...* "On my own, I'd have used my broomstick."

"Perhaps. How would an ordinary first-year solve this challenge? If they had their wand, that is." The plant was now reaching tendrils out toward Professor Quirrell, but Professor Quirrell was hovering just out of their reach.

Harry had now remembered Professor Sprout talking about a Devil's Snare plant, which the Herbology textbook had said liked cool, dark places like caves — though how that could be true of a leafy plant was anyone's guess. "At a guess, I'd say this is a Devil's Snare plant and it might retreat from light or heat. So maybe a first-year could use Lumos? Today I'd use *Inflammare*, but I didn't learn that spell until May."

A twirl of the Defense Professor's wand, and a pattern of sprays of liquid shot out from it, striking the plant near the bases of its tendrils, hitting with a quiet splat and then a quiet hissing. All the tendrils touching Harry frantically shot back and began to beat at the growing wounds appearing on the plant's skin, as if trying to remove the pain-stimulus; something about the plant gave the impression that it was screaming soundlessly.

Professor Quirrell finished drifting downward. "Now it is afraid of light, heat, acid, and me."

Harry stepped off the final leaves onto the floor, after a careful glance at his robes and then the floor to make sure that none of the acid had splashed anywhere. Harry had begun to suspect that Professor Quirrell was trying to make some sort of point, but Harry did not know what that point might be. "I thought we were on a mission, Professor. I can't stop you, but is it *smart* to spend this much time on messing with me?"

"Oh, we have time," said Professor Quirrell, sounding amused. "There would be a great uproar if we were discovered here, guarded by an Inferius. You did not act like you had heard of such an uproar at your Quidditch match, before you arrived in this time and spoke to Snape as you did."

A slight chill came over Harry, as he comprehended this. Anything he did to beat Professor Quirrell would have to *not* disrupt the school, or at least the Quidditch game, because it *hadn't* disrupted the Quidditch game. Even if enough forces could be called in to subdue Lord Voldemort, it might not be easy to do it without Professor McGonagall or Professor Flitwick or anyone else at the Quidditch game noticing...

Fighting a smart enemy was hard.

And even so ... even so it seemed to Harry that if he stood in Professor Quirrell's shoes, he would not be having leisurely conversations and playing mind games. Professor Quirrell was gaining *something* by taking his time here. But what? Was there some other process that had to run to completion?

"By the way, have you betrayed me yet?" said Professor Quirrell.

"Have not betrayed you yet," Harry hissed.

The Defense Professor gestured pointedly with the gun he was now holding in his left hand, and Harry walked ahead to the great wooden door at the end of the room, and opened it.

The next chamber was smaller in diameter, with a higher ceiling. The light shining out of the arched alcoves was white, instead of blue.

Around them whizzed hundreds of winged keys, beating frantically through the air. After watching for a few seconds, it became clear that only a single key was the golden color of a Snitch — though it was moving slower than a Snitch in a real Quidditch game.

On the other end of the room was a door containing a large, prominent keyhole.

Against the left wall leaned a broomstick, the school's workhorse Cleansweep Seven.

"Professor," Harry said, staring up at the clouds and flocks of whizzing keys, "you said you would answer my questions. What exactly is all this about? If you think you've secured a door so that it won't open without a key, you keep the key in a safe place and only give a copy to authorized entrants. You don't give the key wings and then leave a broomstick propped against the wall. So what the heck are we doing in here and what is going on? It's an obvious guess that the magic mirror is the only real factor guarding the Stone, but why the rest of this — and why encourage first-years to come here?"

"I am truly not sure," said the Defense Professor. He had entered the room and taken up station well to Harry's right, maintaining the distance between them. "But I shall answer, as I said I would. Dumbledore's way is to do a dozen things which seem mad, and then only eight of them, or perhaps nine, conceal an inner meaning. My guess is that Dumbledore intends to make it seem like I

am invited to send a student as my proxy. Precisely so that Lord Voldemort, as Dumbledore conceives of him, is less tempted to think himself clever by doing so. Imagine Dumbledore first considering the issue of how to ward the Stone. Imagine Dumbledore considering whether to set true dangers to guard the Mirror. Imagine him imagining some young student blundering through those dangers at my behest. I think that is what Dumbledore is trying to avoid, by making it seem as though that strategy is invited, and so not cunning. Unless, of course, I have misunderstood what Dumbledore thinks Lord Voldemort will think." Professor Quirrell grinned, and it looked just as natural, on him, as any grin he'd shown Harry before. "Plotting does not come naturally to Dumbledore, but he tries because he must. To that task Dumbledore brings intelligence, dedication, the ability to learn from his mistakes, and an utter lack of native talent. He is marvelously hard to predict for that reason alone."

Harry turned away, looking at the door on the opposite side of the room. It wasn't a game to him, Professor. "My guess is that the intended solution for first-years is to ignore the broomstick and use Wingardium Leviosa to grab the key, since this isn't a Quidditch game and there are no rules forbidding that. So what absurdly overpowered spell are you going to unleash on this one, then?"

There was a brief silence but for the whizzing of keys.

Harry took several steps away from Professor Quirrell. "I probably shouldn't have said that, should I."

"Oh, no," Professor Quirrell said. "I think that is a quite reasonable thing to say to the most powerful Dark Wizard in the world when he is standing not a dozen paces from you."

Professor Quirrell put his wand back into the sleeve of his other hand, the hand that sometimes held the gun.

Then the Defense Professor reached into his mouth and took out what appeared to be a tooth. He tossed the false tooth high in the air, and when it came down, it had transformed into a wand that sparked a strange sense of recognition in Harry's mind, as though some part of him recognized that wand as being... part of him...

Thirteen and a half inches, yew, with a core of phoenix feather. Harry had memorized the information when the wandmaker Olli-something had given it, because it had seemed like it might be Plot-Relevant. The event, and the thinking that had underlain it, both felt a lifetime distant.

The Defense Professor raised that wand, and traced in the air a flaming

rune that was all jagged edges and malevolence; Harry took another instinctive step back. Then Professor Quirrell spoke. "Az-reth. Az-reth."

The flaming rune began pouring out fire that was ... twisted, as though the jagged edges of the rune had become the nature of the fire itself. The fire was blazing crimson, shaded further red than blood, glowing as searingly intense as an arc-welder. That brilliance in that shade seemed wrong in its own right, like nothing shaded so far red should give off that much light; and the searing crimson was shot through with veins of black that seemed to suck the light from the fire. Within the blackened fire, outlined in the interplay of crimson and darkness, animal shapes twisted wildly from one predator to another, cobra to hyena to scorpion.

"Az-reth. Az-reth." When Professor Quirrell had repeated the word six times, as much black-crimson fire had poured out as the volume of a small bush.

The cursed fire slowed in its changes as Professor Quirrell locked eyes upon it, taking on a single form, the form of a blackened blood-burning phoenix.

And something told Harry with a terrible certainty that if that black burning phoenix met Fawkes, the true phoenix would die and never be reborn.

Professor Quirrell made a single gesture with his wand, and the blackened fire went soaring across the room. It met the door and its keyhole, and with a single sweep of crimson-burning wings, most of the door and part of the archway was consumed. Then the tainted crimson blaze swept on.

Harry had only a glance through the hole to see huge statues just beginning to raise swords and clubs, when the blackened fire came among them, and they cracked and burned.

When it ended, the blackened-fire phoenix swept back in through the hole, and hovered above Professor Quirrell's left shoulder, the sun-intense crimson claws staying an inch from his robes.

"Go on ahead," said Professor Quirrell. "It's safe now."

Harry walked forward, needing to invoke his dark side's cognitive patterns in order to maintain calm enough to do it. Harry stepped over the glowing edges of the remaining part of the door, and gazed at a chessboard of ruined huge chess-pieces. The alternating tiles of black and white marble on the floor started five meters after the ruined doorway, and extended from wall to wall, but stopped five meters short of the next door on the opposite side of the room. The ceiling was significantly higher than any of the statues should have been

able to reach.

"I would guess," Harry said, and his dark side's cognitive patterns kept his voice calm, "that the intended solution is to fly over the statues using the broomstick from the previous room, since it wasn't actually needed to get the key?"

From behind, Professor Quirrell laughed, and it was Lord Voldemort's laugh. "Proceed," said a voice grown colder and higher. "Go to the next room. I wish to see what you will make of what is there."

Arranged by Dumbledore for first-years, Harry reminded himself, it WILL be safe, and he walked across the ruined chessboard, laid his hand upon that door's handle, and pushed it inward.

Half a second later, Harry slammed the door and leapt back.

It took Harry several seconds to master his breathing, and master himself. From behind the door came continued loud bellows, and great slams as of a rock club pounding the floor.

"I suppose," Harry said in a voice grown cold as well, "that since Dumbledore would hardly put a real mountain troll in there, the next challenge is an illusion of my worst memories. Like a Dementor, with the memory projected into the outside world. Very amusing, Professor."

Professor Quirrell advanced himself toward the door, and Harry stepped well aside. Besides the sense of doom that was now strong about the Professor, Harry's dark side or just plain instinct was advising him not to get anywhere near that black-crimson fire hovering above Professor Quirrell's shoulder.

Professor Quirrell swung open the door, and looked in. "Hm," Professor Quirrell said. "Just the troll, as you say. Ah, well. I had hoped to learn something about you more interesting than that. What lies within is a Kokorhekkus, also known as the common boggart."

"A boggart? What does that — no, I suppose I know what it does."

"A boggart," Professor Quirrell said, and now his voice was again that of a Hogwarts Professor lecturing, "gravitates to dark enclosures that are rarely opened, such as a neglected cupboard in the attic. It seeks to be left alone, and it will manifest in whatever form it thinks will scare you away."

"Scare me away?" Harry said. "I killed the troll."

"You leapt backward out of the room without thinking. A boggart seeks out the instinctive flinch, not the reasoned threat. Else it would have selected something more believable. In any case, the standard counter-Charm for a boggart is, of course, Fiendfyre." Professor Quirrell gestured, and the blackened fire leapt off his shoulder and poured through the doorway.

From within the room there was a single squeak, and then nothing.

They advanced into the boggart's former room, Professor Quirrell going first this time. With the seeming mountain troll gone, the room was just another huge chamber lit by sconces of cold blue light.

Professor Quirrell's gaze seemed distant, thoughtful. He crossed the room without waiting for Harry, and swung open the door on the opposite wall of his own accord.

Harry followed after, and not closely.

The next chamber contained a cauldron, a rack of bottled ingredients, chopping boards, stirring sticks, and the other apparatus of Potions. The light coming from the arched alcoves was white instead of blue, presumably because color vision was important to Potions-brewing. Professor Quirrell was already standing next to the brewing apparatus, scrutinizing a long parchment he had picked up. The door to the next chamber was guarded by a curtain of purple fire that would have looked a lot more threatening, if it hadn't seemed pale and weak by comparison to the blackened flame hovering over Professor Quirrell's shoulder.

Harry's suspension of disbelief had already checked out on vacation at this point, so he didn't say anything about how real-world security systems had the goal of *distinguishing* authorized from unauthorized personnel, which meant issuing challenges that behaved *differently* around people who were or weren't supposed to be there. For example, a *good* security challenge would be testing whether the entrant knew a lock combination that only authorized people had been told, and a *bad* security challenge would be testing whether the entrant could brew a potion according to written instructions that had been helpfully included.

Professor Quirrell tossed the parchment toward Harry, and it fluttered to the ground between them. "What do you make of this?" said Professor

Quirrell, who then stepped back so that Harry could come forward and pick up the parchment.

"Nope," Harry said after skimming the parchment. "Testing whether the entrant can solve a ridiculously straightforward logic puzzle about the order of the ingredients is still not a challenge that behaves differently for authorized and unauthorized personnel. It doesn't matter if you use a more interesting logic puzzle about three idols or a line of people wearing colored hats, you're still completely missing the point."

"Look at the other side," said Professor Quirrell.

Harry turned over the two-foot parchment.

On the other side, written in tiny letters, was the *longest* list of brewing instructions Harry had ever seen. "What on Earth —"

"A potion of effulgence, to quench the purple fire," Professor Quirrell said. "It is made by adding the same ingredients, over and over again, in slightly different ways. Imagine some eager young group of first-years, passing all the other chambers, thinking they are just about to reach the magic mirror, and then encountering this task. This room is the handiwork of the Potions Master indeed."

Harry glanced pointedly at the black fire shape on Professor Quirrell's shoulder. "Fire can't beat fire?"

"It can," said Professor Quirrell. "I am not sure it should. Suppose this room is trapped?"

Harry did *not* want to be stuck brewing this potion for laughs, or for whatever other reason Professor Quirrell was taking them through these chambers so slowly. The potions recipe had *thirty-five* separate occasions for adding bellflowers, fourteen times to add 'a lock of bright hair'... "Maybe the potion gives off a lethal gas that is fatal to adult wizards but not children. Or any of a hundred other deadly tricks, if we're suddenly being serious. Are we being serious?"

"This room is the handiwork of Severus Snape," Professor Quirrell said, once more looking thoughtful. "Snape is not a bystander in this game, not quite. He lacks Dumbledore's intelligence, but possesses the killing intent that Dumbledore never had."

"Well, whatever's going on here, it doesn't actually keep out children," Harry observed. "Lots of first-years made it through. And if you can somehow keep out everyone *except* children, then that, from Dumbledore's perspective,

forces Lord Voldemort to possess a child to enter. I don't see the point, given their goals."

"Indeed," Professor Quirrell said, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "But see, boy, this room lacks the triggers and tripsigns that are upon the others. There are no subtle wards to be defeated. It is as if I am *invited* to bypass the Potion and simply enter — but Snape knows that Lord Voldemort will perceive this. If in fact there was a trap laid for anyone who did not brew the potion, then it would be wiser to lay wards, and give no sign that this room was different from the others."

Harry listened, frowning in concentration. "So... the only point of leaving off the detection webs is to make you *not* bulldoze this room."

"I expect Snape expects me to deduce that as well," the Defense Professor said. "And past that point I cannot predict at what level he thinks I will play. I am patient, and I have given myself plenty of time for this endeavor. But Snape does not know me, he only knows Lord Voldemort. He has sometimes seen Lord Voldemort shriek in frustration, and act on impulses that appear counterproductive. Consider this matter from Snape's perspective: it is the Potions Master of Hogwarts telling Lord Voldemort to be patient and follow instructions if he wants to enter, as though Lord Voldemort were a mere schoolboy. I would find it easy to comply, smiling the while, and take my vengeance later. But Snape does not know that Lord Voldemort finds it easy to think this way." Professor Quirrell looked at Harry. "Boy, you saw me floating in the air by the Devil's Snare, did you not?"

Harry nodded. Then he noticed his confusion. "My Charms textbook says that it's impossible for wizards to levitate themselves."

"Yes," said Professor Quirrell, "that is what it says in your Charms textbook. No wizard may levitate themselves, or any object supporting their own weight; it is like trying to lift yourself up by your own bootstraps. Yet Lord Voldemort alone can fly — how? Answer as quickly as you can."

If the question was answerable by a first-year student — "You had someone else cast broomstick enchantments on your underwear, then you Obliviated them."

"Not quite," said Professor Quirrell. "The broomstick enchantments require a long narrow shape, which must be solid. Cloth will not do."

Harry's eyebrows furrowed. "How long does the shape have to be? Can you attach some short broomstick rods to a fabric harness, and fly using those?"

"Indeed, at first I strapped enchanted rods to my arms and legs, but that was only to teach myself a new mode of flight." Professor Quirrell drew back the sleeve of his robes, revealing the bare arm. "As you can see, I have nothing up my sleeve right now."

Harry absorbed this further constraint. "You had someone cast broomstick enchantments on your *bones?*"

Professor Quirrell sighed. "And that was one of Voldemort's most feared feats, or so I am told. After all these years, and some amount of reluctant Legilimency, I still do not truly comprehend what is *wrong* with ordinary people... But you are not one of them. It is time for you to begin contributing to this expedition. You have known Severus Snape more recently than I. Tell me your own analysis of this room."

Harry hesitated, trying to look thoughtful.

"I will mention," said Professor Quirrell, as the blackened-fire-phoenix on his shoulder seemed to extend its head and glare at Harry, "that if you knowingly allow me to fail, I will call it betrayal. I remind you that the Stone is key to Miss Granger's resurrection, and that I hold hostage the lives of hundreds of students."

"I remember," Harry said, and on the heels of this Harry's wonderful inventive brain came up with a thought.

Harry wasn't sure if he should say it.

The silence stretched.

"Have you thought of anything yet?" said Professor Quirrell. "Answer in Parseltongue."

No, this was *not* going to be easy, not against a smart opponent who could force you to tell the literal truth at any time. "Severus, at least the modern-day Severus, respects your intelligence a great deal," Harry said instead. "I think ... I think he might *expect* Voldemort to believe that Severus wouldn't believe that Voldemort could pass his test of patience, but Severus *would* expect Voldemort to pass it."

Professor Quirrell nodded. "That is a plausible theory. Do you believe it yourself? Answer in Parseltongue."

even thoughts and ideas... "Therefore, the point of this room is to delay Lord Voldemort for an hour. And if I wanted to kill you, believing what Dumbledore believes, the obvious thing to try would be a Dementor's Kiss. I mean, they

think you're a disembodied soul — are you, by the way?"

Professor Quirrell was still. "Dumbledore would not think of that method," the Defense Professor said after a time. "But Severus might." Professor Quirrell began to tap a finger against his cheek, his gaze distant. "You have power over Dementors, boy, can you tell me if there are any nearby?"

Harry closed his eyes. If there were voids in the world, he could not feel them. "None that I can sense."

"Answer in Parseltongue."

⊶SDo not ssensse life-eaterss. ℃

"But you were being honest with me when you suggested the possibility? You intended no clever trickery?"

سة Wass honesst. Not trick. سا

"Perhaps there is some means by which Dementors might be concealed, being told to leap out and eat a possessing soul if they see one..." Professor Quirrell was still tapping his cheek. "It is not impossible that I would qualify. Or it can be told to eat anyone who passes through this room too quickly, or anyone who is not a child. Bearing in mind that I hold Hermione and hundreds of other students hostage over you, would you use your power over Dementors to defend me, if a Dementor unmasked itself? Answer in Parseltongue."

سلاDon't know, الله Harry hissed.

I will ssimply abandon thiss body if they approach too closse. Sshall return sswiftly thiss time, and then there will be no sstopping me. Will torture your parentss for yearss, to punissh you for balking me. Hundredss of hosstage sstudentss die, including thosse you call friendss. Now I assk again. Will you usse power over life-eaterss to protect me, if life-eaterss come? \tag{\tau}.

Wyess, L. Harry whispered. The sadness and horror that Harry had pushed down flared up again, and his dark side had no stored patterns for handling the emotions. Why, Professor Quirrell, why are you like this...

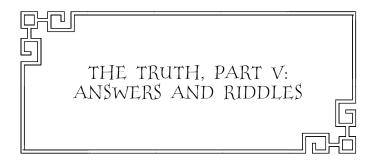
Professor Quirrell smiled. "That reminds me. Have you betrayed me yet?" "Have not betrayed you yet."

Professor Quirrell went over to the Potions equipment, and began chopping a root one-handed, the knife moving almost invisibly fast and with no apparent effort. The Fiendfyre phoenix drifted over to the opposite corner of the room and waited there. "All matters considered in their uncertainty, it seems wiser to expend the time to pass this room as a first-year would," said the Defense

## CHAPTER 107

Professor. "We may as well talk while we are waiting. You had questions, boy? I said that I would answer them, so ask."

## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHT



he Defense Professor had set up a cauldron, floating it into place with a wave of his wand, another wave starting a fire beneath it. A brief circling of the Defense Professor's finger had set in motion a long-handled spoon, and it had continued stirring the cauldron without being held. Now the Defense Professor was measuring out a heap of flowers from a large jar, what Harry supposed to be bellflowers; the indigo petals seemed luminous in the white light of the walls, and curved inward in a way that gave the impression of a desire for privacy. The first of these flowers had been added to the potion at once, but then the cauldron had just gone on stirring itself for a while.

The Defense Professor had assumed a position from which he could see Harry just by turning his head slightly, and Harry knew that he was within the Defense Professor's peripheral vision.

In the corner a Fiendfyre phoenix waited, some of the nearby stone beginning to gloss over as it melted to greater smoothness. The burning wings shed crimson light that gave everything in the room a tint of blood, and reflected in scarlet sparks from the glassware.

"Time is wasting," said Professor Quirrell. "Ask your questions, if you have them."

Why, Professor Quirrell, why, why must you be this way, why make yourself the monster, why Lord Voldemort, I know you might not want the same things I do, but I can't imagine what you want that makes this the best way to get it...

That was what Harry's brain wanted to know.

What Harry *needed* to know was... some way out of what was going to happen next. But the Defense Professor had said that he wouldn't talk about his future plans. It was strange enough that the Defense Professor was willing to talk about *anything*, that had to contradict one of his Rules...

"I'm thinking," Harry said aloud.

Professor Quirrell smiled slightly. He was using a pestle to grind the potion's first magical ingredient, a glowing red hexagon. "I *quite* understand," said the Defense Professor. "But do not think over-long, child."

Goals: Prevent Lord Voldemort from harming people, find a way to kill or neutralize him, but first get the Stone and resurrect Hermione...

... convince Professor Quirrell to STOP THIS...

Harry swallowed, pushing down the emotion, trying not to let the water reach his eyes. Tears probably wouldn't make a good impression on Lord Voldemort. Professor Quirrell was already frowning, though from the direction of his gaze he was examining a leaf colored in vivid shades of white, green, and purple.

There wasn't any obvious way to reach any of the goals, not yet. All Harry could do was ask the questions that seemed most likely to provide useful information, even if Harry didn't yet have a plan.

So we just ask about whatever seems most interesting? said Harry's Ravenclaw side. I'm up for that.

*Shut up*, Harry told the voice; and then, on further reflection, decided that he was no longer pretending it was there.

Four topics came to Harry's mind as being priorities from the standpoint of curiosity about important things. Four questions, then, four major subjects, to try to fit in while this potion was still being brewed.

Four questions...

"I ask my first question," Harry said. "What really happened on the night of October 31st, 1981?" Why was that night different from all other nights... "I would like the entire story, please."

The question of how and why Lord Voldemort had survived his apparent death seemed likely to matter for future planning.

"I expected you would ask that," Professor Quirrell said, dropping a bellflower and a white glittering stone into the potion. "To begin, everything I told you about the Horcrux spell is true; as you should realize, since I spoke in Parseltongue."

Harry nodded.

"Within seconds after you learned the details of the spell, you perceived the central flaw, and began pondering how the spell might be improved. Do you think the young Tom Riddle was any different?"

Harry shook his head.

"Well, he was," said Professor Quirrell. "Whenever I was tempted to despair of you, I reminded myself how I was an idiot at twice your age. When I was fifteen I made myself a Horcrux as a certain book had shown me, using the death of Abigail Myrtle beneath the eyes of Slytherin's basilisk. I planned to make a new Horcrux every year after I left Hogwarts, and call that my fallback plan if my other hopes of immortality did not come to fruition. In retrospect, the young Tom Riddle was grasping straws. The thought of making a better Horcrux, of not being content with the spell I had already learned... this thought did not come to me until I had grasped the stupidity of ordinary people, and realized which follies of theirs I had imitated. But in time I learned the habit that you inherited from me, to ask in every instance how it might be done better. To be content with the spell I had learned from a book, when it bore only a faint resemblance to what I truly wanted? Absurd! And so I set forth to create a better spell."

"You have true immortality, now?" Harry was aware that, even with everything else going on, this was a question more important than war and strategy.

"Indeed," said Professor Quirrell. He paused in his Potions work and turned to face Harry fully; there was a look of exultation in the man's eyes that Harry had never seen there before. "In all the Darkest Arts I could find, in all the interdicted secrets to which Slytherin's Monster gave me keys, in all the lore remembered among wizardkind, I found only hints and smatterings of what I needed. So I rewove it and remade it, and devised a new ritual based on new principles. I kept that ritual burning in my mind for years, perfecting it in imagination, pondering its meaning and making fine adjustments, waiting for the intention to stabilize. At last I dared to invoke my ritual, an invented sacrificial ritual, based on a principle untested by all known magic. And I lived,

and yet live." The Defense Professor spoke with quiet triumph, as though the act itself was so great that no words could ever do it justice. "I still use the word 'Horcrux', but only from sentiment. It is a new thing entirely, the greatest of all my creations."

"As one of my questions you said you'd answer, I ask how to cast that spell," Harry said.

"Denied." The Defense Professor turned back to his potion, dropping in a grey-flecked white feather and a bellflower. "I had thought perhaps to teach you when you were older, for no Tom Riddle would be content otherwise; but I have changed my mind."

Memory is a hard thing to recall, sometimes, and Harry had been trying to remember if Professor Quirrell had dropped any hints about this subject before. Something about Professor Quirrell's phrasing sparked a memory: *Perhaps you will be told when you are older...* 

"There are still physical anchors for your immortality," Harry said aloud. "It resembles the old Horcrux spell by that much, which is another reason you still call them Horcruxes." It was dangerous to say aloud, but Harry needed to *know*. "If I'm wrong, you can always deny it in Parseltongue."

Professor Quirrell was smiling evilly. Sour guesss iss right, boy, for all the good it doess you. L.

Unfortunately, that wasn't a difficult vulnerability to cover if the Enemy was smart. Harry wouldn't ordinarily have made the suggestion, just in case the Enemy *hadn't* thought of it for themselves, but in this case he'd already made it. "One horcux dropped into an active volcano, weighted so it would sink into the Earth's mantle," Harry said heavily. "The same place I thought of dropping the Dementor if I couldn't destroy it. And then you asked me where else I would hide something if I didn't want anyone to find it ever again. One Horcrux buried kilometers down, in an anonymous cubic meter of the Earth's crust. One Horcrux you dropped into the Mariana Trench. One Horcrux floating high in the stratosphere, transparent. Even you don't know where they are, because you Obliviated the exact details from your memory. And the last Horcrux is the Pioneer 11 plaque that you snuck into NASA and modified. It's where you get your image of the stars, when you cast the spell of starlight. Fire, earth, water, air, void." *Something of a riddle*, the Defense Professor had called it, and therefore Harry had remembered it. Something of a Riddle.

"Indeed," said the Defense Professor. "It did give me something of a shock

when you remembered it that quickly, but I suppose it makes no difference; all five are beyond my reach, or yours."

That might not be true, especially if there was some way to trace the magical connection somehow and determine the location . . . though presumably Voldemort would have done his best to obscure it . . . but what magic had done, magic might be able to defeat. Pioneer 11 might be far away by wizard standards, but NASA knew exactly where it was, and it was probably a lot more reachable if you could use magic to tell the Tsiolkovsky rocket equation to bugger off . . .

A sudden note of worry plucked at Harry's mind. There was no rule saying the Defense Professor needed to have told the truth about *which* interstellar probe he'd Horcruxed, and if Harry recalled correctly, communication and tracking of the Pioneer 10 probe had been lost shortly after the Jupiter fly-by.

Why wouldn't Professor Quirrell have just Horcruxed them both?

The obvious next thought came to Harry. It was something that ought not to be suggested, if the Enemy had not thought of it. But it seemed extremely probable that the Enemy had thought of it.

Stell me, teacher, to Harry hissed, Swould desstroying thosse five anchors sslay you?

www. Why do you assk? whissed the Defense Professor, with a lilt to the hiss that Parseltongue translated as snakish amusement. wsDo you ssusspect that ansswer is no? w

Harry couldn't think of how to answer, though he strongly suspected that it didn't matter in any case.

Your ssusspicion iss right, boy. Desstroying thosse five would not render me mortal.

Harry's throat felt a bit dry again. If the spell had no disastrous cost associated with it ... "Mow many anchorss did you make?"...

Would not ordinarily ssay, but iss clear you have already guesssed. The Defense Professor's smile widened. Sansswer iss that I do not know. Sstopped counting ssomewhere around one hundred and sseven. Ssimply made a habit of it each time I murdered ssomeone in private.

Over *one hundred* murders, in private, before Lord Voldemort had stopped counting. And even worse news —"Your immortality spell still requires a human death? *Why?*"

SGreat creation maintainss life and magic within devicess created by ssac-

rificing life and magic of otherss. L. Again that hissing snake laughter. Liked falsse desscription of previousss Horcrux sspell sso much, sso dissappointed when realissed truth of it, thoughtss of improved verssion came out in that sshape. L.

Harry wasn't sure why the Defense Professor was giving him all this vital information, *but there had to be a reason*, and that was making him nervous. "So you really are a disembodied spirit possessing Quirinus Quirrell."

Areas. I sshall return sswiftly, if thiss body iss killed. Will be greatly annoyed, and vengeful. I am telling you this, boy, so that you do not try anything stupid.

"I understand," Harry said. He did his best to organize his thoughts, remember what he'd meant to ask next, while the Defense Professor turned his eyes back to the potion. The man's left hand was dribbling crushed seashell into the cauldron, while his right hand dropped in another bellflower. "So what did happen on October 31st? You... tried to turn the baby Harry Potter into a Horcrux, either the new kind or the old kind. You did it deliberately, because you told Lily Potter," Harry took a breath. Now that he knew why the chills were there, he could endure them. "Very well, I accept the bargain. Yourself to die, and the child to live. Now drop your wand so that I can murder you." In retrospect, it was clear that Harry had remembered that event mainly from Lord Voldemort's perspective, and only at the very end had he seen it through the baby Harry Potter's eyes. "What did you do? Why did you do it?"

"Trelawney's prophecy," Professor Quirrell said. His hand tapped a bellflower with a strip of copper before dropping it in. "I spent long days pondering it, after Snape brought the prophecy to me. Prophecies are never trivial things. And how shall I put this in a way that does not make you think stupid things... well, I shall say it, and if you are stupid I shall be annoyed. I was fascinated by the prophecy's assertion that someone would be my equal, because it might mean that person could hold up the other end of an intelligent conversation. After fifty years of being surrounded by gibbering stupidity, I no longer cared whether my reaction might be considered a literary cliche. I was not about to pass up on that opportunity without thinking about it first. And then, you see, I had a *clever idea*." Professor Quirrell sighed. "It occurred to me how I might fulfill the Prophecy my own way, to my own benefit. I would mark the baby as my equal by casting the old Horcrux spell in such fashion as to imprint my own spirit onto the baby's blank slate; it would be a purer copy of myself, since there would be no old self to mix with the new. In

some years, when I had become bored with ruling Britain and moved on to other things, I would arrange with the other Tom Riddle that he should appear to vanquish me, and he would rule over the Britain he had saved. We would play the game against each other forever, keeping our lives interesting amid a world of fools. I knew a dramatist would predict that the two of us would end by destroying each other; but I pondered long upon it, and decided that both of us would simply decline to play out the drama. That was my decision and I was confident that it would remain so; both Tom Riddles, I thought, would be too intelligent to truly go down that road. The prophecy seemed to hint that if I destroyed all but a remnant of Harry Potter, then our spirits would not be so different, and we could exist in the same world."

"Something went wrong," Harry said. "Something that blew off the top of the Potters' home in Godric's Hollow, gave me the scar on my forehead, and left your burnt body behind."

Professor Quirrell nodded. His hands had slowed in their Potions work. "The resonance in our magic," Professor Quirrell said quietly. "When I had shaped the baby's spirit to be like my own..."

Harry remembered the moment in Azkaban when Professor Quirrell's Killing Curse had collided with his Patronus. The burning, tearing agony in his forehead, like his head had been about to split in half.

"I cannot count how many times I have thought of that night, rehearsing my mistake, thinking of wiser things I should have done," said Professor Quirrell. "I later decided that I should have thrown my wand from my hand and changed into my Animagus form. But that night... that night, I instinctively tried to control the chaotic fluctuations in my magic, even as I felt myself burning up from inside. That was the wrong decision, and I failed. So my body was destroyed, even as I overwrote the infant Harry Potter's mind; either of us destroying all but a remnant of the other. And then..." Professor Quirrell's expression was controlled. "And then, when I regained consciousness inside my Horcruxes, it turned out that my great creation did not work as I had hoped. I should have been able to float free of my Horcruxes and possess any victim that consented to me, or that was too weak to refuse me. That was the part of my great creation that failed my intent. As with the original Horcrux spell, I would only be able to enter a victim who contacted the physical Horcrux... and I had hidden my unnumbered Horcruxes in places where nobody would ever find them. Your instinct is correct, boy, this would not be a good time to

laugh."

Harry stayed very quiet.

The Potions-making had come to a temporary pause, a space where no ingredients were added while the cauldron simmered for a time. "I spent most of my time looking at the stars," Professor Quirrell said, his voice quieter now. The Defense Professor had turned from the potion, staring at the whiteilluminated walls of the room. "My remaining hope was the Horcruxes I had hidden in the hopeless idiocy of my youth. Imbuing them into ancient lockets, instead of anonymous pebbles; guarding them beneath wells of poison in the center of a lake of Inferi, instead of Portkeying them into the sea. If someone found one of those, and penetrated their ridiculous protections... but that seemed like a distant hope. I was not sure I would ever be embodied again. Yet at least I was immortal. The worst of all fates had been averted, my great creation had done that much. I had little left to hope for, and little left to fear. I decided that I would not go insane, since there seemed to be no advantage in it. Instead, I gazed out at the stars and thought, as the Sun slowly diminished behind me. I reflected on the errors of my past life; they were many, in that hindsight. In my imagination I constructed powerful new rituals I might attempt, if I were free to use my magic once more, and yet confident of my immortality. I contemplated ancient riddles at greater length than before, for all that I had once thought myself patient. I knew that if I won free, I would be more powerful by far than in my previous life; but I mostly did not expect that to happen." Professor Quirrell turned back to the potion. "Nine years and four months after that night, a wandering adventurer named Quirinus Quirrell won past the protections guarding one of my earliest Horcruxes. The rest you know. And now, boy, you may say what we both know you are thinking."

"Um," Harry said. "It doesn't seem like a very smart thing to say —"

"Indeed, Mr. Potter. It is not a clever thing to say to me. Not even a little. Not in the slightest. But I *know you're thinking it*, and you will *go on thinking it* and I will *go on knowing that* until you say it. So speak."

"So. Um. I realize that this is something that is more obvious in hindsight than in foresight, and I'm certainly not suggesting that you try to correct the error now, but if you are a Dark Lord and you happen to hear about a child who has been prophesied to defeat you, there is a certain spell which is unblockable, unstoppable, and works every single time on anything with a brain —"

"Yes thank you Mr. Potter that thought occurred to me several times over the next nine years." Professor Quirrell picked up another bellflower and began crumbling it in his bare fist. "I made that principle the centerpiece of my Battle Magic curriculum after I learned its centrality the hard way. It was not the first Rule on the younger Tom Riddle's list. It is only by harsh experience that we learn which principles take priority over which other principles; as mere words they all sound equally persuasive. In retrospect it would have been better if I had sent Bellatrix to the Potters' home in my place; but I had a Rule telling me that for such matters I must go myself and not try sending a trusted lieutenant. Yes, I considered the Killing Curse; but I wondered if casting the Killing Curse at an infant would somehow cause the curse to bounce off and hit me, thus fulfilling the prophecy. How was I to know?"

"So use an axe, it's hard to get a prophecy-fulfilling spell backfire out of an axe," Harry said and then shut up.

"I decided the safest path was to try to fulfill the prophecy on my own terms," Professor Quirrell said. "Needless to say, the next time I hear a prophecy I do not like, I will tear it apart at *every possible point of intervention*, rather than trying to play along." Professor Quirrell was crushing a rose as though to squeeze the juice out of it, still using his bare fist. "And now everyone thinks the Boy-Who-Lived is somehow immune to the Killing Curse, even though Killing Curses do not ruin houses or leave burnt bodies behind them, *because it has not occurred to them that Lord Voldemort would ever use any other spell.*"

Harry again stayed quiet. It had occurred to Harry that there was another obvious way that Lord Voldemort could have avoided his mistake. Something that might perhaps be easier to see given a Muggle upbringing, instead of the wizarding way of looking at things.

Harry had not yet decided whether to tell Professor Quirrell about his thought; there were both pros and cons to pointing out that particular error.

After a time Professor Quirrell picked up the next Potions ingredient, a strand of what looked like unicorn hair. "I tell you this as a caution," said Professor Quirrell. "Do not expect me to be delayed another nine years, if you somehow destroy this body of mine. I set Horcruxes in better places at once, and now even that is unnecessary. Thanks to you, I learned where to find the Resurrection Stone. The Resurrection Stone does not bring back the dead, of course; but it holds a more ancient magic than my own for projecting the seeming of a spirit. And since I am one who has defeated death, Cadmus's

Hallow acknowledged me its master, and answered all my will. I have now incorporated it into my great creation." Professor Quirrell smiled slightly. "I had many years earlier considered making that device a Horcrux, but decided against it at the time, since I realized that the ring had magic of unknown nature... ah, such ironies does life play upon us. But I digress. You, boy, you brought that about, you freed my spirit to fly where it pleases and seduce the most opportune victim, by being too casual with your secrets. It is a catastrophe for any who oppose me, and you wrought it with one finger drawing wetness on a tea-saucer. This world will be a safer place for all, if you learn the rectitude that wizardborns absorb in childhood. "And all this that I have just said is the truth."

Harry closed his eyes, and his own hand massaged his forehead; if he had seen it from the outside, it would have looked the mirror of Professor Quirrell in deep thought.

The problem of defeating Professor Quirrell was looking increasingly difficult, even by the standards of the sort of impossible problems that Harry had solved already. If communicating that difficulty was what Professor Quirrell was trying to do, he was *succeeding*. Harry was starting to seriously consider the possibility that it might be better to offer to rule Britain as Voldemort's *non-homicidal* delegate, if Professor Quirrell himself would just agree to *stop killing people all the time*. Even *mostly*.

But that wasn't likely to happen.

Harry stared at his hands, from where he had sat down upon the floor, feeling sadness shading over into despair. The Lord Voldemort who'd given Harry his dark side had spent *that long* thinking things over and reflecting on his own thought processes... and had emerged as the calm, clear-headed, and still homicidal Professor Quirrell.

Professor Quirrell added a pinch of golden hair to the *potion of effulgence*, and that reminded Harry that time was continuing to move; the locks of bright hair were rarer than the bellflowers.

"I ask my second question," Harry said. "Tell me about the Philosopher's Stone. Does it do anything besides making Transfigurations permanent? Is it possible to make more Stones, and why is that problem hard?"

Professor Quirrell was bent over the potion, and Harry could not see his face. "Very well, I shall tell you the Stone's story as I have inferred it. The one and only power of the Stone is the imposition of permanency, to render a

temporary form into a true and lasting substance — a power absolutely beyond ordinary spells. Conjurations such as the castle Hogwarts are maintained by a constant well of magic. Even Metamorphmagi cannot manifest golden fingernails and then trim them for sale. It is theorized that the Metamorphmagus curse merely rearranges the substance of their flesh, like a Muggle smith manipulates iron with hammer and tongs; and their body contains no gold. If Merlin himself could create gold from thin air, history does not record it. So the Stone, we can guess even before research, must be a very old thing indeed. In contrast, Nicholas Flamel has been known to the world for a mere six centuries. Tell me the obvious next question to ask, boy, if you wanted to trace the Stone's history."

"Um," Harry said. He rubbed his forehead, concentrating. If the Stone was old, but the world had only known Nicholas Flamel for six centuries... "Was there some other very long-lived wizard who disappeared at around the same time Nicholas Flamel showed up?"

"Close," said Professor Quirrell. "You recall that six centuries ago there was a Dark Lady called undying, the sorceress Baba Yaga? She was said to be able to heal any wound in herself, to change shape into any form she pleased... she held the Stone of Permanency, obviously. And then one year Baba Yaga agreed to teach Battle Magic at Hogwarts, under an old and respected truce." Professor Quirrell looked... angry, a look such as Harry had rarely seen on him. "But she was not trusted, and so there was invoked a curse. Some curses are easier to cast when they bind yourself and others alike; Slytherin's Parselmouth curse is an example of such. In this case, Baba Yaga's signature, and signatures from every student and teacher of Hogwarts, were placed within an ancient device known as the Goblet of Fire. Baba Yaga swore not to shed a drop of students' blood, nor take from the students anything that was theirs. In return, the students swore not to shed a drop of Baba Yaga's blood, nor take from her anything that was hers. So they all signed, with the Goblet of Fire to witness it and punish the transgressor."

Professor Quirrell picked up a new ingredient, a loose thread of gold wrapped around a pinch of foul-looking substance. "Entering her sixth year at Hogwarts, then, was a witch named Perenelle. And although Perenelle was new-come into the beauty of her youth, her heart was already blacker than Baba Yaga's own —"

"You're calling her evil?" Harry said, then realized he had just committed

the fallacy of ad hominem tu quoque.

"Hush, boy, I am telling the story. Where was I? Ah, yes, Perenelle, the beautiful and covetous. Perenelle seduced the Dark Lady over the months, with gentle touches and flirtations and the shy pretense of innocence. The Dark Lady's heart was captured, and they became lovers. And then one night Perenelle whispered how she had heard of Baba Yaga's shape-changing power and how this thought had inflamed her desires; thus Perenelle swayed Baba Yaga to come to her with the Stone in hand, to assume many guises in a single night, for their pleasures. Among other forms Perenelle bid Baba Yaga take the form of a man; and they lay together in the fashion of a man and a woman. But Perenelle had been a virgin until that night. And since they were all rather old-fashioned in those days, the Goblet of Fire accounted that as the shedding of Perenelle's blood, and the taking of what was hers; thus Baba Yaga was tricked into being forsworn, and the Goblet rendered her defenseless. Then Perenelle killed the unsuspecting Baba Yaga as she slept in Perenelle's bed, killed the Dark Lady who had loved her and come peacefully to Hogwarts under truce; and that was the end of the pact by which Dark Wizards and Witches taught Battle Magic at Hogwarts. For the next few centuries the Goblet of Fire was used to oversee pointless inter-school tournaments, and then it resided in a disused chamber at Beauxbatons, until I finally stole it." Professor Quirrell dropped a pale beige-pink twig into the cauldron, and its color changed to white just as it touched the surface. "But I digress. Perenelle took the Stone from Baba Yaga, and assumed the guise and name of Nicholas Flamel. She also kept her identity as Perenelle, calling herself Flamel's wife. The two have appeared together in public, but that might be done by any number of obvious methods."

"And the Stone's manufacture?" said Harry, his brain working to process all this. "I saw an alchemical recipe for it, in a book —"

"Another lie. Perenelle was making it appear as though 'Nicholas Flamel' had earned the right to live forever by completing a great magic that any could attempt. And she was giving others a false path to pursue, instead of seeking the one true Stone as Perenelle had sought Baba Yaga's." Professor Quirrell looked rather sour. "It should come as no surprise that I spent years trying to master that false recipe. Next you will ask why I did not kidnap, torture, and kill Perenelle after I learned the truth."

This had not in fact been a question that had come into Harry's mind.

Professor Quirrell continued to speak. "The answer is that Perenelle had foreseen and forestalled the ambitions of Dark Wizards like myself. 'Nicholas Flamel' publicly took Unbreakable Vows not to be coerced by any means into relinquishing his Stone — to guard immortality from the covetous, he claimed, as if that were a public service. I was afraid the Stone would be lost forever, if Perenelle died without saying where it was hidden, and her Vow prevented attempts at torture. Further, I had hopes of gaining Perenelle's knowledge, if I could find the right strategy to extract it from her. Though Perenelle began with little lore of her own, she has held hostage the lives of wizards greater than herself, holding out dribs and drabs of healing in exchange for secrets, and small reversals of age in exchange for power. Perenelle does not condescend to bestow any real youth upon others — but if you hear of a wizard who lived, greybearded, to the age of two hundred and fifty, you may be sure that her hand was in play. By my own generation, the centuries had given Perenelle enough of an advantage that she could raise up Albus Dumbledore as a counterweight to the Dark Lord Grindelwald. When I appeared as Lord Voldemort, Perenelle raised up Dumbledore yet further, parceling out another drop of her hoarded lore whenever Lord Voldemort seemed to gain an advantage. I felt like I ought to be able to figure out something clever to do with that situation, but I never did. I did not attack her directly, for I was not sure of my great creation; it was not impossible that I would someday need to go begging to her for a dollop of reversed age." Professor Quirrell dropped two bellflowers at once into the potion, and they seemed to merge as they touched the bubbling liquid. "But now I am sure of my creation, and so I have decided that the time has come to take the Stone by force."

Harry hesitated. "I would like to hear you answer in Parseltongue, was all of that true?"

a tale implies filling in certain gaps; I was not present to observe when Perenelle seduced Baba Yaga. "The bassicss sshould be mosstly correct, I think."

Harry had noticed a trace of confusion. "Then I don't understand why the Stone is here in Hogwarts. Wouldn't the best defense just be hiding it under an anonymous rock in Greenland?"

"Perhaps she respected my abilities as a particularly good finder," said the Defense Professor. He appeared focused on his cauldron as he dipped a bellflower into a jar of liquid labeled with the Potions symbol for rainwater. We are very much alike, the Defense Professor and I, in some ways if not others. If I imagine what I'd do, given his problem...

"Did you bluff everyone into *believing* you had some way of finding the Stone?" Harry said aloud. "So that Perenelle would put it inside Hogwarts, where Dumbledore could guard it?"

The Defense Professor sighed, not looking up from the cauldron. "I suppose that stratagem would be futile to conceal from you. Yes, after I possessed Quirrell and returned, I implemented a strategy I had conceived while gazing at the stars. First I made sure to be accepted as Defense Professor at Hogwarts, for it would not do to have suspicions raised while I was still seeking employment. When that was done, I arranged for one of Perenelle's curse-breaking expeditions to discover a falsified but credible inscription describing how the Crown of the Serpent could be used to seek out the Stone wherever it was hidden. Immediately after, before Perenelle could buy up the Crown, it was stolen; furthermore I left clear indications that the thief had possessed the power to speak to snakes. So Perenelle thought that I could infallibly find the Stone's location, and that it needed a guardian powerful enough to defeat me. That is how the Stone came to be held in Hogwarts, in Dumbledore's domain. Just as I intended, naturally, since I had already gained access to Hogwarts for the year. I think that is all of this that concerns you, if I speak not of future plans."

Harry frowned. Professor Quirrell should not have told him that. Unless the strategy had somehow become irrelevant to any future deception of Perenelle...? Or unless, by answering so quickly, the Defense Professor had hoped to have people conclude that it was a double-bluff, and that the Crown of the Serpent really could find the Stone...

Harry decided not to question this answer in Parseltongue.

Another lock of bright hair, seeming white but not with age, was gently dribbled into the cauldron, again reminding Harry that they were on a time limit. Harry considered, but he couldn't see any further path to pursue this line of questioning; there was no known way to manufacture more Philosopher's Stones and no obvious way to invent such, which was probably the *objectively* worst news Harry had heard all day.

Harry took a deep breath. "I ask my third question," Harry said. "What's the truth behind this entire school year? All the plots you ran, all the plots you know about."

"Hm," said Professor Quirrell, dropping another bellflower into the potion, accompanied by a plant-shape like a tiny cross. "Let me see . . . the most shocking twist is that the Defense Professor turns out to be secretly Voldemort."

"Well, obviously," Harry said, with a good deal of self-directed bitterness. "Then where do you wish me to start?"

"Why did you kill Hermione?" The question just slipped out.

Professor Quirrell's pale eyes glanced up from the potion, watched him intently. "One would think that should be evident — but I suppose I cannot blame you for distrusting what seems evident. To understand the object of an obscure plot, observe its consequences and ask who might have intended them. I killed Miss Granger to improve your position relative to that of Lucius Malfoy, since my plans did not call for him to have so much leverage over you. I admit I am impressed by how far you managed to parlay that opening."

Harry unclenched his teeth, which took an effort. "That's after your failed attempt to *frame* Hermione for the attempted murder of Draco and *send her to Azkaban* because of *why?* Because you didn't like the influence she was having on me?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Professor Quirrell said. "If I had only wished to remove Miss Granger, I would not have brought the Malfoys into it. I observed your game with Draco Malfoy and found it amusing, but I knew it could not continue for very long before Lucius learned and intervened; and then your folly would have brought you great trouble, for Lucius would not take it lightly. Had you just been able to *lose* during the Wizengamot trial, *lose* as I had taught you, then in only two more weeks, ironclad evidence would have shown that Lucius Malfoy, after discovering his son's seeming perfidy, had Imperiused Professor Sprout into using the Blood-Cooling Charm on Mr. Malfoy and casting the False Memory Charm on Miss Granger. Lucius would have been swept off the political gameboard, sent to exile if not Azkaban; Draco Malfoy would have inherited the wealth of House Malfoy, and your influence over him would have been unchallenged. Instead I had to abort that plot in mid-course. You managed to completely disrupt the real plan in the course of sacrificing double your entire fortune, by giving Lucius Malfoy the perfect opportunity to prove his true concern for his son. You have an incredible anti-talent for meddling, I must say."

"And you also thought," Harry said, even with his dark side's patterns he had to work to keep his voice level and cool, "that two weeks in Azkaban

would improve Miss Granger's disposition, and get her to stop being a bad influence on me. So you somehow arranged for there to be newspaper stories calling for her to be sent to Azkaban, rather than some other penalty."

Professor Quirrell's lips drew up in a thin smile. "Good catch, boy. Yes, I thought she might serve as your Bellatrix. That particular outcome would also have provided you with a constant reminder of how much respect was due the law, and helped you develop appropriate attitudes toward the Ministry."

"Your plot was stupidly complicated and had no chance of working." Harry knew he ought to be more tactful, that he was engaging in more of what Professor Quirrell called *folly*, but in that instant he could not bring himself to care.

"It was less complicated than Dumbledore's plot to have the three armies tie in the Christmas Battle, and not much more complicated than my own plot to make you think Dumbledore had blackmailed Mr. Zabini. The insight you are missing, Mr. Potter, is that these were not plots that *needed* to succeed." Professor Quirrell continued to casually stir the potion, smiling. "There are plots that *must* succeed, where you keep the core idea as simple as possible and take every precaution. There are also plots where it is acceptable to fail, and with those you can indulge yourself, or test the limits of your ability to handle complications. It was not as if something going wrong with any of those plots would have killed me." Professor Quirrell was no longer smiling. "Our journey into Azkaban was of the first type, and I was less amused by your antics there."

"What *exactly* did you do to Hermione?" Some part of Harry wondered at the evenness of his voice.

"Obliviations and False Memory Charms. I could not trust anything else to go undetected by the Hogwarts wards and the scrutiny I knew her mind would undergo." A flicker of frustration crossed Professor Quirrell's face. "Part of what you rightly call complication is because the first version of my plot did not go as planned, and I had to modify it. I came to Miss Granger in the hallways wearing the appearance of Professor Sprout, to offer her a conspiracy. My first attempt at suasion failed. I Obliviated her and tried again with a new presentation. The second bait failed. The third bait failed. The *tenth* bait failed. I was so frustrated that I began going through my entire library of guises, including those more appropriate to Mr. Zabini. *Still* nothing worked. The child *would not* violate her childish code."

"You do not get to call her childish, Professor." Harry's voice sounded strange in his own ears. "Her code worked. It prevented you from tricking her. The whole point of having deontological ethical injunctions is that arguments for violating them are often much less trustworthy than they look. You don't get to criticize her rules when they worked exactly as intended." After they resurrected Hermione, Harry would tell her that Lord Voldemort himself hadn't been able to tempt her into doing wrong, and that was why he'd killed her.

"Fair enough, I suppose," said Professor Quirrell. "There is a saying that even a stopped clock is right twice a day, and I do not think Miss Granger was actually being reasonable. Still, Rule Ten: one must not rant about the opposition's unworthiness after they have foiled you. Regardless. After two full hours of failed attempts, I realized that I was being over-stubborn, and that I did not need Miss Granger to carry out the exact part I had planned for her. I gave up on my original intent, and instead imbued Miss Granger with False Memories of watching Mr. Malfoy plotting against her under circumstances that implied she should not tell you or the authorities. In the end it was Mr. Malfoy who gave me the opening I needed, entirely by luck." Professor Quirrell dropped a bellflower and a scrap of parchment into the cauldron.

"Why did the wards show the Defense Professor as having killed Hermione?"

"I wore the mountain troll as a false tooth while Dumbledore was identifying me to the Hogwarts wards as the Defense Professor." A slight smile. "Other living weapons cannot be Transfigured; they will not survive the disenchantment for the requisite six hours to avoid being traced by Time-Turner. The fact that a mountain troll was used as a weapon of assassination was a clear sign that the assassin had needed a proxy weapon that could be Transfigured safely. Combined with the evidence of the wards, and Dumbledore's own knowledge of how he had identified me to Hogwarts, you could have deduced who was responsible — in theory. However, experience has taught me that such puzzles are far harder to solve when you do not already know the solution, and I considered it a small risk. Ah, that reminds me, I have a question of my own." The Defense Professor was now giving Harry an intent look. "What gave me away at the last, in the corridor outside these chambers?"

Harry put aside other emotions to weigh up the cost and benefit of answering honestly, came to the conclusion that the Defense Professor was giving

away far more information than he was getting (why?) and that it was best not to give the appearance of reticence. "The main thing," Harry said, "was that it was too improbable that everyone had arrived in Dumbledore's corridor at the same time. I tried running with the hypothesis that everyone who arrived had to be coordinated, including you."

"But I had said that I was following Snape," the Defense Professor said. "Was that not plausible?"

"It was, but..." Harry said. "Um. The laws governing what constitutes a good explanation don't talk about plausible excuses you hear afterward. They talk about the probabilities we assign in advance. That's why science makes people do advance predictions, instead of trusting explanations people come up with afterward. And I wouldn't have predicted in advance for you to follow Snape and show up like that. Even if I'd known in advance that you could put a trace on Snape's wand, I wouldn't have expected you to do it and follow him just then. Since your explanation didn't make me feel like I would have predicted the outcome in advance, it remained an improbability. I started to wonder if Sprout's mastermind might have arranged for you to show up, too. And then I realized the note to myself hadn't really come from future-me, and that gave it away completely."

"Ah," said the Defense Professor, and sighed. "Well, I think it is all working out for the best. You did understand only too late; and there would have been inconveniences as well as benefits to you remaining unaware."

"What on *Earth* were you trying to do? The reason I was trying so hard to figure it out was that the whole thing was just so weird."

"That should have pointed at Dumbledore, not myself," said Professor Quirrell, and frowned. "The fact is that Miss Greengrass was not supposed to arrive in that corridor for several hours... though I suppose, since I did have Mr. Malfoy give her the clue I assigned her, it is not too surprising they banded together. Had Mr. Nott arrived seemingly alone, events would have played out less farcically. But I consider myself a specialist in battlefield control magics, and I was able to ensure that the fight went as I wished. I suppose it did end up looking a bit ridiculous." The Defense Professor dropped a peach slice and a bellflower into the cauldron. "But let us defer our discussion of the Mirror until we reach it. Did you have any more questions concerning Miss Granger's regrettable and hopefully temporary demise?"

"Yes," Harry said in an even voice. "What did you do to the Weasley

twins? Dumbledore thought — I mean, the school saw the Headmaster go to the Weasley twins after Hermione was arrested. Dumbledore thought you, as Voldemort, had wondered why Dumbledore had done so, and that you'd checked on the Weasley twins, found and took their map, and Obliviated them afterward?"

"Dumbledore was quite correct," Professor Quirrell said, shaking his head as though in wonderment. "He was also an utter fool to leave the Hogwarts Map in the possession of those two idiots. I had an unpleasant shock after I recovered the Map; it showed my name and yours correctly! The Weasley idiots had thought it a mere malfunction, especially after you received your Cloak and your Time-Turner. If Dumbledore had kept the Map himself — if the Weasleys had ever spoken of it to Dumbledore — but they did not, thankfully."

Showed my name and yours correctly —

"I would like to see that," Harry said.

Without taking his eyes from the cauldron, Professor Quirrell drew a folded parchment from within his robes, hissed at it Sshow our ssurroundingss, and tossed the folded parchment toward Harry. It cut unerringly through the air, an increase of doom breathing on Harry's senses as it moved toward him, and then it fluttered gently to Harry's feet.

Harry picked up the parchment and unfolded it.

At first the parchment seemed blank. Then, as though an unseen pen were moving across it, the outline of walls and doors appeared, all drawn in handwritten lines. The writing outlined a series of chambers, most of them shown as empty; the last chamber in the series had a confused scribble in its center, as though the Map were trying to indicate its own bewilderment; and the second-to-last chamber showed two names within, written in positions within the chamber corresponding to where Harry was sitting and Professor Quirrell was standing.

Tom M. Riddle.

Tom M. Riddle.

Harry gazed at the parchment, an unpleasant chill coming over him. It was one thing to hear Lord Voldemort claim that your name was Tom Riddle; it was another thing to find that Hogwarts's magic agreed. "Did you tamper with thiss map to achieve thiss ressult, or did it appear before you by ssurprisse?"

Harry folded the Map and threw it back in Professor Quirrell's direction; some force caught it in midair before it reached the floor, and drew the Map back into Professor Quirrell's robes.

The Defense Professor spoke. "I should also like to volunteer that Snape was guiding Miss Granger and her underlings toward bullies, and sometimes intervening to protect them."

"I knew that."

"Interesting," said Professor Quirrell. "Did Dumbledore also learn of this? Answer in Parseltongue."

₩Not sso far ass I know, whissed Harry.

"Fascinating," said Professor Quirrell. "You may be interested to know this as well: "Potionss-maker had to work in ssecret because hiss plot oppossed sschoolmasster's plot.?"

Harry thought about this, while Professor Quirrell blew on the potion as though to cool it, though the fire still burned under the cauldron; then added a pinch of dirt and a drop of water and a bellflower. "Please explain," Harry said.

"Has it never occurred to you to wonder why Dumbledore chose Severus Snape as the Head of House Slytherin? To say that it was a cover for his work as Dumbledore's spy explains nothing. Snape could have been a Potions Master only, and not the Head of Slytherin at all. Snape could have been made Keeper of Grounds and Keys, if he needed to stay within Hogwarts! Why the *Head of House Slytherin?* Surely it occurred to you that this could not have good effects upon the Slytherins, according to Dumbledore's moral pretenses?"

The thought hadn't occurred to Harry in *exactly* those terms, no ... "I wondered something like it. I didn't put the dilemma in that precise form."

"And now that you have, is the solution obvious?"

"No," Harry said.

"Disappointing. You have not learned enough cynicism, you have not grasped the *flexibility* of what moralists call morality. To fathom a plot, look at the consequences and ask if they might be intended. Dumbledore was deliberately sabotaging Slytherin House — don't give me that look, boy, and speaking truth. Unuring the last Wizarding War, Slytherins filled out my ranks of underlings, and other Slytherins in the Wizengamot supported me. Look at it from Dumbledore's perspective, and remember that he has no native understanding of Slytherin's ways. Think of Dumbledore becoming

increasingly sad over this Hogwarts House that seems the source of so much illdoing. And then behold, Dumbledore puts in as Head of Slytherin the person of Snape. Snape! Severus Snape! A man who would teach his House neither cunning nor ambition, a man who would impose lax discipline and make its children weak! A man who would offend students of other Houses, who would ruin Slytherin's name among them! A man whose surname was unknown in magical Britain and certainly not noble, who went about half in rags! Do you think Dumbledore ignorant of the consequence? When Dumbledore was the one who brought it about, and had motive to bring it about? I expect Dumbledore told himself that more lives would be saved during the next Wizarding War if Voldemort's future Death Eaters were weakened." Professor Quirrell dropped into the cauldron a chip of ice, slowly melting as it touched the surface froth. "Continue the process long enough, and no child would want to go to Slytherin. The House would be retired, and if the Hat kept calling the name, it would become a mark of ignominy among children who would afterward be distributed among the other three Houses. From that day on, Hogwarts would have three upstanding Houses of courage and scholarship and industry, with no House of Bad Children added to the mix; just as if the three Founders of Hogwarts had been wise enough in the beginning to refuse Salazar Slytherin their company. That, I expect, was Dumbledore's intended end-game; a short-term sacrifice for the greater good." Professor Quirrell smiled sardonically. "And Lucius let it all happen without protest or even, I expect, noticing that anything was going awry. I fear that in my absence my former servants have been quite outmatched in this battle of wits."

Harry was having a bit of trouble taking this in, but decided, after some thought, that now was not the time to try to work it out. Whether Lord Voldemort believed it was not decisive; Harry would have to evaluate this accusation on his own.

Professor Quirrell's mention of his *servants* had reminded Harry of something else that he was... obligated, Harry supposed, to ask. The bad news was predictable. On any other day it would have been horrible. Today it would just wash out in the flood. "Bellatrix Black," Harry said. "What was the truth about her?"

"She was broken inside before I ever met her," Professor Quirrell said. He picked up what looked like a white-grey rubber band and held it over the cauldron; as the rubber was held within the steam, it turned black. "Using

Legilimency on her was a mistake. But that glimpse showed me how easy it would be to make her fall in love with me, so I did. Ever after she was the most faithful of all my servants, the only one I could almost trust. I had no intention of giving her what she wanted from me; so I commended her to the Lestrange brothers for their use, and the three of them were happy in their own special way."

"I doubt it," Harry's mouth said, mostly on autopilot. "If that were true, Bellatrix wouldn't have remembered who the Lestrange brothers were, when we found her in Azkaban."

Professor Quirrell shrugged. "You may be right."

"What the hell were we actually doing there?"

"Finding out where Bellatrix had put my wand. I had told the Death Eaters of my immortality, in the hope — now proven futile — that they would stay together for at least a few *days* if I appeared to die. Bellatrix's instructions were to recover my wand from wherever my body had been slain; and take that wand to a certain graveyard where my spirit would appear before her."

Harry swallowed. The image came to him of Bellatrix Black waiting, waiting, waiting at the graveyard, in increasing desperation... it was no wonder she hadn't been thinking strategically when she attacked the Longbottom household. "What did you do with Bellatrix once she was out?"

A cold smile. "I had a use remaining for her, or rather a certain portion of her, and on my future plans I shall not answer questions."

Harry breathed deeply, trying to maintain control. "Were there any other secret plots in this school year?"

"Oh, a fair number, but not many more that concern you, not that I can think of offhand. The true reason I demanded to try to teach the Patronus Charm to first-years was to bring a Dementor before your own person, and then I arranged for your wand to fall where the Dementor could continue to drain you through it. "Wass no malice in it, only hopess that you would recover ssome of your true memoriess." That was also why I arranged for certain witches to pull you down from the air during your rooftop episode, so I could appear to save your life; just in case any suspicion fell on me during the Dementor incident I had scheduled for shortly after. "Alsso no malice there." I arranged some of the attacks on Miss Granger's group, so that the attacks could be defeated; I do rather dislike bullies. "Think that iss all ssecret plotss concerning

you from thiss sschool-year, unless I have forgotten ssomething. w"

Life lesson learned, said his Hufflepart. Try to resist the temptation to randomly meddle in other people's lives. Like, you know, Padma Patil's life. If you don't want to end up like this, that is.

A pinch of red-brown dust was gently sifted into the potions cauldron, and Harry asked his fourth and final question, the one that had seemed to have the lowest priority, but still mattered.

"What was your objective during the Wizarding War?" Harry said. "I mean, what —" His voice wobbled. "What was the *point* of the *entire thing?*" His brain repeating endlessly, *Why*, *why*, *why*, *why* Lord Voldemort...

Professor Quirrell lifted an eyebrow. "They told you about David Monroe, did they not?"

"Yes you were both David Monroe and Lord Voldemort during the Wizarding War, I understood that part. You killed David Monroe, disguised yourself as him, and wiped out David Monroe's family so they wouldn't notice any differences—"

"Indeed."

"You planned to control whichever side won the Wizarding War, regardless of which side won. But why did one side have to be *Voldemort?* I, I mean, wouldn't it have been easier to gain public support with someone less ... with someone less Voldemort?"

Professor Quirrell's mallet made an unusually loud *thud* as it crushed white butterfly wings, mixing them with another bellflower. "I *planned*," Professor Quirrell said harshly, "for Lord Voldemort to *lose* to David Monroe. The flaw in that strategy was the absolute wretchedness of —" Professor Quirrell stopped. "No, I am telling the tale out of order. Listen, boy, when I had devised my great creation and come into the fullness of my magic, I thought the time had come for me to take political power into my hands. It would be inconvenient, certainly, and take up my time in ways that were not enjoyable. But I knew the Muggles would eventually destroy the world or make war on wizardkind or both, and something had to be done if I were not to wander a dead or dull world through my eternity. Having attained immortality I needed a new ambition to occupy my decades, and to prevent the Muggles from ruining everything seemed a goal of acceptable scope and difficulty. It is a source of continual amusement to me that I, of all people, am the only one really taking action towards that end. Though I suppose it would make sense for the mortal

insects not to care about their world's end; why should they, when they are just going to die regardless, and can save themselves the inconvenience of trying to do anything difficult along the way? But I digress. I saw how Dumbledore had risen to power from his defeat of Grindelwald, so I thought I would do the same. I had long ago taken my vengeance on David Monroe — he was an annoyance from my year in Slytherin — so I bethought to also steal his identity, and wipe out his family to make myself heir of his House. And I conceived also a great foe for David Monroe to fight, the most terrifying Dark Lord imaginable, clever beyond reckoning; more dangerous by far than Grindelwald, for his intelligence would be perfected in all the ways that Grindelwald had been flawed and self-destructive. A Dark Lord who would do his cunning utmost to disrupt the alliances who would fight him, a Dark Lord who would command the deepest loyalty from his followers through his oratorical skills. The most dreadful Dark Lord who had ever threatened Britain or the world, that was who David Monroe would defeat."

Professor Quirrell's mallet struck a bellflower and then a different pale flower with two more thuds. "But then, while I had sometimes played the part of Dark Wizard in my wanderings, I had never adopted the identity of a full-fledged Dark Lord with underlings and a political agenda. I had no practice at the task, and I was mindful of the story of Dark Evangel and the disaster of her first public appearance. According to what she said afterward, she had meant to call herself the Walking Catastrophe and the Apostle of Darkness, but in the excitement of the moment she introduced herself as the Apostrophe of Darkness instead. After that she had to ruin two entire villages before anyone took her seriously."

"So you decided to try a small-scale experiment first," Harry said. A sickness rose up in him, because in that moment Harry *understood*, he saw himself reflected; the next step was just what Harry himself would have done, if he'd had no trace of ethics whatsoever, if he'd been that empty inside. "You created a disposable identity, to learn how the ropes worked, and get your mistakes out of the way."

"Indeed. Before becoming a truly terrible Dark Lord for David Monroe to fight, I first created for practice the persona of a Dark Lord with glowing red eyes, pointlessly cruel to his underlings, pursuing a political agenda of naked personal ambition combined with blood purism as argued by drunks in Knocturn Alley. My first underlings were hired in a tavern, given cloaks and

skull masks, and told to introduce themselves as Death Eaters."

The sick sense of understanding deepened, in the pit of Harry's stomach. "And you called yourself Voldemort."

"Just so, General Chaos." Professor Quirrell was grinning, from where he stood by the cauldron. "I wanted it to be an anagram of my name, but that would only have worked if I'd conveniently been given the middle name of 'Marvolo', and then it would have been a stretch. Our actual middle name is Morfin, if you're curious. But I digress. I thought Voldemort's career would last only a few months, a year at the longest, before the Aurors brought down his underlings and the disposable Dark Lord vanished. As you perceive, I had vastly overestimated my competition. And I could not quite bring myself to torture my underlings when they brought me bad news, no matter what Dark Lords did in plays. I could not quite manage to argue the tenets of blood purism as incoherently as if I were a drunk in Knockturn Alley. I was not trying to be clever when I sent my underlings on their missions, but neither did I give them entirely pointless orders —" Professor Quirrell gave a rueful grin that, in another context, might have been called charming. "One month after that, Bellatrix Black prostrated herself before me, and after three months Lucius Malfoy was negotiating with me over glasses of expensive Firewhiskey. I sighed, gave up all hope for wizardkind, and began as David Monroe to oppose this fearsome Lord Voldemort."

"And then what happened —"

A snarl contorted Professor Quirrell's face. "The absolute inadequacy of every single institution in the civilization of magical Britain is what happened! You cannot comprehend it, boy! I cannot comprehend it! It has to be seen and even then it cannot be believed! You will have observed, perhaps, that of your fellow students who speak of their family's occupations, three in four seem to mention jobs in some part or another of the Ministry. You will wonder how a country can manage to employ three of its four citizens in bureaucracy. The answer is that if they did not all prevent each other from doing their jobs, none of them would have any work left to do! The Aurors were competent as individual fighters, they did fight Dark Wizards and only the best survived to train new recruits, but their leadership was in absolute disarray. The Ministry was so busy routing papers that the country had *no* effective opposition to Voldemort's attacks except myself, Dumbledore, and a handful of untrained irregulars. A shiftless, incompetent, cowardly layabout,

Mundungus Fletcher, was considered a key asset in the Order of the Phoenix because, being otherwise unemployed, he did not need to juggle another job! I tried weakening Voldemort's attacks, to see if it was possible for him to lose; at once the Ministry committed fewer Aurors to oppose me! I had read Mao's Little Red Book, I had trained my Death Eaters in guerilla tactics — for nothing! For nothing! I was attacking all of magical Britain and in every engagement my forces outnumbered their opposition! In desperation, I ordered my Death Eaters to systematically assassinate every single incompetent managing the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. One paper-pusher after another volunteered to accept higher positions despite the fate of their predecessors, gleefully rubbing their hands at the prospect of promotion. Every one of them thought they would cut a deal with Lord Voldemort on the side. It took seven months to murder our way through them all, and not a single Death Eater asked why we were bothering. And then, even with Bartemius Crouch risen to Director and Amelia Bones as Head Auror, it was still too little. I could have done better fighting alone. Dumbledore's aid was not worth his moral restraints, and Crouch's aid was not worth his respect for the law." Professor Quirrell turned up the fire beneath the potion.

"And eventually," Harry said through the heart-sickness, "you realized you were just having more fun as Voldemort."

"It is the least annoying role I have ever played. If Lord Voldemort says that something is to be done, people obey him and do not argue. I did not have to suppress my impulse to Cruciate people being idiots; for once it was all part of the role. If someone was making the game less pleasant for me, I just said Avadakedavra regardless of whether that was strategically wise, and they never bothered me again." Professor Quirrell casually chopped a small worm into bits. "But my true epiphany came on a certain day when David Monroe was trying to get an entry permit for an Asian instructor in combat tactics, and a Ministry clerk denied it, smiling smugly. I asked the Ministry clerk if he understood that this measure was meant to save his life and the Ministry clerk only smiled more. Then in fury I threw aside masks and caution, I used my Legilimency, I dipped my fingers into the cesspit of his stupidity and tore out the truth from his mind. I did not understand and I wanted to understand. With my command of Legilimency I forced his tiny clerk-brain to live out alternatives, seeing what his clerk-brain would think of Lucius Malfoy, or Lord Voldemort, or Dumbledore standing in my place." Professor Quirrell's

hands had slowed, as he delicately peeled bits and small strips from a chunk of candle-wax. "What I finally realized that day is complicated, boy, which is why I did not understand it earlier in life. To you I shall try to describe it anyway. Today I know that Dumbledore does not stand at the top of the world, for all that he is the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation. People speak ill of Dumbledore openly, they criticize him proudly and to his face, in a way they would not dare stand up to Lucius Malfoy. *You* have acted disrespectfully toward Dumbledore, boy, do you know why you did so?"

"I'm...not sure," Harry said. Having Tom Riddle's leftover neural patterns was certainly an obvious hypothesis.

"Wolves, dogs, even chickens, fight for dominance among themselves. What I finally understood, from that clerk's mind, was that to him Lucius Malfoy had dominance, Lord Voldemort had dominance, and David Monroe and Albus Dumbledore did not. By taking the side of good, by professing to abide in the light, we had made ourselves *nonthreatening*. In Britain, Lucius Malfoy has dominance, for he can call in your loans, or send Ministry bureaucrats against your shop, or crucify you in the *Daily Prophet*, if you go openly against his will. And the most powerful wizard in the world has no dominance, because everyone knows that he is," Professor Quirrell's lips curled, "a hero out of stories, relentlessly self-effacing and too humble for vengeance. Tell me, child, have you ever seen a drama where the hero, before he consents to save his country, demands so much gold as a barrister might receive for a court case?"

"Actually there have been a *lot* of heroes like that in Muggle fiction, I'll name Han Solo just to start —"

"Well, in magical drama it is not so. It is all humble heroes like Dumbledore. It is the fantasy of the powerful *slave* who will never truly rise above you, never demand your respect, never even ask you for pay. Do you understand now?"

"I... think so," Harry said. Frodo and Samwise from *Lord of the Rings* did seem to match the archetype of a completely non-threatening hero. "You're saying that's how people think of Dumbledore? I don't believe the Hogwarts students see him as a hobbit."

"In Hogwarts, Dumbledore does punish certain transgressions against his will, so he is feared to some degree — though the students still make free to mock him in more than whispers. Outside this castle, Dumbledore is sneered at; they began to call him mad, and he aped the part like a fool. Step into the

role of a savior out of plays, and people see you as a slave to whose services they are entitled and whom it is their enjoyment to criticize; for it is the privilege of masters to sit back and call forth helpful corrections while the slaves labor. Only in the tales of the ancient Greeks, from when men were less sophisticated in their delusions, may you see the hero who is also high. Hector, Aeneas, those were heroes who retained their right of vengeance upon those who insulted them, who could demand gold and jewels in payment for their services without sparking indignation. And if Lord Voldemort conquered Britain, he might then condescend to show himself noble in victory; and nobody would take his goodwill for granted, nor chirp corrections at him if his work was not to their liking. When he won, he would have true respect. I understood that day in the Ministry that by envying Dumbledore, I had shown myself as deluded as Dumbledore himself. I understood that I had been trying for the wrong place all along. You should know this to be true, boy, for you have made freer to speak ill of Dumbledore than you ever dared speak ill of me. Even in your own thoughts, I wager, for instinct runs deep. You knew that it might be to your cost to mock the strong and vengeful Professor Quirrell, but that there was no cost in disrespecting the weak and harmless Dumbledore."

"Thank you," Harry said through the pain, "for that valuable lesson, Professor Quirrell, I see that you are right about what my mind was doing." Though Tom Riddle's memories had probably also had something to do with the way he had sometimes lashed out at Dumbledore for no good reason, Harry hadn't been like that around Professor McGonagall... who admittedly had the power to deduct House Points and didn't have Dumbledore's air of tolerance... no, it was still true, Harry would have been more respectful even in his own thoughts if Dumbledore had not seemed *safe* to disrespect.

So that had been David Monroe, and that had been Lord Voldemort ...

It still hadn't answered the most puzzling question, and Harry wasn't sure that asking it would be wise. If, somehow, Lord Voldemort had managed *not* to think of it, and then Professor Quirrell had still managed not to think of it during nine years of contemplation, then it wasn't wise to say... or maybe it was; the agonies of the Wizarding War had not been good for Britain.

Harry decided, and spoke. "One thing that did confuse me was why the Wizarding War lasted so long," Harry ventured. "I mean, maybe I'm underestimating the difficulties that were facing Lord Voldemort —"

"You want to know why I did not Imperius some of the stronger wizards

who could Imperius others, slay the very strongest wizards who could have resisted my Imperius, and take over the Ministry in, oh, perhaps three days."

Harry nodded silently.

Professor Quirrell looked contemplative; his hand was sifting grass clippings into the cauldron, bit by bit. That ingredient, if Harry remembered correctly, was something like four-fifths towards the end of the recipe.

"I wondered that myself," the Defense Professor said finally, "when I heard Trelawney's prophecy from Snape, and I contemplated the past as well as the future. If you had asked my past self why he did not use the Imperius, he would have spoken of the need to be seen to rule, to openly command the Ministry bureaucracy, before it was time to turn his eyes outward to other countries. He would have remarked on how a quick and silent victory might bring challenges later. He would have remarked on the obstacle presented by Dumbledore and his incredible defensive prowess. And he would have had similar excuses for every other quick path he considered. Somehow it was never the right time to bring my plans to their final phase, there was always one more thing to do first. Then I heard the prophecy and I knew that it was time, for Time itself was taking notice of me. That the span for hesitation was done. And I looked back, and realized somehow this had been going on for years. I think ... " The occasional bit of grass was still dropping down from his hand, but Professor Quirrell did not seem to pay it any mind. "I thought, when I was contemplating my past beneath the starlight, that I had become too accustomed to playing against Dumbledore. Dumbledore was intelligent, he tried diligently to be cunning, he did not wait for me to strike but presented me with surprises. He made bizarre moves that played out in fascinating and unpredictable ways. In retrospect, there were many obvious plans for destroying Dumbledore; but I think some part of me did not want to go back to playing solitaire instead of chess. It was when I had the prospect of creating another Tom Riddle to plot against, someone even more worthy than Dumbledore, that I was first willing to contemplate the end of my war. Yes, in retrospect that sounds stupid, but sometimes our emotions are more foolish than we can bring our reason to admit. I would never have espoused such a policy deliberately. It would have violated Rules Nine, Sixteen, Twenty, and Twenty-two and that is too much even if you are enjoying yourself. But to repeatedly decide that there was one more thing left to be done, one more advantage left to be gained, one more piece that I simply had to move into place, before abandoning an enjoyable time in my life and moving on to the more tedious rulership of Britain... well, even I am not immune to a mistake like that, if I do not realize that I am making it."

And that was when Harry knew what was going to happen at the end of this, after the Philosopher's Stone had been retrieved.

At the end of this, Professor Quirrell was going to kill him.

Professor Quirrell didn't want to kill him. It was possible that Harry was the only person in the world against whom Professor Quirrell *wouldn't* be able to use a Killing Curse. But Professor Quirrell thought he had to do it, for whatever reason.

That was why Professor Quirrell had decided that it was necessary to brew the *potion of effulgence* the long way. That was why Professor Quirrell had been so easily negotiated into answering these questions, into finally talking about his life with someone who might understand. Just like Lord Voldemort had delayed the end of the Wizarding War to play longer against Dumbledore.

Harry couldn't exactly recall what Professor Quirrell had said earlier about not killing Harry. It hadn't been anything straightforward along the lines of 'I am absolutely not planning to kill you in any way, shape, or form unless you positively insist on doing something stupid'. Harry had been reluctant himself to push the promise too far and insist on unambiguous terms because Harry had already known that he would need to neutralize Lord Voldemort and had expected more precise language to reveal that fact, if they tried to exchange truly binding promises. So there certainly would have been loopholes, whatever had been said.

There was no particular shock to the realization, just an increased sense of urgency; some part of Harry had already known this, and had simply been waiting for an excuse to make it known to deliberation. There had been too many things said here that Professor Quirrell would not reveal to anyone with an expected lifespan measured in more than hours. The overwhelming isolation and loneliness of the life Professor Quirrell had described might explain why he was willing to violate his Rules and talk with Harry, *given* that Harry was going to die soon and that the world did not actually work like a play where the villain disclosing his plans would always fail to kill the hero afterward. But Harry's death certainly had to be in those future plans somewhere.

Harry swallowed, controlling his breathing. Professor Quirrell had just added a tuft of horsehair to the *potion of effulgence*, and that was very late in

the potion, if Harry remembered correctly. There weren't many bellflowers left in the heap to be added, either.

It was probably time to stop worrying so much about risk and play this conversation less conservatively, all things considered.

"If I point out one of Lord Voldemort's mistakes," Harry said, "does he punish me for it?"

Professor Quirrell lifted his eyebrows. "Not if the mistake is a real one. I do not suggest that you moralize at me. But I would not curse the bearer of bad news, nor the subordinate who makes an honest attempt to point out a problem. Even as Lord Voldemort I could never bring myself to that stupidity. Of course, there were some fools who mistook my policy for weakness, who tried to thrust themselves forward by pushing me down in their public counsel, thinking me obliged to tolerate it as criticism." Professor Quirrell smiled reminiscently. "The Death Eaters were better off without them, and I do not advise you make the same mistake."

Harry nodded, a slight shiver going through him. "Um, when you told me about what happened in Godric's Hollow, on Halloween night, in 1981 I mean, um... I thought I saw another flaw in your reasoning. A way you could have avoided disaster. But, um, I think you have a blind spot, a class of strategies you don't consider, so you didn't see it even afterward—"

"I hope you are not about to say anything stupid along the lines of 'don't try to kill people'," Professor Quirrell said. "I shall be unhappy if that is the case."

Not valuess difference. True misstake, given your goalss. Will you hurt me, if I act the part of the teacher toward you, and teach lessson? Or if misstake is ssimple and obviousss, and makess you feel sstupid? ...

Harry swallowed. "Um. Why didn't you test the Horcrux system before you actually had to use it?"

"Test it?" said Professor Quirrell. He looked up from the brewing potion, and indignation came into his voice. "What do you mean, *test it?*"

"Why didn't you test if the Horcrux system was working correctly, before you needed it on Halloween?"

Professor Quirrell looked disgusted. "You ridiculous — I didn't want to *die*, Mr. Potter, and that was the only way to test my great creation! What good would it have done to risk my life sooner rather than later? How would I have

been better off?"

Harry swallowed a lump in his throat. If there wass way for you to tesst your Horcrux ssysstem without dying. The general lesson is important. Do you see it now?"

"No," Professor Quirrell said after a while. The Defense Professor gently crumbled one of the last bellflowers together with a strand of long blonde hair and then dropped it into the potion, which was bubbling brighter, now. Only two more bellflowers remained on the Potions table. "And I do hope your lesson is a sensible one, for your sake."

"Suppose, Professor, that I learned how to cast the improved Horcrux spell and I was willing to use it. What would I do with it?"

Professor Quirrell answered at once. "You would find some person whom you found morally abhorrent and whose death you could convince yourself would save other lives, and murder them to create a Horcrux."

"And then what?"

"Make more Horcruxes," said the Defense Professor. He picked up a jar of what looked like dragon scales.

"Before that," Harry said.

After a time the Defense Professor shook his head. "I still do not see it, and you will cease this game and tell me."

"I would make Horcruxes for my friends. If you'd ever really cared about one single other person in the entire world, if there'd been just one person who gave your immortality *meaning*, someone that you wanted to live forever with you —" Harry's throat choked. "Then, then the idea of making a Horcrux for someone else wouldn't have been such a counterintuitive thought." Harry was blinking hard. "You have a blind spot around strategies that involve doing nice things for other people, to the point where it stops you from achieving your selfish values. You think . . . it's not your style, I suppose. That . . . particular part of your self-image . . . is what cost you those nine years."

The dropper of mint oil that the Defense Professor was holding added liquid to the cauldron, drip by drip.

"I see..." the Defense Professor said slowly. "I see. I should have taught Rabastan the advanced Horcrux ritual, and forced him to test the invention. Yes, that is supremely obvious in retrospect. For that matter, I could have ordered Rabastan to try marking himself onto some disposable infant, to see what happened, before I took myself to Godric's Hollow to create you."

Professor Quirrell shook his head bemusedly. "Well. I am glad I am realizing this now and not ten years earlier; I had enough to chide myself for at that time."

"You don't see nice ways to do the things you want to do," Harry said. His ears heard a note of desperation in his own voice. "Even when a nice strategy would be more effective you don't see it because you have a self-image of not being nice."

"That is a fair observation," said Professor Quirrell. "Indeed, now that you have pointed it out, I have just now thought of some nice things I can do this very day, to further my agenda."

Harry just looked at him.

Professor Quirrell was smiling. "Your lesson is a good one, Mr. Potter. From now on, until I learn the trick of it, I shall keep diligent watch for cunning strategies that involve doing kindnesses for other people. Go and practice acts of goodwill, perhaps, until my mind goes there easily."

Cold chills ran down Harry's spine.

Professor Quirrell had said this without the slightest visible hesitation.

Lord Voldemort was absolutely certain that he could never be redeemed. He wasn't the tiniest bit afraid of it happening to him.

The second-to-last bellflower was dropped into the potion, gently.

"Any other valuable lessons you would like to teach to Lord Voldemort, boy?" said Professor Quirrell. He was looking up from the potion, and grinning as though he knew exactly what Harry was thinking.

"Yes," Harry said, his voice almost breaking. "If your goal is to obtain happiness, then doing nice things for other people feels better than doing them for yourself —"

"Do you really think I never thought of that, boy?" The smile had vanished. "Do you think I am stupid? After graduating Hogwarts I wandered the world for years, before I returned to Britain as Lord Voldemort. I have put on more faces than I bothered counting. Do you think I never tried to play the hero, just to see how it would feel? Have you come across the name of Alexander Chernyshov? Under that guise, I sought out a forlorn hellhole ruled over by a Dark Wizard, and I freed the wretched inhabitants from their bondage. They wept tears of gratitude for me. It did not feel like anything in particular. I even stayed about and killed the next five Dark Wizards to try taking command of the place. I spent my own Galleons — well, not my own Galleons, but the same

principle applies — to prettify their little country and introduce a semblance of order. They groveled all the more, and named one in three of their infants Alexander. I still felt nothing, so I nodded to myself, wrote it off as a fair try, and went upon my way."

"And were you happy as Lord Voldemort, then?" Harry's voice had risen, grown wild.

Professor Quirrell hesitated, then shrugged. "It appears you already know the answer to that."

"Then why? Why be Voldemort if it doesn't even make you happy?" Harry's voice broke. "I'm you, I'm based on you, so I know that Professor Quirrell isn't just a mask! I know he's somebody you really could have been! Why not just stay that way? Take your curse off the Defense Position and just stay here, use the Philosopher's Stone to take David Monroe's shape and let the real Quirinus Quirrell go free, if you say you'll stop killing people I'll swear not to tell anyone who you really are, just be Professor Quirrell, for always! Your students would appreciate you, my father's students appreciate him —"

Professor Quirrell was chuckling over the cauldron as he stirred it. "There are perhaps fifteen thousand wizards living in magical Britain, child. There used to be more. There's a reason they're afraid to speak my name. You'd forgive me that because you liked my Battle Magic lessons?"

Seconded, said Harry's inner Hufflepuff. Seriously, what the hell?

Harry kept his head raised, though it was trembling. "It's not my place to forgive anything you've done. But it's better than another war."

"Ha," said the Defense Professor. "If you ever find a Time-Turner that goes back forty years and can alter history, be sure to tell Dumbledore that before he rejects Tom Riddle's application for the Defense position. But alas, I fear that Professor Riddle would not have found lasting happiness in Hogwarts."

"Why not?"

"Because I still would've been surrounded by idiots, and I wouldn't have been able to kill them," Professor Quirrell said mildly. "Killing idiots is my great joy in life, and I'll thank you not to speak ill of it until you've tried it for yourself."

"There's *something* that would make you happier than that," Harry said, his voice breaking again. "There has to be."

"Why?" said Professor Quirrell. "Is this some scientific law I have not yet encountered? Tell me of it."

Harry opened his mouth, but couldn't find any words, there had to be something had to be something if he could just find the right thing to say —

"And you," said Professor Quirrell, "have no right to speak of happiness either. Happiness is not what you hold precious above all. You decided that in the beginning, all the way back in the beginning of this year, when the Sorting Hat offered you Hufflepuff. Which I know about, because I received a similar offer and warning all those years ago, and I refused it just as you did. Beyond this there is little more to say, between Tom Riddles." The Defense Professor turned back to the cauldron.

Before Harry could think of any way to reply, Professor Quirrell dropped in the last bellflower, and a burst of glowing bubbles boiled up from the cauldron.

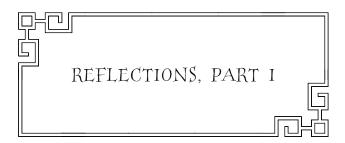
"I believe we are done here," Professor Quirrell said. "If you have further questions, they must wait."

Harry shakily rose to his feet; even as Professor Quirrell took up the cauldron and poured out a ridiculously huge volume of effulgent liquid, more than seemed like it could fit in a dozen cauldrons, onto the purple fire that guarded the doorway.

The purple fire winked out.

"Now for the Mirror," said Professor Quirrell, and he drew forth the Cloak of Invisibility from his robes, and floated it to drop before Harry's shoes.

## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED AND NINE



Even the greatest artifact can be defeated by a counter-artifact that is lesser, but specialized.

That was what the Defense Professor had told Harry, after dropping the True Cloak of Invisibility to pool in fuliginous folds near Harry's shoes.

The Mirror of Perfect Reflection has power over what is reflected within it, and that power is said to be unchallengeable. But since the True Cloak of Invisibility produces a perfect absence of image, it should evade this principle rather than challenging it.

There had followed a series of questions in Parseltongue establishing that Harry currently did not intend to do anything stupid or try to run away, and further reminders that Professor Quirrell could sense him and had spells to detect the Cloak and was holding hostage hundreds of lives plus Hermione.

Then Harry was told to don the Cloak, open the door that lay beyond the quenched fires, and advance through the door into the final chamber; as Professor Quirrell stood well back, outside of that door's sight.

The last chamber was illuminated in lights of soft gold, and the stone walls were of gentle white and faced with marble.

In the center of the room stood a simple and unornamented golden frame, and within the frame was a portal to another gold-illuminated room, beyond whose door which lay another Potions chamber; that was what Harry's brain

told him. The Mirror's transformation of light was so perfect that conscious thought was required to deduce that the room inside the frame was only a reflection, rather than a portal. (Though it might have been easier to intuit if Harry hadn't been invisible, just then.)

The Mirror did not touch the ground; the golden frame had no feet. It didn't look like it was hovering; it looked like it was fixed in place, more solid and more motionless than the walls themselves, like it was nailed to the reference frame of the Earth's motion.

"Is the Mirror there? Is it moving?" came Professor Quirrell's commanding voice from the Potions Chamber.

Jiss there, L. Harry hissed back. JNot moving. L.

Again tones of command rang forth. "Walk around to the back of the Mirror."

From behind, the golden frame appeared solid, showing no reflections, and Harry said so in Parseltongue.

"Now take off your Cloak," commanded Professor Quirrell's voice still from within the Potions room. "Report to me at once if the Mirror moves to face you."

Harry took off his Cloak.

The Mirror remained nailed to the reference frame of Earth's motion; and Harry reported this.

Shortly after there came a hissing and seething, and a balefire phoenix melted through the marble wall behind Harry, the ambient light in the room taking on a red tinge as it entered. Professor Quirrell followed behind it, walking out of the new-made corridor that had been carved, his black formal shoes unharmed by the red-glowing molten surface beneath. "Well," Professor Quirrell said, "that is one possible trap averted. And now . . ." Professor Quirrell exhaled. "Now we will think of possible strategies for retrieving the Stone from the Mirror, and you will try them; for I prefer not to let my own image be reflected. I give you fair warning, this is the part that may prove tedious."

"I take it this isn't a problem you can solve with Fiendfyre?"

"Ha," said Professor Quirrell, and gestured.

The balefire phoenix moved forward in a rush of crimson terror, the red light casting writhing shadows on the remaining marble walls. Harry jumped back before he could think.

The dreadful dark-red blaze rushed past Professor Quirrell, surged into the

golden back of the Mirror, and disappeared as fast as it touched the gold.

Then the fire was gone, and the room was tinged scarlet no more.

There was no scratch upon the golden surface, no glow to mark the absorption of heat. The Mirror had simply remained in place, untouched.

Chills went down Harry's spine. If he'd been playing Dungeons and Dragons and the dungeon master had reported that result, Harry would have suspected a mental illusion, and rolled to disbelieve.

Upon the center of the golden back had appeared a sequence of runes in no known alphabet, black absences of light in small lines and curves, arranged in a level horizontal row. The thought occurred to Harry that some minor concealing illusion had been consumed in the Fiendfyre, a far lesser enchantment that had been added to prevent children from seeing those letters...

"How old is this Mirror?" Harry said in almost a whisper.

"Nobody knows, Mr. Potter." The Defense Professor reached out his fingers toward the runes, a look of something like reverence on his face; but his fingers did not touch the gold. "But my guess is the same as yours, I think. It is said, in certain legends that may or may not be fabrications, that this Mirror reflects *itself* perfectly and therefore its existence is absolutely stable. So stable that the Mirror was able to survive when every other effect of Atlantis was undone, all its consequences severed from Time. You can see why I was amused when you suggested Fiendfyre." The Defense Professor let his hand fall.

Even in the middle of everything else, Harry felt the awe, if that was true. The golden frame gleamed no brighter than before, for all the revelation; but you could imagine it going back, and back, into a civilization that had been made to never be... "What — does the Mirror do, exactly?"

"An excellent question," said Professor Quirrell. "The answer is in the runes that are written upon the Mirror's golden back. Read them to me."

"They're not in any alphabet I recognize. They look like randomly oriented chicken-scratches drawn by Tolkien elves."

"Read them anyway." "Iss not dangerouss."

"The runes say, *noitilov detalo partxe tnere hoc ruoy tu becafruoy ton wo hsi* —" Harry stopped, feeling more prickles at his spine.

Harry knew what the rune for noitilov *meant*. It meant noitilov. And the next runes said to detalo the noitilov until it reached partxe, then keep the part that was both there and hoc. That belief felt like knowledge, like he could have answered 'Yes' with confident authority if somebody asked him whether

the ton wo was ruoy or becafruoy. It was just that when Harry tried to relate those concepts to any other concepts, he drew a blank.

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Professor Quirrell gave a soft exhalation, his eyes not leaving the golden frame. "I had wondered if perhaps the Words of False Comprehension might be understandable to a student of Muggle science. Apparently not."

"Maybe —" Harry began.

Really, Ravenclaw? said Slytherin. You're pulling this NOW?

"Maybe I could try again to understand the words if I knew more about the Mirror?" said Harry's Ravenclaw part, which had assumed direct control.

Professor Quirrell's lips quirked up. "As with most ancient things, scholars have written down enough lies that it is hard to be sure of anything by now. It is definite that the Mirror is at least as old as Merlin, for it is known that Merlin used it as a tool. It is also known that after his death, Merlin left written instructions that the Mirror did not need to be sealed away, despite it having certain powers that might normally cause one to worry. He wrote that, given how painstakingly the Mirror had been crafted to not destroy the world, it would be easier to destroy the world using a lump of cheese."

This statement struck Harry as not entirely reassuring.

"Certain other facts about the Mirror are attested by famous wizards who were reasonably skeptical, and whose word has otherwise proven reliable. The Mirror's most characteristic power is to create alternate realms of existence, though these realms are only as large in size as what can be seen within the Mirror; it is known that people and other objects can be stored therein. It is claimed by several authorities that the Mirror alone of all magics possesses a true moral orientation, though I am not sure what that could mean in practical terms. I would expect moralists to call the Cruciatus Curse by their name of 'evil' and the Patronus Charm by their name of 'good'; I cannot guess what a moralist would think was any *more* moral than that. But it is claimed, for example, that phoenixes came into our world from a realm that was evoked inside this Mirror."

Words like *Jeepers* and what his parents would have termed inappropriate language were all running through Harry's head, none very coherently, as he stared at the golden back of the Mirror.

"I have wandered the world and encountered many stories that are not

often heard," said Professor Quirrell. "Most of them seemed to me to be lies, but a few had the ring of history rather than storytelling. Upon a wall of metal in a place where no one had come for centuries, I found written the claim that some Atlanteans foresaw their world's end, and sought to forge a device of great power to avert the inevitable catastrophe. If that device had been completed, the story claimed, it would have become an absolutely stable existence that could withstand the channeling of unlimited magic in order to grant wishes. And also — this was said to be the vastly harder task — the device would somehow avert the inevitable catastrophes any sane person would expect to follow from that premise. The aspect I found interesting was that, according to the tale writ upon those metal plates, the rest of Atlantis ignored this project and went upon their ways. It was sometimes praised as a noble public endeavor, but nearly all other Atlanteans found more important things to do on any given day than help. Even the Atlantean nobles ignored the prospect of somebody other than themselves obtaining unchallengeable power, which a less experienced cynic might expect to catch their attention. With relatively little support, the tiny handful of would-be makers of this device labored under working conditions that were not so much dramatically arduous, as pointlessly annoying. Eventually time ran out and Atlantis was destroyed with the device still far from complete. I recognize certain echoes of my own experience that one does not usually see invented in mere tales." A twist in the dry smile. "But perhaps that is merely my own preference for one tale among a hundred other legends. You perceive, however, the echo of Merlin's statement about the Mirror's creators shaping it to not destroy the world. Most importantly for our purposes, it may explain why the Mirror would have the previously unknown capability that Dumbledore or Perenelle seems to have evoked, of showing any person who steps before it an illusion of a world in which one of their desires has been fulfilled. It is the sort of sensible precaution you can imagine someone building into a wish-granting creation meant to not go horribly wrong."

"Wow," Harry whispered, and meant it. This was Magic with a capital M, the sort of Magic that appeared in *So You Want To Be A Wizard*, not just a collection of random physics-violating things you could do with a wand.

Professor Quirrell gestured at the golden back. "The final property upon which most tales agree, is that whatever the unknown means of commanding the Mirror — of that Key there are no plausible accounts — the Mirror's

instructions cannot be shaped to react to individual people. So it is not possible for Perenelle to command this Mirror, 'only give the Stone to Perenelle'. Dumbledore cannot state, 'Only give the Stone to one who wishes to give it to Nicholas Flamel'. There is in the Mirror a blindness such as philosophers have attributed to ideal justice; it must treat all who come before it by the same rule, whatever rule may be in force. Thus, there must be some rule for reaching the Stone's hiding-place which anyone can invoke. And now you see why you, called the Boy-Who-Lived, shall implement whatever strategies the two of us devise. For it was said that this thing possesses a moral orientation, and it may have been given commands reflecting the same. I am well aware that on conventional terms you are said to be Good, just as I am said to be Evil." Professor Quirrell smiled, rather darkly. "So as our first attempt — though not our last, rest assured-let us see what this Mirror makes of your attempt to retrieve the Stone in order to save the life of Hermione Granger and hundreds of your fellow students."

"And the *first* version of that plan," said Harry, who was beginning to finally understand, "the one you invented on Friday in my first week of Hogwarts, called for the Stone to be retrieved by Dumbledore's golden child, the Boy-Who-Lived, making a selfless and noble attempt to save the life of his dying Defense teacher, Professor Quirrell."

"Of course," said Professor Quirrell.

It was a poetical sort of plot, Harry supposed, but his appreciation of that elegance was being hampered by the surrounding circumstances.

Then another thought occurred to Harry.

"Um," Harry said. "You think that this Mirror is a trap for you —"

"There is no way beneath the heavens that it is not meant as a trap."

"That is to say, it's a trap for Lord Voldemort. Only it can't be a trap for him personally. There has to be a general rule that underlies it, some generalizable quality of Lord Voldemort that triggers it." Without conscious awareness, Harry was frowning hard at the Mirror's golden back.

"As you say," said Professor Quirrell, who was beginning to frown at Harry's frowning.

"Well, on the first Thursday of this year, the mad Headmaster Dumbledore, who I'd just seen incinerate a chicken, told me that I had no chance whatsoever of getting into his forbidden corridor, since I didn't know the spell *Alohomora*."

"I see," said Professor Quirrell. "Oh, dear. I wish you had thought to

mention this to me a good deal earlier."

Neither of them needed to state aloud the obvious, that this bit of reverse reverse psychology had successfully ensured that Harry would stay the heck away from Dumbledore's forbidden corridor.

Harry was still concentrating. "Do you think Dumbledore suspects that I am, in his terms, a Horcrux of Lord Voldemort, or more generally, that some aspects of my personality were copied off Lord Voldemort?" Even as Harry asked this aloud, he realized what a dumb question it was, and how much completely blatant evidence he'd already seen that —

"Dumbledore cannot *possibly* have missed it," said Professor Quirrell. "It is not exactly subtle. What else is Dumbledore to think, that you are an actor in a play whose stupid author has never met a real eleven-year-old? Only a gibbering dullard would believe that — ah, never mind."

The two of them stared at the Mirror in silence.

Finally Professor Quirrell sighed. "I have outwitted myself, I fear. Neither you nor I dare be reflected in this Mirror. I suppose I must command Professor Sprout to undo my Obliviations of Mr. Nott and Miss Greengrass... You see, the other great difficulty of the Mirror is that the rule by which it treats those reflected will disregard external forces, such as False Memories or a Confundus Charm. The Mirror reflects only those forces arising from within the person themselves, the states of mind they arrive at through their own choices; so it is said in several places. That is why I had Mr. Nott and Miss Greengrass, believing different stories about why the Stone's extraction was necessary, ready to appear before this Mirror." Professor Quirrell rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "I constructed other stories for other students, ready for me to set into motion with the chosen trigger ... but as this day approached, I began to feel pessimistic about the project. Such as Nott and Greengrass still seem worth trying, if we cannot think of something better. But I wonder if Dumbledore has tried to construct this puzzle to specifically resist Voldemort's cunning. I wonder if he might have succeeded. If you devise an alternative plan which I approve enough to try, J promisse that whatever pawn I ssend forth sshall not be harmed by me, then or ever; nor do I expect to break that promisse ... And I remind you again of the hostages I hold to my failure, both Miss Granger and all the others."

Again they stared at the mirror in silence, the elder Tom Riddle and the younger.

"I suspect, Professor," Harry said after a time, "that your entire class of hypotheses about somebody needing to want the Stone for good or honest purposes is mistaken. The Headmaster wouldn't set a retrieval rule like that."

"Why?"

"Because Dumbledore knows how easy it is to end up believing that you're doing the right thing when you're actually not. It'd be the first possibility he imagined."

Iss it truth or trickery that I hear? ...

سلاAm being honesst, السلامة Harry said.

Professor Quirrell nodded. "Then your point is well taken."

"I'm not sure why you think this puzzle is solvable," Harry said. "Just set a rule like, your left hand must hold a small blue pyramid and two large red pyramids, and your right hand must be squeezing mayonnaise onto a hamster—"

"No," Professor Quirrell said. "No, I think not. The legends are unclear on what rules can be given, but I think it must have something to do with the Mirror's original intended use — it must have something to do with the deep desires and wishes arising from within the person. Squeezing mayonnaise onto a hamster will not qualify as that, for most people."

"Huh," Harry said. "Maybe the rule is that the person has to not want to use the Stone at all — no, that's too easy, the story you gave Mr. Nott solves it."

"In some ways you may understand Dumbledore better than I," said Professor Quirrell. "So now I ask you this: how would Dumbledore use his notion of the acceptance of death to guard this Stone? For that above all he thinks I cannot comprehend, and he is not far wrong."

Harry thought about this for a while, considering several ideas and discarding them. And then, having thought of something, Harry considered remaining silent... before mapping out the obvious part of the future conversation where Professor Quirrell asked him to say in Parseltongue if he'd thought of something.

Reluctantly, Harry spoke. "Would Dumbledore think that this Mirror could reach the afterlife? Could he put the Stone into something that he *thinks* is an afterlife, so that only people who believe in an afterlife can see it?"

"Hm..." Professor Quirrell said. "Possibly... yes, there is a certain plausibility to it. Using this setting of the Mirror to show people their heart's

desires... Albus Dumbledore would see himself reunited with his family. He would see himself united with them *in death*, wanting to die himself rather than wishing for them to be returned to life. His brother Aberforth, his sister Ariana, his parents Kendra and Percival... it would be Aberforth to whom Dumbledore gave the Stone, I think. Would the Mirror recognize that Aberforth particularly had been given the Stone? Or will any person's dead relative do, if that person believes their relative's spirit would give them back the Stone?" Professor Quirrell was pacing in a short circle, keeping well away from Harry and the Mirror as he moved. "But all this is only one idea. Let us devise another."

Harry began to tap his cheek, then stopped abruptly as he realized where he'd picked up that gesture. "What if Perenelle is the one who put the Stone in here? Maybe she keyed the Mirror to give the Stone only to the person who put it in originally."

"Perenelle has lived this long by knowing her limitations," said Professor Quirrell. "She does not overestimate her own intellect, she is not prideful, if that were so she would have lost the Stone long ago. Perenelle will not try to think of a good Mirror-rule herself, not when Master Flamel can leave the matter in Dumbledore's wiser hands... but the rule of only returning the Stone to the one who remembers placing it, also works if Dumbledore himself has placed the Stone. It would be a hard rule to bypass, since I cannot simply Confund someone into believing that they put in the Stone... I would have to create a false Stone, and a false Mirror, and arrange the drama..." Professor Quirrell was frowning, now. "But it is still something that Dumbledore would imagine Voldemort being able to arrange, given time. If at all possible, Dumbledore will want to make the key to the Mirror a state of mind he thinks I cannot arrange in a pawn — or a rule that Dumbledore thinks Voldemort can never comprehend, such as a rule involving the acceptance of one's own death. That is why I considered your previous idea plausible."

Then Harry had an idea.

He was not sure if it was a good idea.

... it wasn't like Harry had a lot of choice here.

"Arguendo," Harry said. "We're not sure what's necessary to retrieve the Stone. But a *sufficient* condition should involve Albus Dumbledore, or maybe someone else, in a state of mind where they believe that the Dark Lord has been defeated, that the threat is over, and that it is time to take out the Stone

and give it back to Nicholas Flamel. We aren't sure which part of that person's state of mind, let's say Dumbledore's, will be the necessary part that he thinks Lord Voldemort can't understand or duplicate; but under those conditions Dumbledore's entire state of mind will be *sufficient*."

"Reasonable," said Professor Quirrell. "So?"

"The corresponding strategy," Harry said carefully, "is to mimic Dumbledore's state of mind under those conditions, in as much detail as possible, while standing in front of the mirror. And this state of mind must have been produced by internal forces, not external ones."

"But how are we to get that without Legilimency or the Confundus Charm, both of which would certainly be external — ha. I see." Professor Quirrell's ice-pale eyes were suddenly piercing. "You suggest that I Confund *myself*, as you cast that hex upon yourself during your first day in Battle Magic. So that it is an internal force and not an external one, a state of mind that comes about through only my own choices. Say to me whether you have made this suggestion with the intention of trapping me, boy. Say it to me in Parseltongue."

enced by ssuch an intent — who knowss? Knew you would be ssusspiciouss, assk thiss very question. Decission is up to you, teacher. I know nothing you do not know, about whether thiss iss likely to trap you. Do not call it betrayal by me if you choosse thiss for yoursself, and it failss. La Harry felt a strong impulse to smile, and suppressed it.

"Lovely," said Professor Quirrell, who was smiling. "I suppose there are some threats from an inventive mind that even questioning in Parseltongue cannot neutralize."

Harry put on the Cloak of Invisibility, at Professor Quirrell's orders, to stop the man who sshall believe himsself to be sschoolmasster from sseeing you, as Professor Quirrell said in Parseltongue.

"Wearing the Cloak or no, you will stand in range of the Mirror yourself," Professor Quirrell said. "If a gush of lava comes forth, you will also burn. I feel that much symmetry should apply."

Professor Quirrell pointed to a spot near the right of the door through which they'd entered the room, before the Mirror and well back of it. Harry,

wearing the Cloak, went to where Professor Quirrell had pointed him, and did not argue. It was increasingly unclear to Harry whether both Riddles dying here would be a bad thing, even with hundreds of other student hostages at stake. For all of Harry's good intentions, he'd mostly shown himself so far to be an idiot, and the returned Lord Voldemort was a threat to the entire world.

(Though either way, Harry couldn't see Dumbledore doing the lava thing. Dumbledore was probably sufficiently angry at Voldemort to discard his usual restraint, but lava wouldn't permanently stop an entity that Dumbledore believed to be a discorporate soul.)

Then Professor Quirrell pointed with his wand, and a shimmering circle appeared around where Harry was standing on the floor. This, Professor Quirrell said, would soon become a Greater Circle of Concealment, by which nothing within that circle could be heard or seen from the outside. Harry would not be able to make himself apparent to the false Dumbledore by taking off the Cloak, nor by shouting.

"You will not cross this circle once it is active," Professor Quirrell said. "That would cause you to touch my magic, and while Confunded I might not remember how to halt the resonance that would destroy us both. And further, since I do not want you throwing shoes —" Professor Quirrell made another gesture, and just within the Greater Circle of Concealment, a slight shimmer appeared in the air, a globe-shaped distortion. "Thiss barrier will explode if touched, by you or other material thing." "The resonance might lash at me afterward, but you would also be dead. Now tell me in Parseltongue that you do not intend to cross this circle or take off your Cloak or do anything at all impulsive or stupid. Tell you me you will wait quietly here, under the Cloak, until this is over."

This Harry repeated back.

Then Professor Quirrell's robes became black tinged with gold, such robes as Dumbledore might wear upon a formal occasion; and Professor Quirrell pointed his own wand at his head.

Professor Quirrell stayed motionless for a long time, still holding his wand to his head. His eyes were closed in concentration.

And then Professor Quirrell said, "Confundus."

At once the expression of the man standing there changed; he blinked a few times as though confused, lowering his wand.

A deep weariness spread over the face Professor Quirrell had worn; without

any visible change his eyes seemed older, the few lines in his face calling attention to themselves.

His lips were set in a sad smile.

Without any hurry, the man quietly walked over to the Mirror, as though he had all the time in the world.

He crossed into the Mirror's range of reflection without anything happening, and stared into the surface.

What the man might be seeing there, Harry could not tell; to Harry it seemed that the flat, perfect surface still reflected the room behind it, like a portal to another place.

"Ariana," breathed the man. "Mother, father. And you, my brother, it is done."

The man stood still, as if listening.

"Yes, done," the man said. "Voldemort came before this mirror, and was trapped by Merlin's method. He is only one more sealed horror now."

Again the listening stillness.

"I would that I could obey you, my brother, but it is better this way." The man bowed his head. "He is denied his death, forever; that vengeance is terrible enough."

Harry felt a twinge, watching this, a sense that this was *not* what Dumbledore would have said, it seemed more like a strawman, a shallow stereotype... but then this wasn't the real Aberforth's spirit either, this was who Professor Quirrell imagined Dumbledore imagined Aberforth was, and that doubly-reflected image of Aberforth wouldn't notice anything amiss...

"It is time to give back the Philosopher's Stone," said the man who thought he was Dumbledore. "It must go back into Master Flamel's keeping, now."

Listening stillness.

"No," said the man, "Master Flamel has kept it safe these many years from all who would seek immortality, and I think it will be safest in his hands... no, Aberforth, I do think his intentions are good."

Harry couldn't control the tension that was running through him like a live wire; he was having trouble breathing. Imperfect, Professor Quirrell's Confundus Charm had been imperfect. The underlying personality of Professor Quirrell was leaking through and seeing the obvious question, why it was okay for Nicholas Flamel himself to have the Stone if immortality was so awful. Even if Professor Quirrell conceptualized Dumbledore as being blind to the

question, Professor Quirrell hadn't included a clause in the Confundus saying that *Dumbledore's image of Aberforth* wouldn't think of it; and all of this was ultimately a reflection of Professor Quirrell's own mind, an image from within the intelligence of Tom Riddle...

"Destroy it?" said the man. "Maybe. I am not sure it *can* be destroyed, or Master Flamel would have done it long since. I think, many times, that he has regretted making it... Aberforth, I promised him, and we are not so ancient or so wise ourselves. The Philosopher's Stone must go back into the keeping of the one who made it."

And Harry's breath stopped.

The man was holding an irregular chunk of scarlet glass in his left hand, the size perhaps of Harry's thumb from fingernail to the first joint. The sheened surface of the scarlet glass made it seem wet; the appearance was of blood, suspended in time and made into a jagged surface.

"Thank you, my brother," the man said quietly.

Is that what the Stone should look like? Does Professor Quirrell know what the true Stone should look like? Will the Mirror give back the real Stone under these conditions, or make an imitation and return that?

And then —

"No, Ariana," the man said, smiling gently, "I fear I must go now. Be patient, my dearest, it will be soon enough that I join you in truth... why? Why, I am not sure why I must go... when I hold the Stone I am to step aside from the Mirror and wait for Master Flamel to contact me, but I am not sure why I need to step aside from the Mirror to do that..." The man sighed. "Ah, I am getting old. It is well this dreadful war ended when it did. I suppose there is no harm if I speak to you for a time, my dearest, if you wish it so."

A headache was starting behind Harry's eyes; some part of Harry was trying to send a message about not having breathed in a while, but no one was listening. *Imperfect*, Professor Quirrell's Confundus Charm had been imperfect, Professor Quirrell's image of Dumbledore's image of Ariana wanted to talk to Dumbledore, and maybe didn't want to wait because Professor Quirrell knew on some level that there wasn't really an afterlife, and the previously implanted impulse to leave after getting the Stone *wasn't standing up to Riddle-Ariana's arguments*...

And then Harry felt himself become very calm. He started breathing again. Either way, there wasn't much Harry could do about it. Professor Quirrell

had stopped Harry from intervening; well, Professor Quirrell was welcome to reap the consequences of that decision. If the consequences caught Harry as well, so be it.

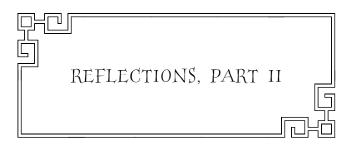
The man who thought he was Dumbledore was mostly nodding patiently, sometimes replying to his dearest sister. Sometimes the man cast an uneasy look to one side; as if feeling a strong impulse to go, but suppressing that impulse with the great patience and politeness and concern for his sister that Professor Quirrell imagined Albus Dumbledore having.

Harry saw it the instant the Confundus wore off, and the man's expression changed, becoming again the face of Professor Quirrell.

And in the same instant the Mirror changed, no longer showing Harry the reflection of the room, showing instead the form of the real Albus Dumbledore, as though he were standing just behind the Mirror and visible through it.

The real Dumbledore's face was set, and grim.

"Hello, Tom," said Albus Dumbledore.



The grimness on Albus Dumbledore's face lasted only an instant before giving way to bewilderment. "Quirinus? What —"

And then there was a pause.

"Well," said Albus Dumbledore. "I do feel stupid."

"I should hope so," Professor Quirrell said easily; if he had been at all shocked himself at being caught, it did not show. A casual wave of his hand changed his robes back to a Professor's clothing.

Dumbledore's grimness had returned and redoubled. "There I am, searching so hard for Voldemort's shade, never noticing that the Defense Professor of Hogwarts is a sickly, half-dead victim possessed by a spirit far more powerful than himself. I would call it senility, if so many others had not missed it as well."

"Quite," said Professor Quirrell. He lifted his eyebrows. "Really, am I that hard to recognize without the glowing red eyes?"

"Oh, yes indeed," Albus Dumbledore said in level tones. "Your acting was perfect; I confess myself utterly deceived. Quirinus Quirrell seemed — what is the term I am looking for? Ah yes, that is the word. He seemed sane."

Professor Quirrell chuckled; he looked for all the world as though the two of them were just having a casual conversation. "I never was insane, you know. Lord Voldemort was just another game for me, the same as Professor Quirrell."

Albus Dumbledore did not look like he was enjoying a casual chat. "I thought you might say that. I regret to inform you, Tom, that anyone who can bring himself to act the part of Voldemort *is* Voldemort."

"Ah," said Professor Quirrell, raising an admonishing finger. "There is a loophole in that reasoning, old man. Anyone who acts the part of Voldemort must be what moralists call 'evil', on this we agree. But perhaps the real me is completely, utterly, irredeemably evil in an interestingly different fashion from what I was pretending with Voldemort —"

"I find," Albus Dumbledore ground out, "that I do not care."

"Then you must think yourself to be rid of me very soon," said Professor Quirrell. "How interesting. My immortal existence must depend on discovering what trap you have set, and finding a way to escape from it, as soon as possible." Professor Quirrell paused. "But let us pointlessly delay to talk of other matters first. How did you come to be waiting inside the Mirror? I thought you would be elsewhere."

"I am there," Albus Dumbledore said, "and *also* inside the Mirror, unfortunately for you. I have always been here, all along."

"Ah," said Professor Quirrell, and sighed. "I suppose my little distraction was for naught, then."

And the rage of Albus Dumbledore was no longer leashed. "Distraction?" roared Dumbledore, his sapphire eyes tight with fury. "You killed Master Flamel for a distraction?"

Professor Quirrell looked dismayed. "I am wounded by the injustice of your accusation. I did not kill the one you know as Flamel. I simply commanded another to do so."

"How could you? Even you, how could you? He was the library of all our lore! Secrets you have forever lost to wizardry!"

There was an edge to Professor Quirrell's smile, now. "You know, I still do not comprehend how your twisted mind can consider it acceptable for Flamel to be immortal, but when I try for the same it makes me a monster."

"Master Flamel never descended into *immortality!* He —" Dumbledore choked. "He only stayed awake past his evening, for our sakes, through his long, long day —"

"I don't know if you recall this," Professor Quirrell said, his voice airy, "but do you recall that day in your office with Tom Riddle? The one where I begged you, where I went down on my knees and begged you, to introduce me

to Nicholas Flamel so that I could ask to become his apprentice, to someday make for myself the Philosopher's Stone? That was my last attempt to be a good person, if you are curious. You told me no, and gave me a lecture on how unvirtuous it was to be afraid of death. I went from your office in bitterness and in fury. I reasoned that if I were to be called evil in any case, just for not wanting to die, then I might as well be evil; and one month later I killed Abigail Myrtle to pursue immortality by other means. Even when I knew more of Flamel, I remained quite put out with your hypocrisy; and for that reason I tormented you and yours more than I otherwise would have done. I have often felt that you ought to know this, but we never had a chance to talk frankly."

"I decline," said Albus Dumbledore, whose gaze did not waver. "I do not accept the tiniest shred of responsibility for what you have become. That was all, entirely, you and your own decisions."

"I am not surprised to hear you say that," said Professor Quirrell. "Well, now I am curious as to what responsibilities you do accept. You have access to some unusual power of Divination; that much I deduced long ago. You made too many nonsensical moves, and the paths by which they worked out in your favor were too ridiculous. So tell me. Were you forewarned of the result, that night of All Hallow's Eve when I was vanquished for a time?"

"I knew," said Albus Dumbledore, his voice low and cold. "For that, I accept responsibility, which is something you will never understand."

"You arranged for Severus Snape to hear the Prophecy that he brought to me."

"I allowed it to happen," said Albus Dumbledore.

"And there I was, all excited at having finally gained my own foreknowledge." Professor Quirrell shook his head as though in sadness. "So the great hero Dumbledore sacrificed his unwitting pawns, Lily and James Potter, merely to banish me for a few years."

Albus Dumbledore's eyes were like stones. "James and Lily would have gone willingly to the death, if they had known."

"And the little baby?" Professor Quirrell said. "Somehow I doubt the Potters would have been so eager to leave him in the path of You-Know-Who."

You could scarcely see the flinch. "The Boy-Who-Lived came out of it well enough. Tried to turn him into *you*, did you? Instead you turned yourself into a corpse, and Harry Potter became the wizard you should have been." Now there was something like the usual Dumbledore behind the half-moon glasses,

a tiny twinkle in those eyes. "All of Tom Riddle's icy brilliance, tamed to the service of James and Lily's warmth and love. I wonder how you felt when you saw what Tom Riddle could have become, if he had grown up in a loving family?"

Professor Quirrell's lips quirked. "I was surprised, even shocked, by the abyssal depths of Mr. Potter's naivete."

"I suppose the humor of the situation would be lost on you." It was then, finally, that Albus Dumbledore smiled. "How I laughed when I realized it! When I saw you had made a Good Voldemort to oppose the evil one — ah, how I laughed! I never had the steel for my role, but Harry Potter shall be more than equal to it, when he comes into his power." Albus Dumbledore's smile disappeared. "Though I suppose Harry shall have to find some other Dark Lord to vanquish for it, since you will not be there."

"Ah, yes. That." Professor Quirrell made to walk away from the Mirror, and seemed to halt just before reaching the point where the Mirror would no longer have reflected him, if it had been reflecting him. "Interesting."

Dumbledore's smile was colder, now. "No, Tom. You are not going anywhere."

Professor Quirrell nodded. "What have you done, exactly?"

"You have refused death," said Dumbledore, "and if I destroyed your body, your spirit would only wander back, like a dumb animal that cannot understand it is being sent away. So I am sending you outside Time, to a frozen instant from which neither I nor any other can return you. Perhaps Harry Potter will be able to retrieve you someday, if prophecy speaks true. He may wish to discuss with you just who is at fault for the deaths of his parents. For you it will only be an instant — if you ever return at all. Either way, Tom, I wish you the best of it."

"Hm," said Professor Quirrell. The Defense Professor had paced past where Harry stood, watching mute and with something like horror, only to halt again at the other edge of the mirror. "As I suspected. You are using Merlin's old method of sealing, what the tale of Topherius Chang names as the Process of the Timeless. If legend speaks true, not even you can stop the process, now that it has been in motion this long."

"Indeed," said Albus Dumbledore. But his eyes were suddenly wary.

And Harry, from where he stood just before and to the right of the door, waiting in silence and controlled terror, could feel it in the air; he could feel the

sense of a *presence* gathering within the Mirror's field. Something more alien than magic, everything about it incomprehensible except for the fact of its strangeness and the fact of its power. It had been slow but now it was waxing faster, that presence.

"But you could still reverse the effect, if Chang's account is true," said Professor Quirrell. "Most powers of the Mirror are double-sided, according to legend. So you could banish what is on the other side of the Mirror instead. Send yourself, instead of me, into that frozen instant. If you wanted to, that is."

"And why would I do that?" Albus Dumbledore's voice was tight. "I suppose you are going to tell me that you have taken hostages? That was futile, Tom, you *fool!* You utter *fool!* You should have known that I would give you nothing for any hostages you had taken."

"You always were one step too slow," said Professor Quirrell. "Allow me to introduce you to my hostage."

Another presence invaded the air around Harry, a crawling sensation all over his flesh as another Tom Riddle's magic passed very close to his skin. The Cloak of Invisibility was torn away from him, and the shimmering black Cloak flew away from him, through the air.

Professor Quirrell caught it, and swiftly drew it over himself; in less than a second he had pulled down the Cloak's hood over his head, and disappeared.

Albus Dumbledore staggered, as though some essential support had been removed from him.

"Harry Potter," the Headmaster breathed. "What are you doing here?"

Harry stared at the image of Albus Dumbledore, on whose face utter shock and utter dismay were warring.

The guilt and the shame were too much, too much, hitting Harry all at once, and he could feel the incomprehensible presence around him rising to a peak. Harry knew without words that there was no time left, and that he was done.

"It's my fault," Harry said in a tiny voice, from whatever part of him had taken over his throat in the final extremity. "I was stupid. I've always been stupid. You mustn't rescue me. Goodbye."

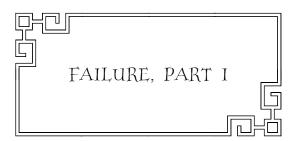
"Why, look at that," sang out Professor Quirrell's voice from the empty air, "I don't seem to have a reflection any more."

"No," said Albus Dumbledore. "No, no, NO!"

Into the hand of the Albus Dumbledore flew from his sleeve his long, dark-grey wand, and in his other hand, as though from nowhere, appeared a short rod of dark stone.

Albus Dumbledore threw these both violently aside, just as the building sense of power rose to an unbearable peak, and then disappeared.

The Mirror returned to showing the ordinary reflection of a gold-lit room of white stone, without any trace of where Albus Dumbledore had been.



The Dark Lord was laughing.

From the empty air came the voice of the Defense Professor laughing wildly, so high and terrible his laughter; it was Voldemort's laughter now, the Dark Lord's laughter beyond all hiding or restraint.

Harry's mind was disarrayed. His eyes kept staring at where Albus Dumbledore had been. There was a horror in him that was too huge for understanding or reflection. His mind kept trying to fall back through time and undo reality, but that wasn't a sort of magic that existed, and reality stayed the same.

He had lost, he had lost Dumbledore, there were no take-backs, and that meant he had lost the war.

And the Dark Lord went on laughing.

"Ah, ah hah, ah hah ha! Professor Dumbledore, ah, Professor Dumbledore, such a fitting end to our game!" Another burst of wild laughter. "The wrong sacrifice even at the finish, for the piece you gave up everything to save was already in my possession! The wrong trap even from the beginning, for I could have abandoned this body at any time! Ah, hahahahaha, aha! You never did learn cunning, you poor old fool."

"You —" A voice was coming from Harry's throat. "You —"

"Ahahaha! Why, yes, little child, you were always along on this adventure as my hostage, it was your whole purpose in being here. Ha, hahahaha! You are

decades too young to play this game against the real Tom Riddle, child." The Dark Lord drew back the hood of the Cloak, his head becoming visible, and began to remove the rest of the Cloak. "And now, boy," "Syou have helped me, yess indeed, and so it iss time to ressurrect your girl-child friend. To keep promisse." The Dark Lord's smile was cold, cold indeed. "I suppose you have doubts? Mark well, I could kill you this instant, for there is no longer a Headmaster of Hogwarts to be informed of it. Doubt me all you wish, but remember that." The hand was once more holding the gun. "Now come along, foolish child."

And they left.

They went back out through the door into the Potions room, the Dark Lord banishing the returned purple fire with a stroke of his wand. They went through the chamber where the boggart had been, and the chamber of ruined chess statues, and through the burned door of the chamber of keys. The Dark Lord floated up through the trapdoor, and Harry struggled up afterward through the spiral staircase of leaves, the tendrils of the Devil's Snare twitching and then moving back as though afraid. The Boy-Who-Lived was trying hard not to burst into tears, and his dark-side patterns weren't helping, maybe because Voldemort had never known or dealt with guilt.

They passed the huge three-headed Inferi, and at a whispered word from the Dark Lord it collapsed over the trapdoor and became a corpse again.

They passed Severus Snape standing guard, who told them both that he was guarding the door, and that they must leave or he would deduct House points.

The Dark Lord spoke the words "Hyakuju montauk" without pausing in his stride, accompanied by a jab of his wand; and Severus staggered before he lifelessly drew himself up beside the door once more.

"What —" Harry said, as he followed. "What did you —"

"Just fulfilling my obligation to my faithful servant. It shall not kill him, as I promised you." The Dark Lord laughed again.

"The hostages —" Harry said. It was hard to keep his voice steady. "The students, you said you'd stop whatever is going to kill them —"

✓Yess. Sstop worrying. Will do on our way out. L.

"Out?"

"We are leaving, child." The Dark Lord was still smiling.

The bad feeling this raised was lost in a sea of other bad feelings.

The Dark Lord was now consulting what he'd called the Hogwarts Map,

the handwritten lines upon it seeming to move as they walked. Some part of Harry's mind that had been considering what to do if they ran into Aurors on patrol (whom the Dark Lord could kill, or Obliviate, in an instant) gave up that hope as well.

They went down the Grand Staircase to the second floor, encountering no one.

The Dark Lord made a turn Harry did not know, and went down another stair-flight. As they descended past one floor and another, the windows stopped and the torches began, they were within the Slytherin dungeons now.

Ahead, the form of a person in Hogwarts robes appeared.

The Dark Lord kept walking toward that person.

Harry followed.

A sixth or seventh-year Slytherin was waiting by a section of wall that was set with an artistic carving of Salazar Slytherin wielding his wand, against what looked like a giant covered in icicles. The witch made no comment at seeing Professor Quirrell walking upright, or seeing Harry in his company, or seeing the gun in the Defense Professor's hand. If her eyes were blank, Harry couldn't tell the difference.

The Dark Lord reached into his robes, took out a Knut, and flipped it to her. "Klaudia Alicja Tabor, I command you thus. Take this Knut to the spell circle I showed you beneath the Quidditch stands and put it in the center. Then Obliviate yourself of the last six hours."

"Yes, lord," the witch said, bowing to him, and went on her way.

"I thought —" Harry said. "I thought you needed the Stone to —"

The Dark Lord was still smiling, he had never stopped smiling. "I did not say that part in Parseltongue, child. All I said in Parseltongue was that I had set events in motion to kill students, events that I would stop if I obtained the Stone. The rest was in human speech. I would also have stopped the Blood Fort sacrifice if I had not obtained the Stone, so long as I was not discovered and restrained. The students of Hogwarts are a valuable resource, whom I have already spent much time training." Then the Dark Lord hissed to the wall, 

\*\*SOpen.\*\*L.

Harry's eyes saw the tiny snake that had been set in the upper-left of the carving, even as the wall slowly swung backward, revealing the opening of a huge pipe. Moss grew on its sides and a musty dusty smell welled up from it; the interior was also covered with cobwebs in multiple sheets.

"Spiders..." murmured the Dark Lord. He sighed, and for that brief moment he sounded once more like Professor Quirrell.

The Dark Lord walked into the huge pipe, the cobwebs burning away before him. Harry, not seeing any other better options, followed.

The pipe branched in a Y-shape, then branched again. The Dark Lord went left, then right.

The pipe came to a solid metal wall. "\*Open, to the Dark Lord hissed, and a crack appeared in the metal; it seemed to fold into itself.

Beyond was the middle of a long, stone tunnel.

"We shall be walking a while," said the Dark Lord. "Did you have more questions to ask, little child?"

"I - I can't think of any - right now -"

Another cold laugh replied to this, and they walked into the tunnel, turning right.

Harry didn't know, then or ever, how long he walked; the light of burning spiderwebs was too dim to read his mechanical watch, and Harry had not thought to look at the time before entering. It felt like they walked for miles, miles beneath the ground.

Slowly, Harry's mind tried to recover itself a final time. Very possibly final, if he was right about the Dark Lord killing him after this... though the Dark Lord had said that he would resurrect Hermione, which seemed pointless if that was true... was that simply the Dark Lord following through on a promise he would not otherwise have been able to make in Parseltongue... why had he not just shot Harry on the spot...

Seriously, some last functioning part of his brain said to all the other parts, this would be a good time to think of something, something that the Dark Lord has not already thought of, something we can do without our pouch or our wand or our Time-Turner, something that Professor Quirrell has not imagined we can do... think, think, pretty pretty please think of something? Don't shut down now, even if you're scared, even if we've never really really faced death before in the sense of being about to die in the next hour, THIS IS NOT THE TIME TO SHUT DOWN—

Harry's mind stayed blank.

Suppose, said that last remaining part, suppose we try to condition on the fact that we win this, or at least get out of this alive. If someone TOLD YOU AS A FACT that you had survived, or even won, somehow made everything turn out

okay, what would you think had happened —

Not legitimate procedure, whispered Ravenclaw, the universe doesn't work like that, we're just going to die.

Someone realizes we're missing, thought Hufflepuff, and Mad-Eye Moody shows up with a squad of Aurors and rescues us. I think the time has come to admit we're not more competent than the standard authorities.

The saving factor does have to be something we do somehow, said the last voice. Otherwise there's no point in our thinking about it.

Problem two, said Gryffindor. Harry Potter isn't missing, he's right there at the Quidditch match where everyone can see him. Professor Quirrell thought of that too, it's part of why he sent that fake note. Problem three. I don't think Mad-Eye Moody and an Auror squad can beat the Dark Lord, and certainly not before he kills us. I'm not sure the entire DMLE can beat the Dark Lord if he's fighting seriously and Dumbledore is gone. Problem four. The Quidditch match was not disrupted, that's probably the only reason why Professor Quirrell was willing to try something as complicated as bringing us along on this trip in the first place.

Thinking along different lines, ventured Slytherin, maybe Professor Quirrell calls in someone else to Memory-Charm us. Legilimency, Imperius, Confundus, who knows what else, we're not a perfect Occlumens. Then the Dark Lord would have a smart — well, sort-of smart lieutenant that he could use. That could be another reason why Professor Quirrell was so willing to tell us secrets, if he knew that the memory would disappear. It's also a reason to leave the Hogwarts wards, so the Dark Lord can call Bellatrix to Apparate in and do the work...

This entire reasoning process is illegitimate and I refuse to participate, said Ravenclaw.

What lovely last words, said the last voice. Now shut up and think.

Rough stone tunnel went by underfoot, Harry's shoes sometimes dipping into moisture or nearly slipping on a curved surface. The neurons in his brain, which kept on firing, imagined voices talking to each other, yelling at each other, even as the Listener stayed numb with horror and shame.

Gryffindor and Hufflepuff were conducting a debate about suicide by charging the Dark Lord's gun, or by swallowing the little jewel on Harry's steel ring. It seemed unclear whether the fate of the world was better or worse if the Dark Lord had Harry as a mind-slave; if the Dark Lord was going to win anyway, it might be better if he won faster.

And the last voice kept talking through it all; even in the depths of failure

that last voice remained. What else did the Dark Lord always say in human speech and never in Parseltongue? Do we remember? Anything like that, anything at all?

It was all too distant in time, too distant in time even though it had all happened this very day. The Dark Lord had told him in Parseltongue just now that it was time to revive Hermione, and then he'd said other things all in English, Harry could hardly remember for all that they'd just been spoken. Before then... before then there'd been the Circle of Concealment, when Professor Quirrell had hissed that the barrier would explode if touched. And the Defense Professor had said in English for Harry not to take off his Cloak or try crossing the Circle, said in English that the resonance might strike Professor Quirrell afterwards but Harry would be dead. Said in English that if Harry touched the magic and Professor Quirrell didn't remember how to halt the resonance, it would kill them both...

Suppose it doesn't kill us both, said the last voice. On Halloween in Godric's Hollow, the Dark Lord's body was burned and we only ended up with a scar on our forehead. Suppose the resonance between us is deadlier to the Dark Lord than to us. What if this entire time we've been able to kill the Dark Lord at any time, just by dashing forward and touching our hands to any part of his exposed skin? And then it makes our scar bleed again, but that's all. The sense of 'stop, don't do that' is inherited from the Dark Lord's worst memory of his mistake in Godric's Hollow, it may not actually apply to the Boy-Who-Lived.

A small note of hope rose.

Rose, and was quashed.

The Dark Lord can just throw away his wand, droned Ravenclaw. Professor Quirrell can turn into his Animagus form. Even if he dies the Dark Lord will possess someone else and return, and then torture our parents, to punish us.

We might be able to get to our parents in time, said the last voice. We might be able to hide them. We might be able to get the Philosopher's Stone away from the Dark Lord if we killed his current body now, and that Stone could provide the nucleus of a counter-army.

The Dark Lord was moving on through the stony corridor. His hand still held the gun. He was at least four meters away from Harry.

If we dart forward, he will sense us approaching through the resonance, said Hufflepuff. He will fly forward rapidly, he can do that, he has the broomstick-enchantments that let him fly. He will fly forward, turn around, and fire the gun. He knows about the resonance, he's thought of this already. This is not something

the Dark Lord has failed to consider. He will be ready for it, and waiting.

Continuing the same line of argument, said the last voice. Suppose we can freely cast magic on Professor Quirrell but he can't cast it on us.

Why would that be true? demanded Ravenclaw. In fact, we have evidence that it's false. In Azkaban, when Professor Quirrell's Avada Kedavra hit our Patronus Charm, it felt like our head was splitting apart —

Suppose that was all his magic going out of control. Suppose if we'd just cast, say, a Luminos targeting him, nothing bad would have happened.

But why? said Ravenclaw. Why suppose that?

Because, thought Harry, it explains why Professor Quirrell didn't warn me not to cast any magic on him in Azkaban. Because Professor Quirrell never said in Parseltongue, that I can remember, that I'd hurt myself if I tried to cast magic on him. He could have given me that warning, but he didn't, even though he gave me a lot of other warnings. Absence of evidence is weak evidence of absence.

There was a pause while Harry's parts considered this.

We don't actually have our wand, said Ravenclaw.

We might get it back at some point, thought the last voice.

But even then, Harry thought, and the grey hopelessness returned, the resonance is something the Dark Lord knows about. He's already thought of everything I can do with that, he already has a response prepared. That was my mistake from the beginning. I didn't respect the Dark Lord's intelligence, I didn't think that maybe he knew everything I knew and could see everything I saw and had already taken it into account.

Then, said the last voice, conditional on our winning, we must have hit him with something he doesn't know about.

Dementors, offered Gryffindor.

The Dark Lord knows we can destroy, deflect, and possibly control Dementors, said Ravenclaw. He doesn't know how, but he knows we have the capability, and where the heck would we get a Dementor anyway?

Maybe, ventured Hufflepuff, the Dark Lord's whole Horcrux system would short out via the resonance if we grabbed him and held him, sacrificing our own life to destroy him forever.

Bullhockey, said Ravenclaw. But I guess it doesn't hurt to engage in some pleasant fantasy before we die, no matter how stupid.

If Lord Voldemort had a strong enough fear of death, Hufflepuff argued, if he wanted strongly enough to just not need to think about death again, then the Horcrux system could have design flaws like that. It never occurred to Voldemort to test his Horcruxes on someone else, that could indicate he wasn't able to think about the subject clearly —

So his fear of death is his fatal weakness? said Ravenclaw. Yeah, no. I'm thinking someone with over a hundred Horcruxes might have a few failsafe mechanisms in there.

And Harry's brain went on thinking.

A genuine asymmetry in the magical resonance between them . . . seemed improbable, there was no reason for the magical effect to work like that. But the magical backlash could hit the stronger wizard harder, the more powerful magic resonating more dangerously. That could explain the observed event in Godric's Hollow (Voldemort explodes, baby survives), and also explain the observed event in Azkaban (Voldemort severely impaired by backlash of his strong magic, first-year Boy-Who-Lived hit by lighter backlash of his weak magic). Or if it was only the caster's magic that resonated, that could also explain both those two observations. That might even explain why Professor Quirrell had been in no rush to warn Harry against casting any magic on him. Though there was another obvious reason why Professor Quirrell would avoid raising the subject of the resonance; it was a gigantic hint about the mystery of Godric's Hollow, if Harry had ever made the connection.

The part that was numb with grief and guilt took this opportunity to observe, speaking of obliviousness, that after events at Hogwarts had turned serious, they really really REALLY should have reconsidered the decision made on First Thursday, at the behest of Professor McGonagall, not to tell Dumbledore about the sense of doom that Harry got around Professor Quirrell. It was true that Harry hadn't been sure who to trust, there was a long stretch where it had seemed plausible that Dumbledore was the bad guy and Professor Quirrell the heroic opposition, but...

Dumbledore would have realized.

Dumbledore would have realized instantly.

The wise old wizard with the true phoenix on his shoulder would have known, and Harry hadn't trusted him, Harry hadn't told him all the relevant facts, and the reason for this had been sheer neglect to reconsider a cached decision made four days into the start of the school year. It had been marked 'something not to tell Dumbledore' and even after Azkaban, even after Hermione died, even after everything, Harry had simply forgot to promote the

question to deliberation and reconsider the tradeoff.

Another wave of grief and shame washed over Harry, and for a time he walked on in the silence of the last voice, other voices being happy enough to fill the gap.

After what was at least several miles, and many grey thoughts, the stone tunnel ended.

The Dark Lord climbed up stone steps, and Harry followed after.

The two of them came into a dark, dank stone building. Dirty old stone doors swung open without being touched.

Before them lay marble slabs, rising up from bare ground, upon them names and dates. The tombstones were scattered in nothing like neat rows, and the rest of the graveyard ran wild.

The moon above was over three-quarters full, already seeming bright with night not fully fallen.

Harry had stopped walking upon seeing the graveyard. There was a blaring alarm in his brain saying to be *anywhere other than here*, but there weren't any options for accomplishing that. So that alarm cried unanswered, even as behind Harry the stone doors of the mausoleum swung shut again and sealed themselves.

The Dark Lord came into the center of the scattered graveyard. He stopped walking, and waved his wand above his head in a small circle.

There was a rumbling sound, and smoothly from the ground rose an altar, at least two meters wide and of black stone carved with grey sigils. And then surrounding the altar groaned up six dark-marble obelisks, regularly spaced, gleaming darkly beneath the fading twilight sky.

The unanswerable alarm in Harry's brain grew louder.

"This," said the Dark Lord in Professor Quirrell's cadences, "is a workspace I made for myself, convenient to either Hogwarts or Hogsmeade." The Dark Lord flourished a hand at the altar. "That is where Miss Granger shall revive, and also where I shall be reborn into my true body. I shall remake myself first, of course." "Magicss to revive girl-child eassier with true body." A strange snakish laughter accompanied these words. "Resst asssured that though ssome asspects of girl-child'ss ressurrection sshall be what otherss conssider Dark, girl-child will not be harmed or made ugly by it. Sshall sstill look like hersself, mind sshall be her own, nor sshall I or mine harm her after."

Harry's tongue was dry and his mind was having trouble functioning.

"Please, Professor, would you say in Parseltongue what is your real purpose in resurrecting Miss Granger?"

sshe iss part of the world for you to care about. That, boy, iss truly the greater part of the reasson I am doing thiss deed. Again snakish laughter accompanied these words, conveying sardonic awareness of some vast irony.

A small spark of hope kindled inside Harry, alongside the much greater note of confusion, and the fear that a perfect Occlumens could indeed lie in Parseltongue. Harry didn't understand why the Dark Lord was doing this, if the next step was just to kill the Boy-Who-Lived or enslave him...

Maybe he'd just never understood Professor Quirrell at all, maybe somehow Harry's model of Tom Riddle was just *that wrong* ... maybe the Boy-Who-Lived would be Obliviated of the last day and dropped off somewhere with a confused Hermione Granger, while Lord Voldemort went on to conquer the world ...?

Hope flared up in Harry, but it was a confused hope that didn't make any sense. It didn't square with the Dark Lord who had mocked Dumbledore and laughed at his defeat. Harry couldn't come up with any consistent account of Professor Quirrell's motives that allowed for something like that.

I do not know what is meant to happen next.

The Dark Lord had moved forward to the altar. He knelt there, and seemed to reach deep into the stone of the altar itself, drawing forth a vial of liquid that looked black in the fading twilight.

When the Dark Lord spoke again his voice was clipped and precise. "Blood, blood, blood so wisely hidden," said the Dark Lord.

And the obelisks surrounding the altar began to speak, voices like a chanting chorus coming from the motionless stones, cadences older than Latin.

Apokatastethi, apokatastethi, apokatastethi to soma mou emoi.

Apokatastethi, apokatastethi to soma mou emoi.

The obelisks' chant echoed after the end of each line, as if they were speaking out of synchrony with each other. The blood was poured from the vial, and it seemed to catch and hang over the altar, slowly expanding through the air, taking on a shape.

Apokatastethi, apokatastethi, apokatastethi to soma mou emoi (emoi).

Apokatastethi, apokatastethi, apokatastethi to soma mou emoi (emoi).

A tall form rested upon the altar, and even in the dimming twilight it

looked too pale.

The Defense Professor reached his hand into his robe, and drew forth a small irregular chunk of red glass.

He placed that upon the tall pale body.

The Stone stayed there for a time, minutes at least. The irregular chunk of red glass did not glow, or flash, or give any other indication of power.

Then the Stone moved, just a little, turning slightly upon the body.

The Defense Professor took back the Stone into his robes, and prodded the tall form that lay motionless upon the altar, touching the eyes with his fingers, poking the chest with his wand.

He threw back his head, then, and laughed.

"Incredible," said the Dark Lord, in the voice of the Defense Professor that Harry had known. "Fixed, it is fixed in form! A mere construct sustained by magic, become the true substance at the Stone's touch! And yet I sensed nothing! Nothing! I feared I had been deceived, that I had obtained a false Stone, but the substance proves true to my every test!" The Defense Professor tucked the red glass back into his robes. "That is eldritch even by my standards, I admit."

Then the Defense Professor walked around the altar, five times he walked around it, chanting something too low for Harry to hear.

The Dark Lord placed his wand in the hand of the figure lying on the altar. He placed his hands, both of them, over the body's forehead.

The Dark Lord spoke. "Fal. Tor. Pan."

Without any warning there was a flash like lightning that lit up the entire graveyard, and Harry staggered back a step, his hands involuntarily going to his forehead. It felt as if he had been shot there, or a wasp stung him, upon his scar.

The Defense Professor collapsed.

And the too-tall figure sat up upon the altar.

It swung around smoothly, and stood tall upon the ground, at least a head higher than a normal man. The form's limbs were lean and pale, little-muscled but giving an impression of terrible strength.

Harry took another staggering step back, his hands still clasped to his scar. Though the distance between them was wide, Harry felt a sense of terrifying apprehension in the air, as though the sense of doom had always been been *out of focus* and had now clarified, concentrated into a physical pain in the scar

on Harry's forehead.

Was that what Voldemort was *supposed* to look like? The nose looked like, it looked like it had *malfunctioned* during the resurrection process —

The too-tall figure threw back his head and laughed, raising his hands and wand to look at them. The left hand opened wide and it was like a pale half-spider with four over-long legs, fingers caressing the wand held in the other hand. Leaves stirred up from the graveyard, approaching to dance around the too-tall figure, surrounding him and clothing him, reforming into a high-necked shirt and flowing robes; and Lord Voldemort was laughing. Exactly the mirthless laughter that Harry remembered coming from his own throat inside the Dementor's nightmare, precise in tone and timbre.

Red eyes gleamed beneath the fading twilight, their pupils slitted like a cat's.

The form that Voldemort had abandoned raised itself, quivering, from the ground; and in a voice that Harry could barely hear, Quirinus Quirrell gasped, "Free — oh, free —"

"Stupefy," said the high cold voice of Voldemort, and Quirinus Quirrell was blasted down into the ground; then, with a wave of Voldemort's other hand, Quirinus Quirrell was picked up and flung away from the altar.

Voldemort walked away from the altar, then turned and looked at Harry; and the pain in Harry's scar flared at it.

"Frightened, child?" Voldemort hissed, like there was an undercurrent of Parseltongue even to the Dark Lord's human speech. "Good. Place the girl on the altar, and break your Transfiguration." "Iss time for me to revive her."

Is this really going to happen? Are we really going to do this?

Harry swallowed, mastering his fear through that note of impossible hope amid the confusion, and walked over to the altar. Then Harry took off his left shoe, and his left sock, and took off the toe-ring that was Hermione Granger, the Transfigured shape identical to the toe-ring that had been given Harry as an emergency Portkey. There was a twinge of regret in Harry for not having the real Portkey now, but only a twinge; an inner-circle Death Eater would routinely put up boundaries against Portkeys, if Severus had been right. Behind Harry, Voldemort laughed again in what sounded like surprised appreciation.

"I need my wand to Finite her," Harry said aloud.

"You do *not*." High the voice and cruel. "You learned to sustain a Transfiguration by touch alone, without further use of the wand. You can likewise

break your own Transfiguration wandlessly, by commanding your sustaining magic to drain away. Do so now."

Harry swallowed, and touched the toe-ring. He had to try three times, and clear his mind, before he could push his magic out of the toe-ring, as before he had learned to make a tiny stream of magic flow in.

The breaking of the spell went much more slowly that way than a *Finite Incantatem*, almost like the sped-up reverse of watching something being Transfigured. The toe-ring distorted, flowing together, expanding. Colors changed, textures changed.

Two-thirds of a dead girl lay strewn across the altar, on her side with one arm falling off the altar's edge, the position in which the reversion had chanced to place her. No blood flowed now from the chewed stumps of her thighs. The dead girl wore Hermione Granger's face, but twisted and pale. It was as Harry had seen before in the hospital's back room, the image burned into his brain during thirty long minutes of Transfiguration, the image he had reproduced during four even longer hours to Transfigure the decoy. The dead girl was naked, for her clothes were not part of her, and had not been Transfigured.

The sight brought back flashbacks, of the hours spent in the infirmary room, of the nightmares afterward, all of which Harry suppressed.

"Go back," said Voldemort's high voice. "This is my work, now."

Harry swallowed, and retreated from the altar, to the mouth of the long corridor where he'd stood before. "Her body is, should be, around five Celsius, I cooled her so, so there wouldn't be brain damage —" Harry's own voice was wavering in pitch. *Is he really going to do this? Really?* There had to be a catch and Harry just couldn't see it. Voldemort had said that neither he nor any of his would harm Hermione, that her body and mind would be her own — why?

Voldemort walked forth to the altar once more, orienting the body before him with a wave of his hand to lie straight across the altar. The Dark Lord spoke with high monotone precision, "Flesh, flesh, flesh so wisely hidden."

The obelisks began chanting once more.

Apokatastethi, apokatastethi, apokatastethi to soma hou emoi (emoi).

Apokatastethi, apokatastethi, apokatastethi to soma hou emoi (emoi).

New flesh flowed out of the stumps of the girl's thighs, creeping forward like an ooze and solidifying.

The obelisks ceased chanting. A complete form lay naked upon the altar. It didn't look like Hermione. A Hermione Granger should be standing up

and talking, she should have her Hogwarts uniform.

Voldemort raised a hand, then hissed, as though in annoyance. With a violent gesture, the robes around Quirinus Quirrell's sleeping from were torn in half, his purple-and-green tie shredded, and his suit-jacket drawn from him to where Voldemort stood. Some part of Harry flinched, as if seeing the Dark Lord Voldemort attacking Professor Quirrell.

Voldemort plunged his hand deliberately into the suit jacket, which jerked as though something were being broken; then Voldemort shook out the suit jacket onto the ground beside him, emptying out the contents. Harry's pouch fell from it, and his Time-Turner, and a broomstick, and Voldemort's gun, and the Cloak, and a number of amulets and rings and stranger devices that Harry did not recognize.

And finally a chunk of red glass, which was laid upon Hermione Granger's form, and allowed to stay there for a time.

Minutes passed. The Dark Lord donned an amulet from the heap of things beside the altar; also from the heap, Voldemort took four short wooden rods with straps upon them, and reached beneath his robes to attach them, it looked like they went on his upper arms and upper thighs. The Dark Lord rose into the air, moved left, right, up and down, seeming to wobble slightly at first; then his flight stabilized.

The chunk of red glass turned, slightly.

The Dark Lord Voldemort floated to the ground, and prodded Hermione Granger's body with his wand.

₩There iss an obsstacle, the hissed Voldemort.

In Harry's mind the expectation of betrayal or other failure had already been so strong that the confirmation came only as a dull shock, not a sharp one. SWhat obstacle?

\*\*Girl'ss body iss resstored. Ssubstance iss repaired. But not magic, or life... thiss iss body of dead Muggle. \*\* Voldemort turned from the altar, began to pace. "The full ritual would solve this. But that would require time... time and the blood of Granger's enemy, and I do not think Draco Malfoy still qualifies, nor can I take my own blood unwillingly... foolish." Voldemort's voice was a lower hiss. "Foolish, I should have foreseen this, and prepared. Her brain might awaken with an electrical shock, I know that much of Muggle medicine... but would her magic return to her? That I do not know, and I suspect if she awakens as a Muggle she will be a Muggle forever. Still, I can think of nothing

better." The Dark Lord raised his wand -

"Wait!" Harry blurted, feeling hope return. She needs a spark of life and magic, just a spark to get her started...

Voldemort turned and looked at him. The snakelike face showed some slight degree of surprise.

Have no intentions to usse it againsst you. L. Harry said nothing about expecting his intentions wouldn't change; he'd simply blurted out the idea fast enough that he hadn't formed any specific intentions yet.

"This," Voldemort hissed, "I desire to see." The Dark Lord reached into the heap of things by the altar, and picked up the wrapped form of Harry's wand. It was thrown, gliding through the air and then dropping at Harry's feet; and then the Dark Lord floated back, the heap of things moving smoothly backwards with him.

Harry unwrapped his wand, and moved forward.

We have our wand back, that's step one, said the last voice, the voice of hope.

No part of Harry had any idea what step two might be, but it was still step one accomplished.

And Harry stood before the reformed body of Hermione Granger, who was still naked and dead, on a twilight-lit stone altar.

"Lord Voldemort," Harry said, "I beg you, please give her some clothes. It might help me do this."

"Granted," hissed Voldemort. The pain in Harry's scar flared as the naked girl's body lifted into the air, then flared again as dead leaves danced around her and she was clothed in the seeming of a Hogwarts uniform, though the trim was red instead of blue. Hermione Granger's hands folded over her chest, her legs straightened, and her body drifted back down.

Harry looked at her.

Focused on her, now that she looked human again.

*She looks like she is sleeping, not dead.* It took a conscious effort to look for breathing, fail to see it, and make the deduction. So far as naked perception was concerned... Hermione might as well be alive, right now.

That Hermione Granger would not approve of this situation, taken as a whole, seemed beyond question. But it didn't mean that she would rather stay dead than be alive, other things being equal, though they might not be.

Because you wish to live, because my best guess is that you would wish to live...

Harry reached out his shaking left hand, and touched Hermione's forehead. It was warm now, not the chill of five degrees Celsius; either Voldemort had increased her body temperature to normal, or the magic of the ritual had done it automatically. Which meant that Hermione's brain was currently warm and without oxygen, come to think.

That did it, the sense of urgency rising in him.

Harry's feet assumed the stance, his wand swung up to point at Hermione Granger's dead body. The *only* thing wrong with Hermione's body was that it was dead; everything else about that body was right, only one thing needed changing.

You don't belong here, death.

"Expecto," Harry shouted, feeling the magic and the life rise up into the Patronus Charm that was fueled by both, "PATRONUM!"

The girl in the Hogwarts uniform was surrounded by a blazing aura of silver fire, as the Patronus was born inside her.

Harry staggered, as he felt a *dip*, a bite. Intuition or Tom Riddle's memory told Harry that the life and magic that had just flowed into Hermione would never return to him, either one. It hadn't been all his life or all his magic, not by a long shot, there hadn't been *time* to expend that much, but whatever he'd just expended was gone forever.

And Hermione Granger was breathing, just like she was sleeping, rhythmic inhalations and exhalations. The twilight sky had dimmed further, and Harry could not see if color was returning to her, but it should have been, it certainly should have been. She looked to be sleeping peacefully, and it wasn't because being dead looked like sleeping, it was because she was asleep and her body was fine and nothing was hurting her while she slept.

Some part of Harry, that had somehow managed not to speak up earlier, quietly pointed out that they were still in a graveyard, the recently victorious Lord Voldemort was still in control of the situation, and that his guess about Hermione wanting to be alive was just a guess.

Harry was still smiling, as he slowly lowered his wand. The celebratory fireworks going off inside his mind were restrained, Harry wasn't screaming and running around in little circles like Professor Flitwick, but that —

That —

THAT, Harry said aloud inside his mind, THAT is what I call Step Two.

"Interesting," said the cold high voice. "Your Patronus draws upon your

life as well as your magic ... I guessed that much, for it was too powerful for a first-year to fuel with magic alone. And yet there must be more to the puzzle, since not just any life-fueled spell would have done ... was your happy thought the image of her returning to life? Was that all it took?" Lord Voldemort was again toying with his wand, a dark interest in those red-slitted eyes. "I suspect I will feel quite stupid when I finally comprehend that spell, someday in my eternity. Now step away from the girl. "There iss more work I intend to do, to give her besst chance of continued life."

Harry stepped back, reluctantly, the sense of tension starting to return to him. He almost tripped over one haphazard grave marker, as the Dark Lord continued to walk forward.

Standing before the altar, the Dark Lord laid one finger upon Hermione Granger's forehead.

Then the Dark Lord tapped his finger upon Hermione Granger's forehead, and said, in a voice so low Harry almost did not hear, "Requiescus."

Voldemort waved his hand at an obelisk, which began to rotate, turning itself to lay flat upon the ground, pointing outward. "Fascinating indeed," Voldemort hissed. "She is alive, and magical, and not another Tom Riddle as I feared you might have made her."

The tension was rising again in Harry. He'd put his wand away into the back belt of his pants, he *did not want* to remind Voldemort that he still had the wand on him. "What are you doing to her now?"

Another obelisk turned, lay flat upon the ground. "There is sold, losst ritual to ssacrifice magical creature, transsfer magical nature to ssubject. Limitationss are great. Transsfer iss temporary, only few hourss. Ssubject ssometimess diess when transsfer wearss off. But Sstone will make permanent."

Four obelisks lay flat upon the ground, evenly spaced; the other two obelisks had been floated away.

Voldemort began to reach into his own mouth, checked himself, hissed with annoyance again. He gestured at the sleeping mouth of Quirinus Quirrell, and from Quirrell's mouth floated up two teeth, almost invisible in the falling night. One of these went to the pile of items, the other floated to before the altar.

Moments later, Harry cried out and took a step back.

Huge and misshapen, lumpy skin, legs thick as tree-trunks, a small head that looked like a coconut perched upon a boulder.

A mountain troll stood within the circle of obelisks, motionless as though asleep while standing.

"What are you doing?"

Voldemort's mouth was stretched in a wide smile; it looked horrible on him, like his face had too many teeth. Sshall ssacrifice my fallback weapon, and girl-child sshall gain troll'ss power of regeneration. Transsfiguration ssicknesss iss nothing before that, if perchance it wass not fixed by previouss ritual. And no knife sshall sslay girl-child, nor cutting cursse, nor ssicknesss take her. L

"Why — why are you doing this?" Harry's voice shook.

 $\omega$ Have not the tiniesst intention of letting girl-child die again, after going to ssuch lengthss to ressurrect her. $\omega$ 

Harry swallowed. "I'm very confused." Was Voldemort *practicing being nice?* This hypothesis did not seem like a sufficient explanation.

"Stay well back," Voldemort said coldly. "This ritual is Darker than the last." The Dark Lord began a new chant, softer syllables that seemed to see the through the air like living things; and Harry, feeling a new surge of apprehension, stepped backwards.

Then Harry cried aloud, as pain flared again within his scar. The mountain troll crumbled in on itself, becoming ashes hanging in the air, then dust, and then the dust seemed to blow away without going anywhere; it was gone.

Hermione Granger slept on peacefully, whatever spell of repose Voldemort had cast on her being sufficient to the task.

"Um," Harry said in a small voice. "Did it work?"

"Diffindo."

Harry stepped forward with a choked yell, and then halted, both as the stupidity of his motion caught up with him, and as the sudden cut that the Severing Charm had opened on Hermione's leg closed almost as quickly as it had been made. In seconds there was only a light stain of blood on the surrounding flesh.

The Stone was laid again on Hermione, and after a time it turned. Voldemort laughed once more, as he passed his hand over her. "Marvelous."

Then another tiny tooth was floating within the circle of obelisks; and an instant later, a unicorn stood where the troll had stood before, eyes dull and head lowered.

"What?" Harry said. "Why a unicorn?"

SPower of unicorn'ss blood to presserve life makess excellent combination

with troll'ss healing. Only Fiendfyre and Killing Cursse sshall girl-child fear, from thiss day. L. A flicker of snakish laughter. Bessidess, had sspare unicorn left over, might ass well usse. L.

"Unicorn's blood has side effects —"

Shat iss only when power of unicorn'ss blood iss sstolen by another. Thiss sspell will make power of unicorn belong insside girl-child, ass if sshe wass alwayss born that way. L.

The grim chant and its seething words began again.

Harry watched, not understanding in the slightest.

Forget understanding, what am I seeing?

I'm seeing the Dark Lord Voldemort going to enormous lengths to resurrect Hermione Granger and keep her alive. It's like he thinks that his own life depends on Hermione Granger being alive, somehow.

The confused parts of Harry looked around for a procedure to follow. 'Make a prediction based on your best current hypothesis' was the first thought that came to mind, but it didn't seem to lead anywhere. The plot of the story wasn't going how it ought to, after the villain had won.

Again the blaze of pain in his scar, like a blow to Harry's forehead. The unicorn swayed, and then disintegrated as the troll had done.

The Dark Lord laid the Stone upon Hermione's form once more, clasping her hands around it.

Voldemort watched the unremarkable process for a time, then turned while the Stone still laid on her, making a high humming sound in his throat. "Ah, yes," hissed Voldemort. "That would be most appropriate. Do you still have the diary I gave you, boy? The diary of the famous scientist?"

Harry's brain took a moment to place what Voldemort was talking about. It had been in Mary's Room, in Mary's Place, in October, that precious gift from a friend. The thought should have triggered a wave of awful sadness, for the Professor Quirrell that had been lost or never real; but there had been enough of that emotion already, and his brain had set it aside for now.

"Yes," Harry said aloud. "I think it's in my pouch, can I check?" Harry *knew* it was in the pouch. He'd loaded it up with everything that he might possibly conceivably need, that he owned or had bought; everything that could have been a quest item.

From the heap of items by the altar, Harry's mokeskin pouch was drawn out, tossed to Harry's feet.

"Roger Bacon's diary," Harry said as he reached in a hand, and the diary appeared. Professor Quirrell had said that the diary would emerge unscathed from a fire, so Harry threw it toward Voldemort's altar. Harry did not wince; there were more important things to worry about than polite treatment of books, even that one.

Voldemort picked up the diary, examining it, appearing quite absorbed.

Harry, as quietly and unobtrusively as he could, attached the pouch to his belt loop in back, where it wouldn't be visible, near where Harry had put his wand.

Step three, the pouch.

"Yes," Voldemort hissed as he flipped pages of the diary, "this will do quite well." The Stone moved slightly, and the Dark Lord's other hand stored the Stone again within his robes.

"What was your hidden purpose behind the diary?" Harry said when the pouch was attached to his belt, and he'd put both of his empty hands where Voldemort could see them again. "I tried translating a little at the beginning, but it was going slowly —" Actually, it had been excruciatingly slow and Harry had found other priorities.

Voldemort made intricate gestures in the air with his wand, not even looking at what his hand was doing, as he held the diary in his other hand. For a moment Harry thought he could see a trail of darkness in the air, but the moonlight was too faint for certainty. "And now, my dear boy," Voldemort's high voice was laced with grim amusement, as his wand briefly tapped Hermione Granger's forehead with a casual gesture, "I make this diary into a far more precious gift, a sign of how much wisdom I have learned from you. For I would never want you to be deprived of Hermione Granger's counsel and restraint, not ever while the stars yet live. Avadakedavra."

The green bolt of the Killing Curse blazed out faster than Harry could possibly have cast the Patronus Charm, faster than he could possibly have moved, it was already over even as Harry cried out and went for his wand.

Quirinus Quirrell's unconscious body did not even jerk, in death. The green light struck into it without other sign.

Darkness glowed in the air, anti-light in the trails that Voldemort had made before, and the Diary of Roger Bacon darkened as though corruption were creeping over it, even as a shiver appeared in the air around Hermione Granger's form.

The pain in Harry's scar flared overwhelmingly, like a brand driven into his forehead, it sent Harry dodging unthinkingly to one side as Tom Riddle's reflexes took over.

And Voldemort was also screaming, shrieking as he dropped the diary to the ground, holding his own head and screaming.

Chance —

The last voice of hope said that, as Harry tried frantically to think, to understand. There wasn't any *point* in trying to kill Voldemort now, it might only *annoy* him, weapons couldn't kill him while any of his hundreds of Horcruxes remained —

But it still seemed worth it to temporarily disincarnate Voldemort, take the Stone and Hermione and run.

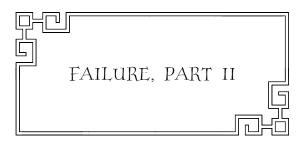
Harry's right hand had already taken his wand. His left hand went around to his back, reached awkwardly into his pouch, began to make a silent sign, three English letters.

"No!" cried Voldemort. He'd dropped his hands from his head, was staring at Hermione's body as though bewildered. "No, no!"

The item came up from Harry's pouch into his hand, and Harry began to step forward as smoothly as he could, diminishing the range between them to what his brief trials had shown was doable.

"My great creation —" gasped Voldemort. His voice was high, sounding panicked. "Two different spirits cannot exist in the same world — it is gone, it is severed! A Horcrux, I must make a Horcrux at once —" Voldemort's gaze fell on Hermione Granger's still-sleeping form, and he began to raise his wand in the air, executing the same gestures as before.

Harry raised his gun and pulled the trigger three times.



Even as Harry had raised the gun, he'd *known* he was making a mistake, his forebrain saw it and tried to stop his hand, but somehow the sick certainty didn't propagate fast enough to prevent his finger from pulling the trigger —

The echo of the shots died away within the graveyard.

A fraction of a second before Harry had pulled the trigger, Voldemort had jabbed his wand downward, and a wide wall of dirt had shot up between them from the graveyard earth, intercepting all three bullets.

An instant after that, pain flared in Harry's scar, a crawling feeling came close to his skin; and then Harry's pouch, clothes, gun, everything except his wand disappeared, leaving him naked but for the wand still in his right hand, and the glasses he'd Charmed to stick to his nose. The steel ring upon his left pinky finger was yanked off hard enough to scrape skin, taking the Transfigured jewel with it.

"That," said the voice of Voldemort from behind the dirt wall, "was *absolutely* predictable. Do you really think I would shout it aloud for you to hear, if my immortality were disrupted? Really, stupid child? Lower your wand, do not raise it up again at any time, or you die upon the spot."

Harry swallowed, and pointed his wand downward. "You would have been disappointed in me," Harry said, his own voice now unusually high, "if I'd missed an opportunity like that, I mean." There was no time to think, and Har-

ry's mouth was operating on autopilot for trying to placate evil overlords that might have paternal feelings for you and whom you'd just failed to assassinate.

Voldemort stepped around from behind the dirt wall, smiling that horrible smile that seemed to contain too many teeth. "I promised not to raise my hand or wand against you, child, if you did not raise your hand or wand against me."

"I used bullets," Harry said, his voice still high. "That's not a fist or a spell."

"My curse thinks differently. That is the puzzle piece that you missed. Did you think I would leave the peace between us to mere fortune? Before I created you, I invoked a curse upon myself and all other Tom Riddles who would descend from me. A curse to enforce that none of us would threaten the others' immortality, so long as the other made no attempt upon our own. Typical of that ridiculous fiasco, the curse seems to have ended up binding me, but taking no hold upon the infant with his self so lost." A low, lethal chuckle. "SBut you tried to end my true life jusst then, sstupid child. Now cursse iss lifted, and I may kill you any time I wissh."

"I see," Harry said. He did see; that was why Voldemort had told him about his Horcrux system in the first place, just to set up the moment when Harry knowingly tried to violate his immortality. Harry's mind was frantically churning through options, none of which seemed helpful. His pouch, his clothes, Harry saw by the moonlight that they all now lay in another heap by the altar, out of reach. "And now you kill me?" Harry still had his wand, presumably the Dark Lord couldn't cast his own magic on that, or his glasses, because of the disharmony. Cast my own spell first? No, Voldemort just jabs his wand downward to make another shield, then shoots me — what else is there? WHAT ELSE?

"Still a fool. If no further matters remained between us, I would already have killed you." The dirt wall crumbled at another gesture of the wand, and Voldemort moved smoothly back toward the heap of items by the altar. The Dark Lord stretched out a hand, and the diary of Roger Bacon flew to him. "Thiss iss, indeed, Horcrux of girl-child, my ssuperior verssion." In his other hand appeared a parchment. "Thiss iss ritual for ressurrecting her, if it musst be done again. Insstructionss are honesst, no trapss. Remember that girl-child'ss sspirit cannot float free like ghosst, Ressurrection Sstone iss my Horcrux, not herss. Do not losse her Horcrux, or her sspirit may be trapped within it." Voldemort reached down, picked up Harry's pouch, fed both the diary and the parchment into it. "Remember that, in casse something goess wrong with next movess."

"I don't understand what is happening," Harry said. There was nothing else left. "Please explain to me."

The Dark Lord was now regarding Harry with a grim look. "When girl-child died, wass in company of sschool'ss Sseer, heard prophecy sspoken that you would become force of vasst desstruction. You would become threat beyond imagination, beyond apocalypsse. That iss why I went to ssuch lengthss to undo my killing of girl-child, keep it undone."

"Are," what "are you sure," what.

it. Have not forgotten that dissasster. Woldemort backed further away from Harry, red slitted eyes fixed upon the Boy-Who-Lived, gun unwavering in the left hand. SAll thiss, all I have done, iss to ssmassh that desstiny at every point of intervention. If ssome fate makess me fail in what comess next, idiot-child of foretold desstruction, then you musst kill yoursself to ssave girl-child. Elsse all you claim to value diess by your own hand.

"I," Harry's voice went up an octave, "I," another octave, "I really really wouldn't do that, seriously!"

Ssilence, fool. Remain ssilent unlesss given leave by me to sspeak. Keep your wand pointed down and do not raisse it unlesss told. Elsse you die upon the sspot, and mark that I ssaid that in Parsseltongue. Voldemort reached into the altar again.

For a second Harry's mind couldn't process what he was seeing, and then he saw that Voldemort was holding a human arm, severed near the shoulder; it seemed too thin, that arm.

The Dark Lord pressed his wand to the flesh above the severed arm's elbow, and the fingers twitched, twitched like they were alive; by dim moonlight Harry saw a darker mark appear on that flesh, just above the elbow.

Seconds later the first hooded figure appeared inside the graveyard with the popping sound of an Apparition. A moment after that came another pop, and then another.

The hooded figures wore silver skull masks, and moonlight fled from the robes beneath them.

"Master!" cried one of the black robes, the third to arrive. The voice was of peculiar timbre, from behind the silver skull mask. "Master — it has been so long — we had lost hope —"

"Silence!" shouted the high voice of the Dark Lord Voldemort. Every

trace of Professor Quirrell was now gone from the too-tall figure. "Train your wand upon the Boy-Who-Lived, and watch him! Do not be distracted, not by anything! Stun him at once if he moves, if he begins to speak!"

More pops. Between graves, behind a tree, in all the shadowy spaces, more black robes were Apparating, all hooded and masked. Some of them voiced exclamations of joy, many of those sounding rather forced; others moved forwards as though to greet their Master. Voldemort gave them all the same instruction, except that some were commanded to Cruciate Harry Potter if he moved, others to restrain the Boy-Who-Lived if he moved, others told to fire hexes and curses, others told to cancel his magic.

Thirty-seven pops, Harry counted before the black robes and skull masks seemed to stop arriving.

All of them were now holding their wands pointed at Harry, aligned in a semicircle before him, where they wouldn't get into each other's lines of fire.

Harry continued pointing his wand downward, insofar as he had been told that, if he tried to raise it, he would die. He remained silent, insofar as he had been told that if he tried to speak, he would die. He tried not to shiver in the falling night temperatures, for he was naked, and it was getting colder.

You know, said the last voice within Harry, the voice of hope, I think this is getting pretty bad even by my standards.

## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTEEN



The gibbous moon riding higher in the cloudless sky, the stars and wash of the Milky Way visible in all their majesty within the darkness: All these illuminated thirty-seven skull masks gleaming above black robes, and the darker-clad Lord Voldemort, whose eyes shone red.

"Welcome, my Death Eaters," spoke Lord Voldemort's voice, smooth and high and terrible. "No, do not look at me, you fools! Eyes upon the Potter child! Ten years, it has been, ten years since we last met. Yet you answer my call as though it were yesterday..." The Dark Lord Voldemort came near to one hooded figure, tapped fingers upon the mask. "In a hastily Transfigured mockery of a Death Eater's true armor, with a childish Charm to distort your voice. Explain, Mr. Honor."

"Our old masks and robes..." said the robe whose mask the Dark Lord had tapped. Even through the distorting timbre of the mask, the fear in it was audible. "We... we were not fighting in them, Master, with you gone... so I did not maintain their enchantments... and then you summoned me to appear here, masked, and I... I always held faith in you, Master, but I did not know you would return this very day... I am truly sorry to have displeased you..."

"Enough." The Dark Lord moved on to stand behind another figure, that seemed to tremble, though it kept its mask facing the Boy-Who-Lived, and its wand held level. "I might think more kindly of such neglect, if you had

pursued my agenda by other means... Mr. Counsel. Yet I return to find — what? A country conquered in my name?" The high voice climbed higher. "No! I find you playing ordinary politics in the Wizengamot! I find your brothers still abandoned in Azkaban! It is a disappointment to me... I confess myself disappointed... You thought I was gone, the Dark Mark dead, and you forsook my purpose. Is that right, Mr. Counsel?"

"No, Master!" cried that masked figure. "We knew you would return — but, but we could not fight Dumbledore without you —"

"Crucio."

A horrible scream tore out of the mask, piercing the night, it continued for long, long seconds.

"Get up," the Dark Lord said to the figure that had collapsed upon the ground. "Keep your wand on Harry Potter. Do not lie to me again."

"Yes, Master," sobbed the figure, as it pushed itself to its feet.

Voldemort resumed pacing behind the black-robed figures. "I suppose you are also wondering what Harry Potter is doing here... Why he is a guest at my rebirthing party."

"I know, Master!" said one of the robes. "You mean to prove your power by killing him, in front of us all, to leave no doubt as to which of you is stronger! To show how your Killing Curse can slay even this so-called Boy-Who-Lived!"

There was a pause. None of the cloaked figures dared to speak.

Slowly, the Dark Lord Voldemort, in his high-collared shirt and dark robes, turned to face the Death Eater who had spoken.

"That," whispered Voldemort in a voice chill as death, "is a little too much folly for me to credit, Mr. Sallow. You heard that theory of how I died, and tried to provoke me into repeating a mistake?" Lord Voldemort was floating, rising high off the ground. "I suppose you came to prefer your laziness to my mastery, *Macnair?*"

The Death Eater who'd spoken was suddenly surrounded by a blue haze. He spun, slashed his wand at the Dark Lord, and cried "Avada Kedavra!"

Voldemort simply tilted to one side in midair, dodging the green bolt.

"Avada Kedavra!" cried the Death Eater. His hand that didn't hold a wand was making other gestures, further colors and layers building up in his shielding haze with each gesture completed. "Help me, my brothers! If we all —"

The Death Eater fell in seven flaming pieces to the ground, chunks of flesh with the cauterized edges still glowing.

"Eyes and wands on Harry Potter, all of you," Voldemort repeated, his voice low and dangerous. "And Macnair acted in sheer stupidity just then, for I command your Marks, as I *always* shall. *I am immortal*."

"Master," said another robe. "The girl upon the altar — is she to serve us for a Dark Revel? She seems unworthy of such a joyous occasion. I could find better, Master, if you give me leave for just a short time —"

"No, Mr. Friendly," said Voldemort, sounding rather amused. "The little witch you see upon the altar is none other than Hermione Granger —"

"What?" cried one of the black robes, and then, "I'm sorry, Master, I'm sorry, I beg your —"

"Crucio." This screaming only lasted a few seconds, and Voldemort had performed it as though it were perfunctory. Afterward Voldemort's voice returned to low amusement. "I have resurrected this Mudblood through the Darkest of magics, for my own purposes. You shall not offer her the slightest trouble, any of you. You are better off dead than if I learn my little experiment came to harm at your hands. This order is absolute, regardless of other circumstances — even if she escapes, let us say." A cold high laugh, as if at some joke that nobody else understood.

"Master," one of the robes said in a faltering voice distorted by his skull mask. "Master, please — I would never defy you, I am obedient as you see — but Master, I beg you, let me return, the better to serve you later — I came here in haste, forsaking — Master, with so many of us being gone, others will wonder, they will mark the absences, who has disappeared. Soon there shall be no alibi I can offer."

A cold high laugh. "Ah, Mr. White, the most delinquent of my servants. I have not yet decided if you will survive your punishment. I have less need of you than I once did, Mr. White. In two days' time the Death Eaters shall walk openly. My powers have increased, and I have just this day disposed of Dumbledore." More gasps of shock arose from the Death Eaters, Voldemort paid them no heed. "Tomorrow I shall slay Bones, Crouch, Moody, and Scrimgeour, if they have not fled. The rest of you shall go into the Ministry and the Wizengamot, and cast Imperius Curses as I direct you. We are *finished* waiting. By tomorrow's nightfall I shall have declared myself Lord Ruler of Britain!"

Intakes of breath rose from the gathered masks, but one figure was laughing. "You find me amusing, Mr. Grim?"

"Apologies, Master," said the robed figure who had laughed, his wand

perfectly level upon where Harry stood. "I was glad to hear you had dispatched Dumbledore. I fled from Britain in cowardly fear of him, having lost faith in your return."

Voldemort's chuckle resounded within the graveyard. "Your candor earns you my mercy, Mr. Grim. I was surprised to see you here tonight; you are more competent than I suspected. But before we turn our attention to happier matters, there is a certain affair to which we must attend. Tell me, Mr. Grim, if the Boy-Who-Lived swore an oath to you, might you trust him?"

"Master... I don't understand..." said Mr. Grim. One or two of the other Death Eaters turned their masks toward Voldemort before quickly fixing the skull gaze on Harry.

"Answer me," Voldemort hissed. "This is not a trick, Mr. Grim, and you will answer truthfully or bear the consequences. You knew the boy's forebears, did you not? Knew them for straightforward folk? If the boy freely chose to swear to you an oath, even knowing you for a Death Eater, might you trust in his words? Answer me!" Voldemort's voice rose to a shriek.

"I... yes, Master, I suppose I might..."

"Good," Voldemort said coldly. "The potential for trust must exist, to be sacrificed. And for the bonder of the Unbreakable Vow... which of you shall sacrifice their magic? It shall be quite the long Vow... much longer than usual... much magic shall be required for that..." Voldemort smiled his awful smile. "Mr. White shall do."

"No, please! *Master, I beg you!* I served you better than any — as best I could —"

"Crucio," said Voldemort, and Mr. White screamed through his mask's distortion for what seemed like a full minute. "Be grateful if I leave you your life! Now approach the boy, Mr. Grim, Mr. White. From behind him, idiot! You must not block the others' wands! And the rest of you, you must fire if Harry Potter tries to run, even if it means striking at your fellow Death Eaters."

Mr. White took time to approach, the black robes seeming to shake, even as Mr. Grim moved smoothly into position.

"What is to be the Vow, Master?" came the voice of Mr. Grim.

"Ah, yes," Voldemort said. The Dark Lord went on pacing behind the semicircle of Death Eaters. "Today — though I hardly expect even you to believe me — today we are doing Merlin's work, my Death Eaters. Yes! Before

us stands a great danger, who in his blundering folly has been prophesied to wreak destruction such as even I can scarcely imagine. The Boy-Who-Lived! The boy who frightens *Dementors!* The cattle who believe they own this world should have been more worried when they saw that. Useless, all of them!"

"Forgive me —" said one black robe in a halting voice. "Master — surely, if that is so — Master, why don't we just kill him right away?"

Voldemort laughed, a strange bitter laugh. When he spoke on his high voice was precise. "Here is the oath's intent, Mr. Grim, Mr. White, Harry Potter. Listen well and comprehend the Vow that must be sworn, for its intent is also binding, and you three must share an understanding of its meaning. You will swear, Harry Potter, not to destroy the world, to take no risks when it comes to not destroying the world. This Vow may not force you into any positive action, on account of that, this Vow does not force your hand to any stupidity. Do you understand that, Mr. Grim, Mr. White? We are dealing with a prophecy of destruction. A prophecy! They can fulfill themselves in twisted ways. We must be cautious that this Vow itself does not bring that prophecy about. We dare not let this Vow force Harry Potter to stand idly after some disaster is already set in motion by his hand, because he must take some lesser risk if he tries to stop it. Nor must the Vow force him to choose a risk of truly vast destruction, over a certainty of lesser destruction. But all Harry Potter's foolishness," Voldemort's voice climbed, "all his recklessness, all his grandiose schemes and good intentions — he shall not risk them leading to disaster! He shall not gamble with the Earth's fate! No researches that might lead to catastrophe! No unbinding of seals, no opening of gates!" Voldemort's voice lowered again. "Unless this very Vow itself is somehow leading into the destruction of the world, in which case, Harry Potter, you must ignore it in that particular regard. You will not trust yourself alone in making such a determination, you must confide honestly and fully in your trusted friend, and see if that one agrees. Such is this Vow's meaning and intent. It forces only such acts as Harry Potter might choose himself, having learned that he is a prophesied instrument of destruction. For the capacity for choice must also exist, to be sacrificed. Do you understand, Mr. White?"

"I — I think so — oh, Master, *please*, do not let the Vow be so long —"

"Silence, fool, you do a more useful thing this day than you have ever done. Mr. Grim?"

"I think, Master, that it must be repeated to me."

Voldemort smiled that too-wide smile, and said it all again using different words.

"And now," Voldemort said coldly, "Harry Potter, you will keep your wand low, and permit Mr. Grim to touch his wand to yours; and you will speak such words as I direct you. If Harry Potter speaks any other word, then cut him down, the rest of you."

"Yes, Master," came the thirty-four-fold chorus.

Harry was chilled, and shivering, and not only because he was naked in the night. He didn't understand why Voldemort was *not* just killing him. There seemed to be only a single line leading into the future, and it was Voldemort's chosen line, and Harry did not know what came after this.

"Mr. White," said Voldemort. "Touch your wand to Harry Potter's hand, and repeat these words. Magic that flows in me, bind this Vow."

Mr. White spoke those words. Even through the distortion effect of his mask, it sounded as though his heart were breaking.

Behind Voldemort the obelisks chanted, a language that Harry did not know; three times they repeated their words, then fell silent.

"Mr. Grim," said Voldemort. "Think of the reasons why you might trust this boy, if he had given this oath freely. Think of that potential for trust, and *sacrifice* it as you say..."

"By my trust that I hold for you," said Mr. Grim, "be you held."

And then it was Harry Potter's turn to repeat Lord Voldemort's words, and Harry did so.

"I vow..." Harry said. His voice shook, but he spoke. "That I shall not... by any act of mine... destroy the world... I shall take no chances... in not destroying the world... if my hand is forced... I may take the course... of lesser destruction over greater destruction... unless it seems to me that this Vow itself... leads to the world's end... and the friend... in whom I have confided honestly... agrees that this is so. By my own free will..." Harry could feel it, as the rite was invoked, the shining cords of power wrapping around his wand and Mr. Grim's wand, wrapping around his hand where Mr. White's wand touched it, wrapping around his self on some disturbingly abstract level. Harry could feel himself *invoking* his power of free choice, and he knew that his next words would *sacrifice* it, that this was absolutely the last chance to turn back.

"... so shall it be," said the coldly precise voice of Lord Voldemort.

"... so shall it be," Harry repeated, and he knew in that moment that the content of the Vow was no longer something he could decide whether or not to do, it was simply the way in which his body and mind would move. It was not a vow he could break even by sacrificing his life in the process. Like water flowing downhill or a calculator summing numbers, it was just a thing-Harry-Potter-would-do.

"Did the Vow take, Mr. White?"

Mr. White sounded like he was weeping. "Yes, Master... I have lost so much, please, I have been punished enough."

"Return to your places..." said Voldemort. "Good. All eyes on the Potter child, prepare to fire the instant he tries to flee, or raise his wand, or speak any word..." The Dark Lord floated high in the air, the black-clad figure overlooking the graveyard. Again he held a gun in his left hand, and his wand in his right. "Better. *Now* we shall kill the Boy-Who-Lived."

Mr. White staggered. Mr. Grim was laughing again, and so were others.

"I did not do that to be funny," Voldemort said coldly. "We are dealing with a prophecy, fools. We are snipping the threads of destiny one by one; carefully, carefully, not knowing when we may first encounter resistance. This is the order in which the next acts shall be done. First Harry Potter shall be stunned, then his limbs severed and the wounds cauterized. Mr. Friendly and Mr. Honor will examine him for any trace of unusual magics. One of you shall shoot the boy many times with my Muggle weapon, and then as many of you as can shall strike him with the Killing Curse. Only then will Mr. Grim crush his skull and brains with the mundane substance of a tombstone. I shall verify his corpse, then his corpse shall be burned with Fiendfyre, then we will exorcise the surrounding area in case he has left a ghost. I myself will guard this place until six hours have passed, for I do not fully trust the wards I have set against Time's looping; and four of you shall search the surroundings for signs of anything noteworthy. Even after that we must remain vigilant for any sign of Harry Potter's renewed presence, in case Dumbledore has left some unimagined trick in play. If you can think of any trick that I have missed in being sure that Harry Potter's threat is ended, speak now and I shall reward you handsomely . . . speak now, in Merlin's name!"

There was stunned silence amid the cemetery; no one made to speak.

"Useless, the lot of you," Voldemort said with bitter scorn. "Now I shall ask Harry Potter one final question, and he is to answer that question for my

ears alone, in Parseltongue. Strike the boy down at once if he answers with anything but hisses, if he tries to speak one word of human speech." Then Voldemort hissed, "Power I know not, it wass ssaid that you would have. The Muggle Artss I have now learned of from you, and I am already sstudying them. Your power over life-eaterss musst be comprehended for onesself, or sso you ssay. If there is any other power you possess, that I may come to have, tell me of it now. Elsse, I intend to torment certain of thosse you care for. Ssome livess I have already promissed you, but otherss I did not. Your Mudblood sservantss in your little army. Your preciouss parentss. All sshall ssuffer for what will sseem to them like eternitiess; and then I sshall ssend them, broken, into the life-eater prisson to remember it, until they wasste and die. For each unknown power you tell me how to masster, or other ssecret you tell me that I desire to know, you may name one more of thosse to insstead be protected and honored under my reign. Thiss alsso I promisse and intend to keep. Woldemort's smiling expression now came through as if it were a snake's gaping fangs, and the meaning that expression bore among snakes, a promise that whoever beheld the teeth was to be consumed by them. Swasste not time in thoughtss of esscape, if you care for thosse oness. You have ssixty ssecondss to begin telling me ssomething I wissh to know, and then your death beginss. ...

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### FINAL EXAM

This is your final exam.

You have 60 hours.

Your solution must at least allow Harry to evade immediate death, despite being naked, holding only his wand, facing 36 Death Eaters plus the fully resurrected Lord Voldemort.

If a viable solution is posted before \*12:01AM Pacific Time\* (8:01AM UTC) on Tuesday, March 3rd, 2015, the story will continue to Ch. 121.

Otherwise you will get a shorter and sadder ending.

Keep in mind the following:

- 1. Harry must succeed via his own efforts. The cavalry is not coming. Everyone who might want to help Harry thinks he is at a Quidditch game.
- 2. Harry may only use capabilities the story has already shown him to have; he cannot develop wordless wandless Legilimency in the next 60 seconds.
- 3. Voldemort is evil and cannot be persuaded to be good; the Dark Lord's utility function cannot be changed by talking to him.
- 4. If Harry raises his wand or speaks in anything except Parseltongue, the Death Eaters will fire on him immediately.
- 5. If the simplest timeline is otherwise one where Harry dies if Harry cannot reach his Time-Turner without Time-Turned help then the Time-Turner will not come into play.
- 6. It is impossible to tell lies in Parseltongue.

Within these constraints, Harry is allowed to attain his full potential as a rationalist, now in this moment or never, regardless of his previous flaws.

Of course 'the rational solution', if you are using the word 'rational' correctly, is just a needlessly fancy way of saying 'the best solution' or 'the solution I like' or 'the solution I think we should use', and you should usually say one of the latter instead. (We only need the word 'rational' to talk about ways of thinking, considered apart from any particular solutions.)

And by Vinge's Principle, if you know exactly what a smart mind would do, you must be at least that smart yourself. Asking someone "What would an optimal player think is the best move?" should produce answers no better than "What do you think is best?"

So what I mean in practice, when I say Harry is allowed to attain his full potential as a rationalist, is that Harry is allowed to solve this problem the way YOU would solve it. If you can tell me exactly how to do something, Harry is allowed to think of it.

But it does not serve as a solution to say, for example, "Harry should persuade Voldemort to let him out of the box" if you can't yourself figure out how.

The rules on Fanfiction dot Net allow at most one review per chapter. Please submit \*ONLY ONE\* review of Ch. 113, to submit one suggested solution.

For the best experience, if you have not already been following Internet conversations about recent chapters, I suggest **not** doing so, trying to complete this exam on your own, not looking at other reviews, and waiting for Ch. 114 to see how you did.

I wish you all the best of luck, or rather the best of skill.

Ch. 114 will post at 10AM Pacific (6PM UTC) on Tuesday, March 3rd, 2015.

### ADDED:

If you have pending exams, then even though the bystander effect is a thing, I expect that the collective effect of 'everyone with more urgent life issues stays out of the effort' shifts the probabilities very little (because diminishing marginal returns on more eyes and an already-huge population that is participating).

So if you can't take the time, then please don't. Like any author, I enjoy the delicious taste of my readers' suffering, finer than any chocolate; but I don't want to \*hurt\* you.

Likewise, if you hate hate this sort of thing, then don't participate! Other

#### FINAL EXAM

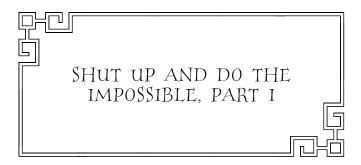
people ARE enjoying it. Just come back in a few days. I shouldn't even need to point this out.

I remind you again that you have hours to think. Use the Hold Off On Proposing Solutions, Luke.

And really truly, I do mean it, Harry cannot develop any new magical powers or transcend previously stated constraints on them in the next sixty seconds.

Unsurprisingly, this led to a lot of reader submissions. An awful lot.

You can see the fallout on the /r/HPMOR subreddit. If you're reading this somewhere that the previous text isn't a link, you can go to http://www.reddit.com/r/HPMOR and search for "Help! My evil plan has worked all too well!"



The gibbous moon riding higher in the cloudless sky, the stars and wash of the Milky Way visible in all their majesty within the darkness, all these shone down upon the graveyard to bear witness from their unimaginable distances.

In the instant when Harry had realized there was no way at all left to save everyone, his mind's voices had fallen away, become one, a single purpose taking up every fraction of his mind.

Fifty seconds.

Forty seconds.

Harry's eyes tracked slowly across the air, until his gaze landed on the first Death Eater, the one closest to him.

Thirty seconds?

Twenty seconds?

*STime'ss almosst up — ™* hissed Voldemort.

Look directly at the Dark Lord as he spoke. Low most valuable knowledge to you, I think, would be my ideass ass to how world might be desstroyed. Yet, to tell you ssuch thoughtss might lead to desstruction of world. Do not know prophecy, but if there iss prophecy, that makess it more than ussually probable that any action I take might have that effect. Or to tell you ssuch might prevent desstruction of world,

ssince you do sseem motivated to avoid it. Not allowed to make ssuch a decission mysself. Would need to awaken and conssult girl-child friend. Vow requiress. ...

There was a long pause. The Dark Lord, floating above and behind the curve of Death Eaters with leveled wands, began to laugh as Salazar Slytherin had thought a snake would laugh, cold amusement in the form of a hiss. "Do you know how to desstroy world, then?"

Cannot deliberately try to imagine method. You might have way for sservant to ssteal my thoughtss. Vow prohibitss. But ssusspect I could devisse method, if girl-child ssaid to try. ...

Harry's eyes drifted slowly to another Death Eater, and another.

More snakish laughter. Sclever. You have my complimentss for thinking of ssuch tacticss. But no. ...

Sknow it iss annoying, but with world and your eternity at sstake, would you not — ...

and Greater rissk to world in introducing ssuch complicationss, delaying your end. I will sstudy Muggle ssciencess mysself, think of all you might imagine. Now sspeak ssuch ssecretss as you may tell me, or this endss.

Slowly Harry's vision tracked across the graveyard in careful arcs, ignoring the Dark Lord except as a floating blackness in his peripheral vision. His mouth went on speaking with only half his attention. "Have thought of idea you might not have conssidered, teacher. Your attempt to kill me might fail in certain sspecific way desspite all your precautionss, perhapss lead into my desstroying world later. Would not ordinarily deem probable, but with prophecy at hand, may well be sso."

Voldemort went still, in the air. سلامى How? سى

ℳAm not obligated to tell you.~

A cold anger began to see the through the snakish reply. "Though I undersstand well your dessperation and attempted clevernesss, thiss beginss to annoy me. I will not withhold from killing you, for that iss sstill greater rissk. To fail to tell me your thought rissks desstroying world. Sspeak!"

₩No. Vow doess not obligate me to any possitive action.

The Dark Lord stared down at Harry Potter, who glanced up at the angry face only briefly before his eyes went back to the next Death Eater. Some of them were shifting their stances slightly, but they stood still, and said no words as they leveled their wands. The silver skull masks could not be read.

Then the Dark Lord began to chuckle again. Ssurvive your death, you

think you might? No, child, my Horcruxess are not linked to you alsso. I would know if they were. Or iss there other reasson you think you might ssurvive beyond my ways of enssuring your death? ...

Harry didn't allow himself to be distracted. The repeated failures didn't matter, they only led into the next action in the chain — but he *still needed a next action* —

SNow sspeak a ssecret, the Dark Lord hissed, Sor I —the

Life-eaterss will purssue you alwayss, hate you alwayss, sseek you out wherever you go, if what I have jusst done wass ssuccesssful, I have caused them to be set upon you! Guardian Charm ssecret will be beyond you for long time to come, perhapss forever! Besst defensse againsst life-eaterss would die with me!\tag{\tau}.

Shiss iss sstarting to become ssad... the Dark Lord's voice trailed off. Sh. I ssee. Life-eaterss resspond to expectationss. You tell me I will be hunted, I expect to be hunted, they hunt me. Ssuch iss rare, but not unheard-of. Valuable ssecret, yess. Can ssee many ussess. A cruel smile. I sshall allow you to sselect one persson to be ssaved.

ℳMysself.~

Would tell you to die with dignity, but knowing mysself, I know it for futility. You have wassted my kindly gift jusst then by annoying me, and I retract it. Any other ssecretss?

Yess. Really interessting oness, too. Ssome you are unlikely to figure out on your own, not for very long time if ever. If I ssay I have told you all that do not rissk world, will you not torment any of my friendss or family? All of thiss sspeech sstarted becausse you left me no way at all to ssave everyone.

The Dark Lord stood still in the air for a long moment.

And Harry's eyes went on tracking slowly across the graveyard, as his hand remained tight upon his wand.

In the instant when Harry had realized there was no way left to save everyone —

He couldn't speak any incantation in English. But Transfiguration was wordless.

There was no material in contact with his wand's end except air, which couldn't be Transfigured. But Voldemort didn't know about partial Transfiguration, which Harry could use to Transfigure a tiny bit of the material from his wand itself.

Syou're sstalling, to the Dark Lord said. SJusst to delay death? Or with

other purposse? **u** 

Harry said nothing, his other work slowing as his mind sought a continuation of the conversation that would work even against the Dark Lord's will —

Sspeak and tell me purposse, or thiss ends now and your friends suffer for lifetimess!\tag{\tau}

hissed, putting as much cold danger as he could into the snake's voice. Sspeak no commandss to sservantss. I do posssesss capabilitiess of which you are ignorant. Can usse one ssuch capacity to causse huge explossion almosst insstantly, without sspeaking incantation. Sslay your new body, all sservantss, Sstone sscattered to who knowss where.

At his current level of practice Harry could Transfigure one cubic millimeter as fast as he could apply his will and magic.

One cubic millimeter of antimatter.

It wasn't a world-ending threat.

Voldemort could have been carved from stone. Jou bluff, ssomehow. L.

Solution Speaking in ssnaketalk, I tell you, I can do it almosst insstantly, before any sspell can be casst at me, I think. You know very little of sscience ass yet. Power I would command iss sstronger than processs that fuelss sstarss.

www.will sstop you, whissed Voldemort. wyou cannot rissk world. Take no risskss, none, with clever ideass! w

Would not rissk world. I esstimated ssize of explossion, nowhere near that large. L..

wyou do NOT know, fool! Cannot be SURE! Woldemort's hiss was climbing higher.

*SI am reassonably certain. Vow will not sstop me.™* 

There was an increasing fury in Voldemort's expression, and yet his hiss carried a tinge of fear.  $\omega SI$  sshall wreak pain beyond imagining on all you care for  $-\lambda \omega$ 

Sshut up. I dissregard all ssuch threatss now, as theory of gamess ssayss I sshould. Only reasson you make threatss iss that you expect me to resspond. That, too, Harry had truly understood in the last extremity. Soffer me ssomething I want, teacher. For your new body, for your continued holding of Sstone, for livess of your sservantss.

Harry's mouth was running on automatic, his real attention elsewhere.

Beneath the moonlight glints a tiny fragment of silver, a fraction of a line...

From a tiny spot on the end of Harry's wand, a cubic millimeter of anchor, stretched out a thin line of Transfigured spider-silk. It would have broken at once, if tested; it would have gone unremarked, if any had noticed its glint. Less than a tenth of a millimeter in cross-section, the tiny shape represented by the extended line of spider-silk was something Harry could Transfigure swiftly, ten centimeters of length to a cubic millimeter of total volume; and Harry could Transfigure a cubic millimeter in a fraction of a second. He was forcing the Transfiguration outward, extending it through the air as fast as he could without risking the transformation.

The tracing line of spider-silk looped around a Death Eater's hood at neck level, returned to the pattern of threads.

Voldemort's face was now impassive. "Syou musst not leave here alive. Ssenssible people called good would also agree, thiss I tell you in ssnake'ss sspeech. But all your friendss I will treat kindly and protect under my reign, if you agree to die now ass good persson sshould."

The last Death Eater was looped. The pattern of spider-silk was complete. The web had been drawn with loops around all the Death Eater's necks. The ends of those loops had been anchored to a central circle; and that central circle in turn had three threads stretching across its center. The entire pattern still touching the anchor-line stretching out of Harry's wand.

Over the next seconds, those near-invisible threads of reflected moonlight turned black.

Filaments narrower, stronger, and sharper than steel wire; braided carbon nanotubes, each individual tube all a single molecule.

Harry hissed, www. Want you to also promisse to treat nationss kindly under your rule. Will not accept lesss. L.

Voldemort hovered still in the air, snake-face showing a dawning fury.

The last two threads stretched out from the dark pattern, black theads already in the form of nanotubes. They moved lightly through the air toward the Dark Lord himself, toward the sleeve just above Voldemort's left hand that held the gun, toward the sleeve above the right hand that held the yew wand, threads placed high at first to give them time to drift slowly downward through the air. The threads looped around, went over themselves, tied slippable knots. Began to tighten, coming closer to the sleeve, as Harry Transfigured them shorter —

Harry felt the tickle of Voldmort's power beginning to touch his own in the back of his mind; at the same time the Dark Lord's eyes widened, his mouth opened.

And Harry Transfigured the black threads stretching across the black pattern's center to a quarter their previous size, shrinking the circle, yanking hard on everything attached, tightening loops.

(Black robes, falling.)

Harry wasn't looking there, he didn't see the falling masks, the blood, in the back of his mind he felt some explosions of magic like he'd felt when Hermione died but he ignored them, Harry's eyes only saw the Dark Lord's hands and wand and gun dropping downward, and then Harry's wand was rising, pointing —

Harry screamed, "STUPORFY!"

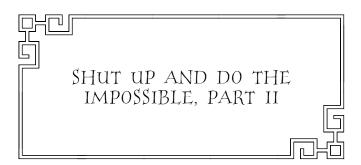
The red bolt the color of the Stunning Hex winged toward Voldemort, blazing across the graveyard almost faster than the eye could see.

Without any hesitation despite his wounds the Dark Lord jerked down and right through the air.

And the red bolt from Professor Flitwick's secret Swerving Stunner turned in midair and slammed into Voldemort.

The pain that flashed through Harry's scar was searing, it made him cry out and a red haze appear across his vision, despite everything Harry dropped his wand in pain and sheer fatigue.

As Harry let go of his wand, the pain began to clear —



omething like a fugue state had come over Harry's mind. The absolute state had partially worn off him, partially stayed with him. Elements of his mind were numb, maybe deliberately numbed by some part that was smart enough to predict what would happen otherwise. What he'd just done —

The thought was shut off, making space for an awareness of other things. Harry was standing in the middle of a haphazard graveyard, tombstones scattered without order.

By moonlight and starlight, it could be seen that black robes littered the ground, surrounded by textures that didn't match the surrounding graveyard earth, wetness tinged red in the moonlight. Some heads had come loose from the surrounding hoods of the robes, revealing hair that was long or short, dark or bright, which was all that could be seen beneath the moon. The silver masks stayed on, making all the hair originate in skulls instead of human faces —

The thought was shut off, making space for awareness of other things.

A girl in a red-trimmed Hogwarts uniform slept upon an altar. Near the altar, Harry's things lay in a heap.

Upon the ground lay a too-tall pale man of inhuman face, blood pouring from the stumps of his wrists.

As soon as the Dark Lord Voldemort awakens, he will destroy everything you love. Dumbledore is no longer there to stop him.

He cannot be imprisoned, for he can abandon his body at any time.

He cannot be killed permanently, not without destroying more than a hundred Horcruxes, one of which is the Pioneer plaque.

Materials: One wand, you are allowed to point it and speak this time.

You have five minutes.

Solve.

Harry stumbled toward the altar, knelt at its side, and picked up his pouch. He walked toward where Voldemort lay.

The sense of apprehension had diminished, after Voldemort had been hexed unconscious. Now, as Harry approached, it rose to a terrifying height, flaring also into pain in his scar.

Harry ignored the inner shriek. That had been the last memory of Tom Riddle seared into Harry's brain, the last cognitive pattern to be transferred over into the infant baby before Tom Riddle had exploded: a sense of mounting horror and dismay associated with the resonance that had spun out of control. Harry knew the meaning of it now, that sense of apprehension, and that made it easier to disregard. He'd guessed that the effect of the resonance mostly hit the caster, with power proportional to the caster's power, and the bet had paid off.

Harry looked upon Voldemort's body, and breathed deeply — through his mouth, because coppery smells Harry was not thinking about were coming in through his nose.

Harry knelt by Voldemort's side, took out his medical kit from his pouch, and placed a self-tightening tourniquet around the body's left wrist, then another tourniquet about the right.

It felt *wrong*, showing Voldemort that concern. Some part of Harry was aware, in the back of his mind, that some number of people had just had something extremely bad happen to them. What would have been balance, what would have been justice, was if Voldemort had suffered the same fate without an instant's more hesitation. What Harry was doing now felt like Batman showing more concern for the Joker than for the Joker's victims; it felt like a comic book where the writers wrung their hands endlessly about the morality of killing the Big Named Villains while innocents went on dying in the background. To show more solicitousness for the head villain than his minions, to pay *more attention* to his fate than the fates of his lower-status followers, was a flaw in human nature.

So it felt wrong when Harry rose up from beside the body, the tourniquets having tightened upon Voldemort's wrists; it felt like Harry was doing something ethically monstrous.

Even though any sane strategic thinking said that Voldemort's body *must not* die. The soul he'd created for himself had to be anchored in this brain, it mustn't be allowed to float free.

Harry stepped back, back from Voldemort's unconscious body, breathing deeply through his mouth. He went to the pile of his things, to put on his robes and other items, starting with placing the Time-Turner around his throat once more, readying his own escape and return if that was required...

More than a hundred Horcruxes.

That had been insane, there wasn't any other word for it, a sign of Voldemort's damaged thinking about death. A Muggle security expert would have called it fence-post security, like building a fence-post over a hundred meters high in the middle of the desert. Only a very obliging attacker would try to climb the fence-post. Anyone sensible would just walk around the fence-post, and making the fence-post even higher wouldn't stop that.

Once you forgot to be scared of how impossible the problem was supposed to be, it wasn't even difficult, not by comparison to the last one.

Neville's parents, for example, had been Crucioed into permanent insanity. Two hundred advanced Horcruxes wouldn't prevent that insanity, they would all just echo the same damaged mind.

It would be an ethically justified use of the Cruciatus Curse, if that were the only way to stop Voldemort permanently. It would be justice, balance, it would show that the Joker's life wasn't worth more than his meanest henchman...

All Harry needed to do was cast the Patronus Charm, send it to... Alastor Moody?... and tell him to come here. Well, no, it was a pretty good guess the Patronus Charm wouldn't work if it was cast with *that* intent. Maybe just resolve to tell Moody that, and use his Time-Turner once he was out of range of Voldemort's wards.

And then Voldemort could be Crucioed into permanent insanity.

It wasn't even the least merciful fate. That would have been throwing Voldemort's wand into the pit at Azkaban, if the wand stayed connected to Voldemort's life and magic no matter where his ghost tried to flee.

Harry turned to face where Voldemort lay. He walked forward, and continued to control his breathing, ignoring the burning feeling in his throat. Some

part of him knew that Voldemort was *also* Professor Quirrell, even though his body now was different. Even though the shift of personality had been perfect and that meant that Professor Quirrell had been just another mask...

Though Voldemort hadn't planned to kill Harry painfully. Hadn't thought to strike Harry with his followers' Cruciatus, when Harry was being annoying before. That meant something, when your opponent was Voldemort. Maybe he'd had some remaining shred of fellow-feeling for the other Tom Riddle after all.

... it would be wrong to take that into account.

Wouldn't it?

Harry looked back up at the stars. Here below the atmosphere the stars twinkled, they were embedded in the false dome of the night sky, stretched out across the wash of the Milky Way that glowed like a long ribbon, as if they were all close enough that you could fly up to them on a broomstick and touch them.

What would they want him to do now at this juncture, the children's children's children?

The answer to that also felt obvious, if it wasn't just the part of Harry that still cared about Professor Quirrell doing the real talking.

Harry had needed to do the thing he'd done, it *had* prevented greater evils, Harry couldn't have stopped Voldemort if the Death Eaters had fired first. But that thing Harry had done wasn't something that could be balanced by a not-necessary tragedy happening to one more sentient being, even if that being was Voldemort. It would just be one more element of the sorrows of ancient Earth so long ago.

The past was past. You did what you had to do, and you didn't do one scrap of harm more than that. Not even to balance things out, and make it all symmetrical.

The children's children wouldn't want Voldemort to die, even if his minions had. They wouldn't want Voldemort to hurt, if it didn't accomplish anything compared to him not hurting.

Harry breathed deeply, and let go of — not his hate — not quite his hate — he hadn't been able to hate his creator even at the very end — but even so, Harry let go of *something*. Of the sense that he *ought* to hate Voldemort, that it was a hate he was obligated to feel, for the endless list of crimes that Voldemort had committed for no good reason, not even his own happiness...

It's all right, the stars whispered down at him. It's all right not to hate him. It doesn't make you a bad person.

In the end, there was only one option he would take, and since Harry already knew that, there was no point agonizing about it. Whether it was the best option, only time would tell.

Harry breathed deeply, building up the magic inside himself. The spell he was going to cast didn't need to be *precise*, but it was still one of the most powerful spells he'd mastered.

Harry thought again of how unjust it was that Voldemort could not die with his followers, felt the slight trace of coldness in his blood that came with thoughts of ruthlessness. And then Harry let it go, let it all drain away beneath the starlight, because his dark side had never been anything except an inherited pattern of cognition, just one more bad habit of thinking to break.

Instead Harry looked at Hermione's breathing form atop the altar, and let the tears finally start from his eyes. What would become of Hermione now, what path she would choose after this, Harry couldn't guess; but she would be *there* to have a choice, their friendship wouldn't have destroyed her existence. He hadn't realized how shaky his hope had been, until he'd noticed how surprised he'd been after the hope had come true. Sometimes things did go better than expected.

And Harry took that thought, too, and put it into the magic he was building.

The power he was storing up was vibrating in him, like his whole body was part of his wand, either Harry's eyes were blurring or there was a luminous white quiver running over the holly. And Harry thought the shape of the spell he would cast, he didn't have much fine control but the pattern he needed was simple, it just needed to include —

Everything, forget everything, Tom Riddle, Professor Quirrell, forget your whole life, forget your entire episodic memory, forget the disappointment and the bitterness and the wrong decisions, forget Voldemort —

And at the last moment before Harry cast the spell, he had one final thought, a note of grace —

But if you ever had any truly happy memories, not hurting people or laughing at their pain, but the warm feeling of helping someone or being helped, there won't be many, maybe just when you were a child, but if you had any truly happy memories then keep only those —

Something bright in him unfolded at the decision, knowing he'd made the right choice, and Harry pushed that too into his wand —

# "OBLIVIATE!"

And it all poured out of Harry into the spell.

Harry fell over on his side, dropping his wand, gritted screams coming from his throat, his hands going helplessly to his scar, even as the sudden blast of pain in his head began to fade. Only dimly did his eyes see that the air was filled with glowing snowflakes, drifting motes of silver light like tiny specks of Patronus Charm.

Only a moment the silver light lasted, and then it was gone.

Professor Quirrell was gone.

Nothing left but a remnant.

And that spirit, what remained of it, wouldn't be so different now from Harry's own.

The Prophecy was complete.

They had each remade the other in their own image.

Harry started sobbing, then, from where he was curled up in the dirt.

He cried for a while.

And then eventually Harry staggered to his feet and picked up his wand again, because this day's work wasn't quite done.

Harry laid his wand directly on Voldemort's wrist-stump; it made his scar throb with an ongoing pain, but neither of them exploded.

And Harry began a Transfiguration.

Slowly — though faster than Harry had been able to Transfigure Hermione's body, last time — the stunned form of the snake-man changed, reshaped itself. As the Transfiguration progressed, especially as the snake-man's head began to turn glassy and shrunken, the pain in Harry's scar faded.

It would be a spell to maintain whether Harry was waking or sleeping; and later, when Harry was older and more powerful and maybe had some help, he would un-Transfigure the mindwiped Tom Riddle and heal his body with the power of the Stone. *After* future-Harry had figured out what to do with an almost-completely-amnesiac wizard who still had some bad habits of thought and some highly negative emotional patterns — a dark side, as 'twere — plus

a great deal of declarative and procedural knowledge about powerful magic. Harry had tried his best *not* to Obliviate that part, because he might need it, someday.

And meanwhile, just like magic hadn't defined a Transfigured unicorn as dead for purposes of setting off wards, Voldemort's Horcruxes wouldn't define a Transfigured Voldemort as dead and try to bring him back.

That was the hope, anyway.

Harry's scar twinged one last time when the steel ring went on his pinky finger, holding the tiny green emerald in contact with his skin. Then his scar subsided, and did not hurt again.

An upthrust rock served Harry for a chair, when he staggered over it and sat down motionless, resting after a fashion, shoving back the exhaustion that threatened the corners of his mind. *It was not done, there was more to do.* 

Harry took another deep breath, still inhaling through his mouth, said "Lumos," and looked around the graveyard.

Black robes and severed skull masks, surrounded by pools of blood — Hermione Granger, asleep on an altar.

Voldemort's empty robes and bloody hands, lying where the Dark Lord had fallen.

Quirinus Quirrell with his shredded robes, fallen in a heap where the Killing Curse had stricken him.

Harry imagined someone else looking at this scene, trying to understand it, and shook his head, because that wouldn't do, it wouldn't do at all.

Then Harry shoved himself up from his rock, grimacing as his mind, if not body, protested. He hadn't been bloodied or beaten much today, but somehow Harry's body was managing to feel like all the stress had hit it directly.

Harry staggered over toward where Voldemort had fallen, and picked up Voldemort's left hand from where it lay upon the ground.

Even in just the left hand, you could see the faint trace of snake's scales; it was very distinctively Voldemort. That was good.

Harry went to the altar where the sleeping Hermione lay, and gently placed the detached hand around Hermione's neck, carefully moving the fingers to clutch at her throat. It was hard to do, Hermione seemed so peaceful and innocent when she was sleeping, and Voldemort's severed hand seemed so ugly; Harry bluntly overrode whatever part of his mind was thinking that, since it made no sense in context.

A few weak Severing Charms served to mess up the almost perfectly fine cut the nanofiber had made, which was critical; it would not do to have the hand-stump look like the neck-stumps. The multiple *Diffindos* scattered small bits of Voldemort-wrist all over Hermione's shirt, which, Harry had to remind himself, was also part of the plan.

Harry repeated this with the right hand, arranging it symmetrically with the left.

Harry used *Inflammare* to singe Voldemort's robes where they lay, and then arranged the singed clothing around Hermione.

Voldemort's gun, and his wand, went into Harry's pouch. Harry placed the Stone of Permanency in an ordinary pocket, he wasn't sure what the Stone might do to his pouch.

The heap of things from inside Quirrell's robe, also near the altar, yielded the wand that the Defense Professor had used when he was being Quirrell. Harry went to where Quirrell lay, and straightened out the body as best he could, and put Quirrell's wand into his hand. Tears predictably came to Harry's eyes, and Harry wiped them away on his sleeve.

Harry took another deep breath, still inhaling through his mouth, said "Lumos" again, and once more looked around the graveyard.

Black robes, severed skull masks, and Hermione Granger lying on an altar with Voldemort's severed hands clutched around her throat, and Voldemort's singed clothing scattered around her. Quirinus Quirrell lay dead with his clothes torn and shredded, his wand in his right hand.

That would do.

There remained the problem of calling attention to it.

Harry was very nearly out of magic at this point. But he still had enough left to Transfigure a leaf into the deflated form of a three-meter weather balloon.

Harry's pouch produced a bottle of oxyacetylene, and a stick of dynamite, and a spool of fuse-cord. Be prepared, that's the Boy Scout's marching song, be prepared for a life that includes mountain trolls and who knows what else...

Harry inflated the weather balloon with the oxyacetylene. That would produce a very sharp overpressure when it detonated, maybe as loud as a sonic boom.

He attached the stick of dynamite — it was overkill, for detonation, but it would do.

He attached a 60-second fuse to the stick of dynamite, but did not light it

yet.

Harry put on his Cloak of Invisibility, that had been among the piles by the sacrificial altar.

He obtained his broomstick from his pouch, and mounted it.

Harry cast a Quieting Charm around Hermione Granger — it wouldn't stop *all* the noise, not even close, and it wasn't like she'd be permanently hurt if her eardrums burst, but it still seemed polite.

And then that was it. The Quieting Charm had done it. Harry was drained of magic for at least the next hour.

Harry mounted the broomstick, slowly rising into the air, lifting the weather balloon filled with oxyacetylene with him. The castle Hogwarts came into view, distantly gleaming in moonlight a few kilometers away, as Harry rose above the trees; and Harry did his best to figure the distance, and the angle as it would be seen from Hogwarts.

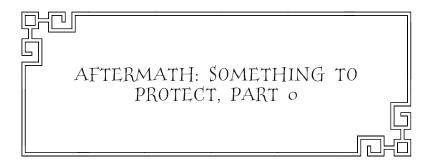
When he had risen high above the forest, Harry used a lighter to ignite the fuse on the dynamite attached to the weather balloon full of oxyacetylene. Then Harry spun the broomstick and darted away — though not directly toward the castle, that might take him too close to the route past-Harry and Professor Quirrell had traversed, it wouldn't do to have the Professor sense another Harry —

Harry felt a leaden stab of sadness, and refused it.

Thirty-one one-thousand, thirty-two one-thousand, thirty-three one-thousand...

When Harry reached forty, not wanting to take chances with his own eardrums, he glanced at his wristwatch, noting the exact time, and spun his Time-Turner once.

## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTEEN



It first Anna had been gratified to see the final Quidditch Cup go on so long — as a Gryffindor she was a bystander at the House Cup thing, it wasn't like Gryffindor ever won. In contrast, last year's World Cup of Quidditch, to which her family had bought some very expensive tickets, had been over in ten minutes which was awful. Modern Quidditch games had become too short, the Snitch caught much too quickly. It was a widely-talked problem among aficionados: broomstick enchantments had advanced, while the Snitch stayed the same regulation speed, with the result that Quidditch games had become shorter and shorter. At professional levels the sport of Quidditch had been reduced to a contest of who had the deepest pockets for their Seeker's experimental racing broom, and the rest of the players might as well have been watching from the stands.

Everyone knew something had to be done, the situation had been getting worse for *centuries* and now it was *intolerable*. But the International Confederation of Wizards' Quidditch Committee was mired in all the usual acrimony of the I.C.W., screaming disputes between Germans and Bulgarians, and somehow nobody could agree on *exactly* how to fix the rules. To Anna the correct course seemed obvious, just make the Snitch fast enough to restore the four-hour or five-hour games of the early nineteenth century and the Golden Age of Quidditch. Except the Belgians thought the duration of a professional game should

be two hours like in *La Belle Époque* when Belgium had dominated Quidditch, and the lunatic Italians wanted to go back to the week-long Quidditch games of the fourteenth century, and Britain's even crazier blood purists kept on talking up the occasional day-long Quidditch match as proof that broomsticks couldn't *really* have improved since everything was better in the old days *which was not how the Interdict of Merlin worked*.

She was one hundred percent on the side of Harry Potter that it was time for Hogwarts to give up on those gibbering slowpokes and just change the rules, starting here and now. But not by *eliminating the Snitch*, that was going all the way back to *eleventh century Kwidditch*. It didn't matter if Headmistress Hufflepuff had first introduced the innovation because one of her students had wanted to play the game but not been suited to the usual roles. Snitches had caught on internationally because it was more exciting when the game could always end in the next minute.

Anna had been arguing this viewpoint at the top of her lungs for the last thirty minutes, quite forgetting to pay attention to the game. Thanks to a lucky coincidence of seating she'd been near the Boy-Who-Lived and his sign, and hence she'd managed to stake out her position right from the start.

She was aware, in the back of her mind, that if the Quidditch rules really did change starting here and now, then this was the most important thing she'd ever do. She could almost feel the pressure of Time twisting around her as though the fate of Quidditch Itself were being settled this very day, and she was standing close to the center of it... though she hadn't gotten high-enough scores in Divination to actually sense anything like that, of course.

She hardly noticed when at one point the Boy-Who-Lived stood up to go to the bathroom.

The Boy-Who-Lived did catch her eye when he trudged back; Harry Potter looked a bit tired and wobbly, though his uniform appeared as trim as if he'd just changed into a new one.

She noticed half an hour later on, when Harry Potter seemed to sway a bit, and then hunch over, his hands going to cover up his forehead; it looked like he was prodding at his forehead scar. The thought made her slightly worried; everyone knew there was *something going on* with Harry Potter, and if Potter's scar was hurting him then it was possible that a sealed horror was about to burst out of his forehead and eat everyone. She dismissed that thought, though, and continued to explain Quidditch facts to the historically ignorant at the top

of her lungs.

She definitely noticed when Harry Potter stood up, hands still on his forehead, and dropped his hands to reveal that his famous lightning-bolt scar was now blazing red and inflamed. It was *bleeding*, with the blood dripping down Potter's nose.

She stopped talking mid-sentence. Other people turned to look at what she was staring at.

"Professor McGonagall?" Harry Potter said in a wavering voice. There were tears in the corners of his eyes, which shocked her; the Boy-Who-Lived did *not* seem like the sort of person who would burst into tears. Harry Potter raised his voice further, as though it were hard for him to speak. "Um, Professor McGonagall?"

Professor McGonagall turned away from where she was arguing with the Hufflepuff Quidditch team. The Head of Gryffindor's eyes widened in shock, and then she was moving people out of her way, almost running. "Harry!" she said. "Your *scar!*"

Silence was spreading, in a widening circle.

"I think," Harry said, his voice still wavering but louder, "I think he's back. I think I'm seeing — through Voldemort's mind —"

Anna took a step back at You-Know-Who's name and nearly fell over a bleacher. An older boy standing next to her gave a cry of dismay, and then the Boy-Who-Lived shrieked even louder.

"HE'S KILLING THEM!" screamed Harry Potter.

Half the Quidditch stadium turned to look at him.

"The ritual!" cried Harry Potter. "Blood of his servants! The blood, the life! He summoned them, he took their heads, their blood, the life, to renew his own — THE DARK LORD RISES, VOLDEMORT IS RETURNED!"

Madam Hooch blew a shrill whistle, and the Quidditch brooms that hadn't already stopped in midair began to slow. For herself she wasn't sure if this was a joke; if it was, Boy-Who-Lived or not, he was in more trouble than she could even imagine.

Professor McGonagall raised her wand into position for a Quieting Charm and Harry Potter caught her hand.

"Wait —" Harry Potter gasped, his voice lower, but still loud enough that she and the people near her could hear clearly. "He can be stopped — I see his mind, his mistake — he can be stopped *now* — *THE WAY IS STILL OPEN!* 

SHE'S FOLLOWING HIM! SHE WHO VOLDEMORT SLEW!" Harry's voice rose further, as Anna's own mouth fell open in sudden confusion. "RETURN! RETURN, RETURN, REVIVE AND STOP HIM! STOP HIM, HERMIONE!"

And then Harry Potter fell silent. He looked around at the people staring at him.

She'd just about decided that this had to all be a prank in *unbelievably* poor taste, when a distant but sharp CRACK filled the air.

Harry Potter swayed, and fell to his knees, even as her heart jumped into her throat. An explosion of excited babble rose around them.

She could still hear the words from Harry Potter's mouth, as Professor McGonagall knelt next to him. "It worked," Harry Potter gasped aloud, "she got him, he's gone."

"What?" cried Professor McGonagall, then glanced around. "Quiet! Quiet, all of you! Harry, what happened?"

Harry Potter was speaking rapidly but loudly. "Voldemort — tried to revive — he summoned Death Eaters and he killed them, stole their blood and life — Hermione's body was there, I don't know why, maybe Voldemort was planning to use it for something — Voldemort came back, he resurrected himself, but Hermione followed him back and she destroyed him, he's gone, it's over. It happened in a graveyard near Hogwarts, it's," Harry Potter rose to his feet, still swaying, "I think it's in that direction." Harry Potter pointed in the rough direction the CRACK had come from, "I'm not sure how far. The sound from there took twenty seconds to get here, so maybe two minutes on a broomstick —"

With a motion so smooth it looked unconscious, Professor McGonagall shifted into a stance and said "*Expecto Patronum*." She addressed the glowing cat that then appeared. "Go to Albus, tell him he must come at once —"

"Dumbledore's gone!" cried Harry Potter. "The Headmaster is gone, Professor McGonagall! The Dark Lord trapped him, he reversed some kind of trap the Headmaster planned and Dumbledore was caught outside Time, he's gone!"

The horrified babble around them rose in pitch.

"Go to Albus!" Professor McGonagall said to her Patronus.

The moonlit cat only looked at McGonagall sadly, and Anna sucked in her breath in sudden horror, feeling like someone had punched her in the stomach. It was real, it was all real, this wasn't a joke.

"Professor McGonagall, Hermione is *alive!*" Harry Potter raised his voice again. "She's really alive and not an Inferius or anything, and she's still there in the graveyard!"

"A broomstick!" Professor McGonagall shouted. She turned to the players hovering motionless over the Quidditch field. "I need a broomstick. NOW!"

Despite everything, Anna raised a hand in mute protest, then caught herself, even as the Ravenclaw and Slytherin Seekers came zooming over (with excellent strategic sense, since they weren't actually doing anything).

Harry Potter was already retrieving another broomstick from his pouch, a multi-person one.

Professor McGonagall saw this, and nodded firmly. "You stay here, Mr. Potter, unless there is some excellent reason you must be there. I will go at once."

"You mustn't!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, who'd shoved his tiny way through the crowd, occasionally running under someone's legs. His eyes were wide, he looked as though he wanted to faint. "You have to stay at Hogwarts, Minerva! You — you're the —" Professor Flitwick seemed to be having trouble speaking.

Professor McGonagall spun around to face Professor Flitwick, and then stopped, blood draining from her face.

Then she seized the broomstick from Harry Potter's hand, and presented it to the tiny half-goblin Professor. "Filius," she said crisply. All the incipient panic had disappeared from her voice, she now spoke in her crisp Scottish accent as though addressing lessons on Monday. "Look for the graveyard of which Mr. Potter spoke, find Miss Granger. Apparate her to St. Mungo's and then stay by her."

"I think —" Harry Potter said hoarsely. "I think Transfiguration might have been used in combat there — Professor Quirrell tried to fight Voldemort — take precautions —"

Filius Flitwick nodded without halting in getting on the broomstick.

"Professor Quirrell's dead!" wailed Harry Potter. The anguish in his voice carried clearly. "He's dead! The Dark Lord killed him! His body —" Harry Potter choked up. "It's there, in the graveyard."

She stumbled back again, feeling it like another punch in her gut. Professor Quirrell had been — one of her favorite Professors, *ever*, he'd made her rethink everything she'd believed about Slytherin, she'd known in some distant way that he was probably going to die very soon but to hear that he was really,

truly dead...

The Boy-Who-Lived sat down on the bench, as if his legs couldn't support him anymore.

Professor McGonagall turned to the crowd, touching her wand to her throat. "QUIDDITCH IS OVER," her amplified voice boomed out. "GO BACK TO YOUR DORMITORIES—"

"Don't!" screamed Harry Potter.

Professor McGonagall turned to look at him.

Tears were leaking down the Boy-Who-Lived's cheeks, he looked like the interruption had surprised himself as much as it had surprised anyone else. "It was Professor Quirrell's last plot," Harry Potter said, his voice breaking. The Boy-Who-Lived looked at the Quidditch players who had now flown to nearby, as though speaking to them directly. "His last plot."

Harry Potter was floated off by Professor McGonagall to the infirmary. The other Professors ran off to oversee who-knew-what, leaving only Professors Sinistra and Hooch behind. At the stadium, rumors ran wild; Anna repeated everything she could remember hearing as best she could. Something had happened to Dumbledore, some Death Eaters had been summoned and killed (no, Harry Potter hadn't said which ones), Professor Quirrell had gone out to face the Dark Lord and died for it, You-Know-Who had returned and died again, Professor Quirrell was dead, he was dead.

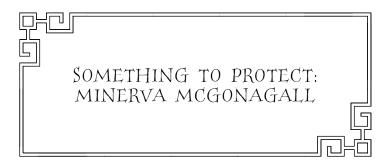
In time most of the students wandered off back to their dormitories, to sleep if they could.

Anna stayed in the stadium, and watched the rest of the game, ignoring her body's need for sleep, and her eyes that often blurred with tears.

The Ravenclaw team put up a valiant fight.

But there was no Quidditch team anywhere that could've defeated the Slytherins that day.

Dawn was tinging the sky when the Slytherins won their final game, the Quidditch Cup, and the House Cup.



he morning after had come, and all the students had gathered silently around the four Tables of Hogwarts, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres among them. He had collapsed in exhaustion last night and been awoken in the infirmary next morning, still muzzy, with the Philosopher's Stone underneath his left sock.

The Head Table looked like a plague had swept it.

Dumbledore's throne was gone from the Head Table, without replacement, leaving the center of the Head Table empty.

Severus Snape was sitting in a floating seat, the magical equivalent of a wheelchair.

Professor Sprout was missing. According to what Harry had been told last night, a court Legilimens would examine her to see if any further compulsions remained, but probably no charges would be filed. Harry had emphasized to Professor McGonagall and the Aurors, as hard as he could, that Professor Sprout was probably just a victim. The Boy-Who-Lived had pronounced that he'd seen no evidence of Sprout's intentional guilt in Voldemort's mind.

Professor Flitwick was missing, presumably still staying by Hermione's side.

Professor Sinistra was missing and Harry didn't know why or where.

The numbness that surrounded Harry's mind was like a Mylar blanket, protective if not comforting. There were scenes in his mind of black robes falling and blood spilling, appearing for an instant before being shoved back. He'd process it later, not now. Some other time would be better, future-Harry would have a comparative advantage at coping.

Somewhere inside Harry was the fear that it *wouldn't* hurt, that there would be no price to be paid. But that fear also could be put off into the future.

No breakfast had appeared on the tables. The students sitting near Harry were waiting in frightened silence. Owls had been prohibited from entering or leaving Hogwarts since early last night.

The doors of the Great Hall opened once more, and forth came Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall. She wore robes of formal black, and her head was bare, denuded of its usual witch's hat. Her grey-brown-blonde hair was done up in a coiled braid, as if in preparation for a hat to be placed later; but for now Harry saw her head bare for the first time.

Minerva McGonagall came to the lectern that stood before the Head Table. All eyes were upon her.

"I am afraid that I have much news," Minerva said. Her voice was sad, within its Scottish precision. "And most of it is terrible. First. The reason I am the one to speak to you is that the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus," her voice stopped, "Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, has been lost. You-Know-Who trapped him outside Time, and we do not know if he ever can be brought back to us. We, we have lost, what may have been, the greatest Headmaster, that Hogwarts has ever had."

A susurration of horror arose across the tables, no audible gasps or moans, just the sound of many intaken breaths; most from Gryffindor, and some from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw as well. The ill news had already been known, but now it had also been said by authority.

"Second. You-Know-Who returned briefly, but is once again dead. All that remained of him was his hands clutched around Miss Granger's throat. There is no more threat from him, or so we think." Minerva McGonagall drew in another breath. "Third. Professor Quirrell died with his wand in his hand, facing You-Know-Who. He was found not far from where You-Know-Who perished again, a victim of You-Know-Who's Killing Curse." Another susurration of verified horror, now from all four tables.

Minerva drew another breath. "Last night we also lost what may have

been the greatest Defense Professor in the history of Hogwarts. His scholastic merits alone... Our Defense Professor has gone by many names, but his true name was David Monroe. As he was the last of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Monroe, his funeral — his second funeral, and the true one — will be held before the Most Ancient Hall of the Wizengamot, in two days. Yet a wake shall also be held for the Defense Professor of Hogwarts, for our own Professor Quirrell, in this castle. That man also died a Hogwarts teacher, as nobly as a Hogwarts teacher ever did."

Harry listened in silence, shoving down the tears that again rose to his eyes. It wasn't even *true*, let alone unexpected; and yet hearing it still hurt. From where he sat beside, Anthony Goldstein put a comforting hand over Harry's hand, and Harry left it there.

"Fourth. One piece of exceedingly unexpected and happy news. Hermione Granger is alive and in full health, sound of body and mind. Miss Granger is being observed at St. Mungo's to see if there are any unexpected aftereffects from whatever happened to her, but she appears to be doing astonishingly well considering her previous condition."

It should have produced wild cheers from Ravenclaw and Gryffindor, if the news had come as part of any other package, or if it had been more unexpected. As it stood, Harry saw a few smiles, but they were brief. Maybe they'd jumped for joy earlier, but at the moment there was only silence. Harry understood that. He wasn't cheering either, not right now.

"Finally —" Minerva McGonagall faltered, then raised her voice. "I fear that I have the gravest possible news to share with some of our students. It seems that You-Know-Who summoned those who were once his followers; and many of them obeyed, whether from terribly misguided loyalty, or out of fear for their families if they refused. A sacrifice was required, it seems, to complete You-Know-Who's resurrection; or perhaps You-Know-Who blamed his former followers for his defeat. Thirty-seven bodies were found, more followers outside Azkaban than You-Know-Who was thought to have. I am afraid —" Minerva McGonagall faltered again. "I am afraid that among the deceased are the parents of many of our students —"

no no no no no no NO NO NO NO

As though by some terrible magnet, Harry's eyes were drawn to the picture of absolute horror that was Draco Malfoy's face, even as the comforting cotton wrap around Harry's thoughts was torn away like thin tissue.

How could he have not thought, how could he have not realized —

Somewhere in the background, someone was already screaming, and yet the room seemed very silent.

"Sheila, Flora, and Hestia Carrow. Lost both their parents last night. Students who have lost their fathers include Robert Jugson. Ethan Jugson. Sara Jugson. Michael MacNair. Riley and Randy Rookwood. Lily Lu. Sasha Sproch. Daniel Gibson. Jason Gross. Elsie Ambrose —"

Maybe Lucius realized, maybe he was smart enough to stay away, maybe he realized that Voldemort was the one who struck at Draco —

"— Theodore Nott. Vincent Crabbe. Gregory Goyle. Draco Malfoy. This concludes the list."

One student sitting at the Gryffindor table let out a single cheer, and was immediately slapped by the Gryffindor witch sitting nearby hard enough that a Muggle would have lost teeth.

"Thirty points from Gryffindor and detention for the first month of next year," Professor McGonagall said, her voice hard enough to break stone.

"Lies!" shrieked a tall Slytherin, who'd risen up from that table. "Lies! Lies! The Dark Lord will return, and he'll, he'll teach you all the meaning of —"

"Mr. Jugson," said Severus Snape's voice. It was also faltering, it didn't sound like the Potions Master at all, it wasn't loud and yet the Slytherin fell silent. "Robert. The Dark Lord killed your father."

Robert Jugson let out a scream of terrific fury and turned to run out of the room, and Draco Malfoy folded in on himself like a collapsing house and made sounds that nobody heard, because the babble was starting up now.

Harry rose six inches from the bench and then stopped.

what would you say to Draco there is nothing you can say to Draco you can't go over there now and pretend to be his friend

you want to make it right you want to make it better but you cannot make it right there is no way you can make right what you have done to him what you did to Vincent to Gregory what you did to Theodore

The world blurred around Harry, he barely saw Padma Patil rise up and make her way toward the Slytherin table and Draco, or Seamus heading towards Theodore.

And because Harry had read his father's science fiction and fantasy collection, because he had already read this scene a dozen times over when it happened to other protagonists, there was an image in Harry's mind of Mad-

Eye Moody, of the scarred man called Alastor. And Mad-Eye's image was saying, in just the same voice he'd used to speak to Albus Dumbledore in memory, that the Death Eaters had been pointing their wands at Harry, that they had already chosen to take the Dark Mark, that they had been guilty of sins beyond reckoning and maybe beyond Harry's imagination, that they had foregone the deontological protection of good people and made themselves targetable if there was a strong reason to sacrifice them. That it had been necessary to save Harry's innocent parents from torture and Azkaban, that it had been necessary to protect the world from Voldemort. That plain old ordinary Aurors and judges had to do much more morally questionable things than killing sworn and blooded Death Eaters who were pointing wands at them, in the course of carrying out ordinary justices that were less clear-cut but still necessary to society. If it were not right to do what Harry had done, if it were not right to do much *more* morally ambiguous things than what Harry had done, then society as human beings knew it could not exist. Nobody with common sense would blame Harry for doing it, Neville wouldn't blame him, Professor McGonagall wouldn't blame him, Dumbledore wouldn't blame him, even Hermione would tell him it had been the right thing to do once she knew.

And all of this was true.

Just as it was also true that some part of Harry's mind had calculated that wiping out the blood purist political elite would make it easier and more convenient to rebuild magical Britain afterward. It hadn't been an important consideration, but it had still been calculated in those instants of rapid thought, a check on the long-term consequences to see if they rated as catastrophic, and a decision that they actually rated as pretty much okay. And that check had forgotten that Death Eaters had children at Hogwarts or that one of them wore the face of Draco's father. It wouldn't have changed anything. It wouldn't have changed anything at all. But that was the truth of the calculation Harry's mind had performed, given only seconds to think.

At least Harry could, if the Death Eaters' survivors were in any sort of financial trouble, do something about that easily enough. Transfigure gold, and use the Stone to make it permanent — unless making that much gold would be troublesome to the wizard economy at large, or cause objections from goblins who didn't understand market monetarist economics — though it wasn't as though Harry didn't also have useful services to sell —

Other cotton wrap was also being torn off Harry's thoughts, now.

"It seems likely," Minerva said, her voice was not loud but it cut through all other sounds, "that some of our students will also have been stripped last night of those named as their guardians. Should you end up a ward of Hogwarts, please know that I will take the responsibilities of my position with extreme seriousness. You will be extended every courtesy. Your family's vault will be managed well and truly. As best I can, I will treat every one of you as I would my own children — and I will protect you as much as I would protect my own children, no more, no less. I hope that is clear to *EVERYONE AT HOGWARTS*."

Students nodded rapidly.

"Good," Minerva said. Her voice sank back. "Then there is one more thing that must be done."

With a sad, solemn air, Professor Sinistra emerged from a side entrance. She was wearing white robes instead of her usual brown, and instead of her customary witch's hat, she was wearing a many-tasseled square hat whose colors had faded into mostly grey.

In her hands, Professor Sinistra carried the Sorting Hat.

With the air of someone carrying out a ceremony that had not changed in centuries, Aurora Sinistra knelt, on one knee, before Minerva McGonagall, presenting to her the Sorting Hat in both hands.

Minerva McGonagall took the Sorting Hat from Professor Sinistra's hands, and placed it on her own head.

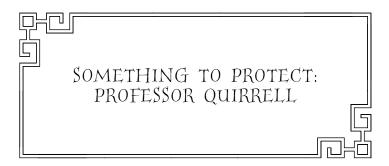
There was a long silence.

"HEADMISTRESS!"

"As Albus Dumbledore is not dead," Minerva said, her voice so low that students strained to hear it, "but only taken from us, I accept this position in the capacity of Acting Headmistress only — until Dumbledore's return."

A piercing cry split the Great Hall, and Fawkes was there, overflying all Four Tables in a slow spiral arc. He passed over each of the tables, humming in his bird's voice, a hum of absolute loyalty that would outlast the death of merely physical fires. *Wait*, the hum seemed to say. *Wait until his return, and be true*.

Fawkes circled Minerva McGonagall three times, feathered wings brushing around her as the tears began to creep down her cheeks; then the bird flew out a window above the Hall, and was gone.



The Sun shone down on the Scottish green, striking sparks of reflected white from every passing dewdrop or reflective leaf that happened to position itself correctly, a clear blue sky for a funeral.

Harry had declined to give the eulogy. He'd declined for the second time. Professor Flitwick had asked him about it weeks ago in May, to give Harry time to write his lines before it would become necessary to speak; and Harry had said no then, too.

So it fell to a sixth-year Gryffindor, Oliver Habryka, who had the fourth-highest total of Quirrell points among all the students, and who had been General of an army. The seventeen-year-old boy was tall and not especially handsome in solid black robes; instead of a red tie, he was wearing a purple tie such as Professor Quirrell had sometimes favored.

Speaking, under the circumstances, *ex tempore*. The previous eulogies, written well in advance, had been discarded; Oliver Habryka had a parchment in his left hand, but he wasn't looking at it at all.

"Professor Quirrell was very sick," the tall boy said, his wavering voice falling into a hush of students, occasionally broken by a muffled sob. "I think if Professor Quirrell had been able to fight in the fullness of his power, You-Know-Who couldn't have beat him easily, and maybe not at all. They say that David Monroe was the only one that You-Know-Who was ever afraid of, in his day. But," Oliver's voice broke, "Professor Quirrell wasn't in the fullness of his power. He was very sick. He had trouble walking by himself. And he went to face the Dark Lord, alone."

There was a pause, then, while the students cried for a while.

Oliver wiped away his tears with his sleeve, and spoke again. "We don't know exactly what happened," said Oliver. "I imagine the Dark Lord laughed at him. Maybe made fun of the Professor, for challenging him when he couldn't stand up. Well, *he's not laughing now*, is he."

There were fierce nods from the students; all of them that Harry could see, from Gryffindor to Slytherin.

"Maybe the Dark Lord knew some way of curing Professor Quirrell, You-Know-Who did come back from the dead after all. Maybe he offered Professor Quirrell his life if Professor Quirrell would serve him. Professor Quirrell smiled, and told the Dark Lord it was time for them to play a game called Who's The Most Dangerous Wizard In The World."

If you don't know, don't just make stuff up. But Harry didn't say anything. It was what Lord Voldemort might have tried, it was what Professor Quirrell might have said back.

"And they aren't telling us everything," Oliver said, "but we can guess what happened next. We all know that Hermione Granger, who was one of the Professor's best students, was killed by a troll earlier this year, it must have been the Dark Lord who made it happen, just like he framed her for the Blood-Cooling Charm. Professor Quirrell knew the Dark Lord was behind it, so he stole Miss Granger's body and preserved it, kept it safe —"

Couldn't blame him for that one.

"Then Professor Quirrell went out to face the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord killed Professor Quirrell. And Hermione Granger came back to life. They say she's alive and whole now, and maybe something more. When the Dark Lord tried to seize her, all that was left of him afterward was his burned robes and his hands around Miss Granger's throat. Just as Harry Potter was protected from the Killing Curse by his mother's love and sacrifice, Professor Quirrell willingly going out, to face, the Dark Lord alone, must have called, Hermione Granger's spirit, back from, from wherever, she was —" Oliver's voice was breaking.

"Not just like that," Harry said from the front row of seats, his own voice

hoarse. He *had* to say something at this point, before it got out of control. If it wasn't already out of control. "David Monroe was a powerful wizard, more powerful than anyone knew except him and me. I don't think you can bring someone back from the dead just by sacrificing yourself. No one should try doing it that way."

Such a beautiful story. It should have been true. It should have been true.

"I don't know very much about the person behind the Professor," Oliver Habryka said, after he got himself under control again. "I know David Monroe wasn't a happy man. He never could cast a Patronus Charm."

Tears were gathering in Harry's eyes again. It wasn't right, it wasn't fair, Voldemort had killed so many people, he should have died along with his followers, he didn't deserve special treatment. But it hadn't just been Harry's weakness, it had been the Horcruxes, Voldemort *couldn't* have been killed outright. So Harry could admit it, he was glad, he was *glad* Professor Quirrell wasn't all gone...

"But I, know," said Oliver, tears glistening on his own cheeks, "Professor Quirrell, is happy, wherever, he is now."

On Harry's left hand, a tiny emerald glowed bright beneath the morning sun.

Not Heaven, not some faraway star, not a different place but a better person, I'll show you, someday I'll show you how to be happy —

The tall boy glanced down at a parchment he held in his other hand, the first time he'd consulted it. "Professor Quirrell," Oliver said, his voice now fiercer and faster, "was, by far, the best Professor of Battle Magic that Hogwarts ever had. Salazar Slytherin couldn't have been half as good a teacher, no matter what spells he knew. Professor Quirrell told us at the beginning of this year that what he taught us would always be our firm foundation in the arts of Defense. And it will be. Forever. We'll teach it to the new students next year, no matter who we have for a professor. The older students will teach the younger ones. That's the solution to the curse on the Defense position. We won't sit around waiting for authority to teach us. And we'll make sure that Professor Quirrell's teachings never die out of Hogwarts."

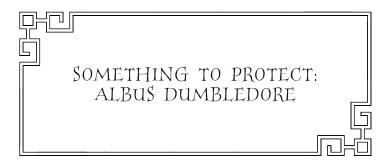
Harry looked at where Professor — no, Headmistress McGonagall — was sitting, and saw the Headmistress nodding silently, a look that was sad and stern and proud.

"They haven't let us see Miss Granger yet," Oliver said. His voice quavered.

"The Girl-Who-Revived. But I'll always think of the Defense Professor when I see her. His sacrifice lives on in her, just as his teachings live on in us." Oliver glanced at where Harry sat, then looked down again at the parchment. "Here's to Professor Quirrell, then, the best Slytherin that ever was, what every Slytherin should be! Three cheers for him!"

"Huzzah! Huzzah! Huzzah!"

No one stayed silent this time, not a single student that Harry could see.



Harry stood now before the gargoyles that guarded the Headmaster's — no, the Headmistress's office. He had been summoned by Professor Sinistra, told that it was an emergency, but the gates were not opening for him.

Experiment had showed that the Stone made one Transfiguration permanent every three minutes and fifty-four seconds, irrespective of the size of object Transfigured. Just once, holding the Philosopher's Stone up to the light of Harry's most powerful flashlight in an otherwise darkened closet, Harry had thought he'd seen an array of tiny points inside the chunk of crimson glass; but Harry hadn't been able to see it again, and now suspected himself of having imagined it. The Stone had no other powers that Harry could detect, nor did it respond to any attempted mental commands.

Harry had given himself until noon tomorrow to figure out how to begin using the Stone without it being grabbed by someone else, trying not to think about what was still happening, what had always been happening, in the meanwhile.

Ten minutes late, Minerva McGonagall approached, moving in a swift stride. Her arms were full of papers, she was once again wearing the Sorting Hat.

The gargoyles, with a brief sound of grinding stone, bowed low before her.

"The new password is 'Impermanence'," Minerva said to the gargoyles, and they stepped aside. "I'm sorry, Mr. Potter, I was delayed —"

"Understood."

Minerva mounted the long spiral stairs, climbing instead of waiting to be carried, Harry following behind her.

"We are meeting with Amelia Bones, Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; with Alastor Moody, whom you have met; and with Bartemius Crouch, Director of the Department of International Magical Cooperation," Minerva said as she climbed. "They are Dumbledore's heirs as much as you or I."

"How — how's Hermione doing?" Harry hadn't had a chance to ask until now.

"Filius said she seemed rather in shock, which I suppose is not surprising. She asked where you were, was told you were at a Quidditch game, asked where you really were, and refused to speak with anyone about what happened until she was allowed to talk with you. She was taken to St. Mungo's, where," the Headmistress now sounded slightly perturbed, "a standard diagnostic Charm showed Miss Granger as a healthy unicorn in excellent physical condition except that her mane needs combing. Charms to detect active magic have each time detected her as being in the process of transforming into another shape. There was an Unspeakable who showed up before Filius, ah, removed him. He performed certain spells he probably ought not to have known, and declared that Hermione's soul was in healthy condition but at least a mile away from her body. At that point the senior healers gave up. She's currently alone in a cell with the rats and flies —"

"She's what?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Potter, that's Transfiguration jargon. Miss Granger is in an isolation chamber with a cage of tame rats, and a box of flies that will bear offspring in a single day. Logic suggests that whatever mystery underlies her resurrection, it left behind an emanation that is causing the healers' Charms to produce gibberish. But if nothing happens to the rats or to the flies' offspring, Miss Granger will be declared safe to return to Hogwarts after she wakes up again tomorrow morning."

Harry still wasn't sure ... wasn't sure at *all*, what Hermione would think of having been resurrected, at least under these particular circumstances. He didn't actually think Hermione would yell at him for doing it wrong. That

was just Harry's brain trying to imagine her as a stereotype. Harry had been legitimately exhausted and not thinking very straight when he'd come up with that cover story, and Hermione would probably understand that part. But he couldn't imagine what Hermione *would* think...

"I wonder how Miss Granger will feel about having also vanquished You-Know-Who," Minerva said reflectively, climbing the moving stairs fast enough that Harry felt out of breath trying to keep up. "And people believing the most interesting things about her."

"You mean, because she's always self-identified as a normal academic genius, and now a bunch of people think of her as the Girl-Who-Revived and everyone wants to shake her hand?" Harry said. Even though she doesn't remember doing anything to earn it. Even though it was all someone else's work and other people's sacrifices, and she's getting the credit. Even though she doesn't feel like she's actually done anything worthy of the way other people treat her, and she's not sure if she can ever live up to the person they imagine. "Gosh, I don't know, I can't imagine what that feels like."

Maybe I shouldn't have subjected her to it. But people had to be given something to believe or heaven knows what they'd have made up. Feeling guilty about this would be stupid. I think.

The two of them reached the top of the stairs, and came into the office filled with dozens of strange objects, all facing a great desk and a mighty throne behind it.

Minerva's hand passed over one of those objects, the one with golden wibblers, her eyes closing briefly. Then Minerva took off the Sorting Hat and put it on a hatrack that held three slippers for left feet. She transformed the mighty throne into a simple cushioned chair and the great desk into a round table, around which four other chairs rose up.

Harry watched it all with a strange pang in his throat. He knew, without either of them saying anything, that there should have been more ceremony for the changing of the chairs, the changing of the table. Much more ceremony, for the first time the Headmistress sat down in her new office. But for whatever reason, there wasn't time, and Minerva McGonagall was discarding all that for speed.

A wave of Minerva's wand lit the Floo-fire in the fireplace, even as Minerva sat down into the chair that had been Dumbledore's.

Harry quietly took one of the chairs around the table, sitting at Minerva's

left.

Almost at once, the Floo-fire burned emeraldine and whirled out Alastor Moody, who spun around with his wand raised, taking in the whole room at a seeming glance, and then pointed his wand directly at Harry and said "Avada Kedavra."

It happened so fast, and took him so completely by surprise, that Harry's wand wasn't even half-raised by the time Alastor Moody finished the incantation.

"Just checking," Alastor said to the Headmistress, whose own wand was now pointed at Alastor, her mouth open as if to say words she couldn't find. "Voldie would've tried to dodge, if he'd taken over the boy's body last night. I'll still need to check the Granger girl, though." Alastor Moody went to Minerva's right and sat down.

Harry had thought, in that split second, to try producing a wordless silver Patronus glow from his wand; but his wand hadn't been in place to intercept in time, not even close.

Well, if I was feeling invincible before, that does for that. What a valuable life lesson, Mr. Moody.

Then the Floo-fire burned green again, and spat out the oldest, grimmest, toughest-looking witch Harry had ever seen, like beef jerky given human shape. The old witch did not have her wand in her hand, but she projected an air of authority that was stronger and stricter than Dumbledore's.

"This is Director Amelia Bones, Mr. Potter," said Headmistress McGonagall, who'd regained her poise. "We are still waiting on Director Crouch —"

"The corpse of Bartemius Crouch Jr. was identified among the dead Death Eaters," the old witch said without preamble, even as she continued toward the chairs. "It took us entirely by surprise, and I'm afraid Bartemius is in considerable grief about it, on both counts. He will not be with us today."

Harry kept the flinch inward.

Amelia Bones sat down in a chair, sitting to Moody's own right.

"Headmistress McGonagall," said the elder witch, still without hesitation or delay, "The Line of Merlin Unbroken, which Dumbledore left to me in regency, is not responding to my hand. The Wizengamot must have a Chief Warlock who is trustworthy, at once; matters are in great flux in Britain. I must know what Dumbledore has done, immediately!"

"Crap," muttered Moody. His mad-eye was rolling wildly. "That's not

good, not good at all."

"Yes, well," said Minerva McGonagall, who looked rather apprehensive. "I cannot say that for certain. Albus — well, he clearly had an intimation that he might not survive this war. But I do not think he was expecting Miss Granger to come back from the dead and kill Voldemort only hours later. I do not think Albus was expecting that at all. I am not quite sure what his legacies will make of that —"

Amelia Bones rose half out of her chair. "You mean to imply that the *Granger* girl may have inherited the Line of Merlin Unbroken? This is a *catastrophe!* She is twelve years old, untested — surely Albus would not be so irresponsible as to leave the Line to whoever happened to defeat Voldemort, without knowing *who!*"

"Well, putting it simply," Minerva said. Her fingers squared the paperwork she'd taken with her, now lying on the desk. "Albus *did* think he knew who would defeat Voldemort. There was a prophecy concerning it, a verified one, which now seems to be in abeyance, or — I don't know, Madam Bones! I have one letter for Mr. Potter that I am to give him in the event of Albus's death or other departure, and then another letter that Albus said Mr. Potter would be able to open only after he defeated Voldemort. I am not sure what will happen to it now. Perhaps Miss Granger will be able to open it, or perhaps it can never be opened —"

"Hold up," Mad-Eye Moody said. He reached into his robes, drew out a long, grey-knobbed wand that Harry recognized; it was Dumbledore's wand, of a form and style not like any other wand in Hogwarts. Moody laid the wand on the table. "Before we go any further, Albus left me an instruction or two of his own. Pick up this wand, boy."

Harry hesitated, thinking.

Albus Dumbledore sacrificed himself for me. He trusted Moody. This probably isn't a trap.

Then Harry began to reach for the wand.

It leapt up and flew across the table, into Harry's hand. And the moment that Harry's fingers grasped the handle it was like he heard a song, a paean of glory and battle that resonated in his mind. A wave of white fire ran up the handle and over the wood, magnifying as it moved, bursting from the end in a tremendous spray of sparks. Through the wood beneath his fingers ran a sense of strength and constrained danger, like a leashed wolf.

Harry was also receiving an impression of distinct skepticism, as if the wand had some level of awareness, and it was wondering how the hell it had ended up being held by a Hogwarts first-year.

"Right," said Mad-Eye Moody into the puzzled stares. "So it wasn't Miss Granger who defeated Voldie, then. Didn't think so."

"What." Amelia Bones spoke the word flatly.

Mad-Eye Moody gave her a respectful nod. "Albus said this wand goes to whoever defeats its previous master. Took it off old Grindie, he did. Then Voldie defeated Albus, yesterday. Do I need to spell it out, Amelia?"

Amelia Bones was staring at Harry, her mouth wide open.

"That might not be right," Harry said. He swallowed another pang of the awful guilt. "I mean, Voldemort used me as a hostage because I, I was stupid, and Dumbledore gave himself up to save me, maybe the wand thinks that counts as my defeating Dumbledore. Um, I did defeat Voldemort, though. Vanquished him. But I think it's better if nobody has any idea I was there."

Beep. Tick. Whirr. Ding. Poot.

"That must have taken some doing," Mad-Eye said. The scarred man inclined his head slowly, a gesture of profound respect. "Don't feel too guilty about losing Albus and David and Flamel, son, no matter how stupid you were. You won in the end. All of us put together never could. Just to check, son, you and David also destroyed Voldie's Horcrux? And you're certain it was the real thing?"

Harry hesitated, weighing up the probable consequences of trust, the possible disasters of silence, and then shook his head to Moody in reply. He'd been planning to tell at least McGonagall about what was now inside her school, anyway. "Voldemort had... rather a lot of Horcruxes, actually. So instead I Obliviated most of his memories, then Transfigured him into this." Harry raised his hand, and silently pointed to the emerald on his ring.

Splat. Boing. Splat. Splat.

"Huh," Moody said, leaning back in his chair. "Minerva and I will be putting some alarms and enchantments on that ring of yours, son, if you don't mind. Just in case you forget to sustain that Transfiguration one day. And don't go hunting any other Dark wizards, ever, just live a quiet and peaceful life." The scarred man took a handkerchief and wiped at the beads of sweat that had now appeared on his forehead. "But well done, lad, you and David both, may he rest in peace. This was his idea, I'm guessing? Well done, I say."

"Indeed," said Amelia Bones, who had now regained her composure. "We all owe the both of you a tremendous debt of gratitude. But I say again that there is urgent business regarding the Line of Merlin Unbroken."

"I believe," Minerva McGonagall said slowly, "that I had best give Albus's letters to Mr. Potter, right now." At the top of her stack of papers now lay a parchment envelope, and a rolled-up parchment scroll sealed with a grey ribbon.

The Headmistress gave Harry the parchment envelope, first, and Harry opened it.

If you are reading this, Harry Potter, then I have fallen to Voldemort, and the quest now lies in your hands.

Though it may shock you to learn, this was the end that I wished in my heart would come to pass. For as I write this, it yet seems possible that Voldemort may fall by my own hand. And then, in time, I shall myself become the darkness you must overcome, to enter fully into your power. For it was said once that you might need to raise your hand against your mentor, the one who made you, who you loved; it was said that you might be my downfall. If you are reading this, then that shall never come to pass, and I am glad of it.

Even so, Harry, I would spare you this, the lonely fight against Voldemort. I write this, vowing to shelter you as long as I can, no matter the final cost to myself. But if I have failed, then know that I am glad of it, in my own selfish way.

With my passing, there is none left to oppose Voldemort as an equal save you. His shadow will fall long and terrible over magical Britain, and many will suffer and die for it. That shadow will not lift until you destroy its source, until you cleanse the heart of the darkness. How you are to do this, I do not know. If Voldemort knows not the power you bear, then neither do I. You must find that power within yourself, you must learn to wield it, you must become Voldemort's final judge, and I beg you not to make the error of showing him mercy.

My wand, which I have left to you in Moody's keeping, you must not dare to wield against Voldemort. For when that wand's master is defeated,

it passes to the victor in turn. When you have conquered my conqueror, then the wand will answer truly to your hand; but if you try to turn it against Voldemort before then, it will betray you for certain. Keep it out of Voldemort's grasp at all costs. I should advise you not to wield that wand at all, yet it is a device of great power, which you might need in some desperate case. But if you pick it up you must fear its treachery at all times.

In my absence, the Wizengamot will inevitably fall to Malfoy. The Line of Merlin Unbroken I have passed to you, with Amelia Bones as your regent, until you come of age or come into your power. But she cannot oppose Malfoy for long, not with myself gone and Voldemort returned to advise him. Soon, I think, the Ministry will fall, and Hogwarts will become the last fortress. To Minerva I have left Hogwarts's keys, but you alone are its prince, and she will help you however she can.

Alastor now leads the Order of the Phoenix. Heed his words well, both his advice and his confidences. It is one of my life's greatest regrets that I did not heed Alastor more and sooner.

That you will in the end defeat Voldemort, I have no doubt.

For that will be only the beginning of your life's destiny. Of that, too, I am certain.

When you have vanquished Voldemort, when you have saved this country, then, I hope, you may embark upon the true meaning of your days.

Hurry then to begin.

Yours in death (or in whatever),

Dumbledore.

P.S. The passwords are 'phoenix's price', 'phoenix's fate', and 'phoenix's egg', spoken within my office. Minerva can move those rooms to where you can reach them more easily.

Harry folded up the parchment and put its back into the envelope, frowning thoughtfully, then took the grey-ribboned scroll from the Headmistress. When the long grey wand in Harry's hand touched the ribbon, it fell away at once; and Harry unrolled the scroll, and read it.

Dear Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres:

If you are reading this, you have defeated Voldemort.

Congratulations on that.

I hope you had some time in which to celebrate before you opened this scroll, because the news in it is not cheerful.

During the First Wizarding War, there came a time when I realized that Voldemort was winning, that he would soon hold all within his hand.

In that extremity, I went into the Department of Mysteries and I invoked a password which had never been spoken in the history of the Line of Merlin Unbroken, did a thing forbidden and yet not utterly forbidden.

I listened to every prophecy that had ever been recorded.

And so I learned that my troubles were far worse than Voldemort.

From certain seers and diviners have come an increasing chorus of foretellings that this world is doomed to destruction.

And you, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, are one of those foretold to destroy it.

By rights I should have ended your line of possibility, stopped you from ever being born, as I did my best to end all the other possibilities I discovered on that day of terrible awakening.

Yet in your case, Harry, and in your case alone, the prophecies of your apocalypse have loopholes, though those loopholes be ever so slight.

Always 'he will end the world', not 'he will end life'.

Even when it was said that you would tear apart the very stars in heaven, it was not said that you would tear apart the people.

And so, it being clear that this world is not meant to last, I have gambled literally everything upon you, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres. There were no prophecies of how the world might be saved, so I found the prophecies that offered loopholes in the destruction; and I brought about the strange and complex conditions for those prophecies to come to pass. I ensured that Voldemort discovered a certain one of those prophecies, and so (even as I had feared) condemned your parents to death and made you what you are. I wrote a strange hint in your mother's Potions textbook, having no idea why I must; and this proved to show Lily how to help her sister, and ensured you would gain Petunia Evans's heartfelt love. I snuck invisibly

into your bedroom in Oxford and administered the potion that is given to students with Time-Turners, to extend your day's cycle by two hours. When you were six years old I smashed a rock that was on your windowsill, and to this day I cannot imagine why.

All in the desperate hope that you can pass us through the eye of the storm, somehow end this world and yet bring out its people alive.

Now that you have passed the preliminary test of defeating Voldemort, I place my all in your hands, all the tools I can possibly give you. The Line of Merlin Unbroken, the command of the Order of the Phoenix, all my wealth and all my treasures, the Elder Wand out of the Deathly Hallows, the loyalty of such of my friends as may heed me. I have left Hogwarts in Minerva's care, for I do not think you will have time for it, but even that is yours if you demand it from her.

One thing I do not give you, and that is the prophecies. Upon the moment of my departure, they will be destroyed, and no future ones will be recorded, for it was said that you must not look upon them. If you think this frustrating, believe me when I say that even your wit cannot comprehend what frustration you have been spared. I will die, or be lost by you, or in some other way be taken from you — the prophecies are unclear, naturally — without ever once knowing what the future truly holds, or why I must do what I do. It is all cryptic madness and you are well rid of it.

There can only be one king upon the chessboard.

There can only be one piece whose value is beyond price.

That piece is not the world, it is the world's peoples, wizard and Muggle alike, goblins and house-elves and all.

While survives any remnant of our kind, that piece is yet in play, though the stars should die in heaven.

And if that piece be lost, the game ends.

Know the value of all your other pieces, and play to win.

— Albus

Harry held the parchment scroll for a long time, staring at nothing. So.

There were times when the phrase 'That explains it' didn't really seem to cover it, but nonetheless, that explained it.

Absently Harry rolled up the parchment scroll in his fist, still staring at nothing.

"What does it say?" said Amelia Bones.

"It's a confession letter," Harry said. "Turns out Dumbledore's the one who killed my pet rock."

"This is not a time for jokes!" cried the elder witch. "Are you the true holder of the Line of Merlin Unbroken?"

"Yes," Harry said absently, his mind occupied with thoughts that were, by any objective quantification, overwhelmingly more important.

The old witch was sitting very still in her chair. She turned her head, and locked eyes with Minerva McGonagall.

Meanwhile Harry's brain, which was juggling way too many possibilities over way too many time horizons, some of them involving literally billions of years and stellar disassembly procedures, declared cognitive bankruptcy and started over. All right, what's the first thing I have to do to save the world... no, make it even more local, what do I have to do today... besides figuring out what to do, that is, and I'd better not delay before looking at whatever Dumbledore left me in the Phoenix's Egg room...

Harry raised his eyes from the rolled-up parchment and looked at Professor — at Headmistress McGonagall, at Mad-Eye Moody, and at the leathery-looking old witch, as though seeing them for the first time. Though he was in fact seeing Amelia Bones for mostly the first time.

Amelia Bones, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, whom Albus Dumbledore had thought worthy to lead the Wizengamot at least temporarily. Her cooperation would be invaluable, maybe *necessary*, for . . . for whatever was headed Harry's way. Dumbledore had chosen her, and he'd read prophecies Harry hadn't seen.

Amelia Bones, who had thought she'd been appointed regent over the Line of Merlin Unbroken and made the next Chief Warlock, only to find that instead the position had gone to, apparently, an eleven-year-old boy.

You will now, said the voice of Hufflepuff inside his head, you will now be polite. You will not be your usual brand of bloody idiot. Because the fate of the world might just depend on it. Or not. We don't even know.

"I'm terribly sorry about all this," Harry Potter said, then paused to see

what effect, if any, this polite statement had produced.

"Minerva seems to think," the old witch said, "that you will not take offense to honest words."

Harry nodded. His Ravenclaw part wanted to include the disclaimer about that being different from people blatantly trying to push you down while crying that you were intolerant of criticism, but Hufflepuff vetoed. Whatever she had to say, Harry would hear.

"I do not wish to speak ill of the departed," the old witch said. "But since time immemorial, the Line of Merlin Unbroken has passed to those who have thoroughly demonstrated themselves to be, not only good people, but wise enough to distinguish successors who are themselves both good and wise. A single break, anywhere along the chain, and the succession might go astray and never return! It was a mad act for Dumbledore to pass the Line to you at such a young age, even having made it conditional upon your defeat of You-Know-Who. A tarnish upon Dumbledore's legacy, that is how it will be seen." The old witch hesitated, her eyes still watching Harry. "I think it best that nobody outside this room ever learn of it."

"Um," Harry said. "You... don't think very much of Dumbledore, I take it?"

"I thought..." said the old witch. "Well. Albus Dumbledore was a better wizard than I, a better *person* than I, in more ways than I can easily count. But the man had his faults."

"Because, um. I mean. Dumbledore *knew* everything you just said. About my being young and how the Line works. You're acting like you think Dumbledore was unaware of those facts, or just ignoring them, when he made his decision. It's true that sometimes stupid people, like me, make decisions that crazy. But not Dumbledore. He was *not* mad." Harry swallowed, forcing a sudden moisture away from his eyes. "I think... I'm beginning to realize... Dumbledore was the only sane person, in all of this, all along. The *only* one who was doing the right things for anything like the right reasons..."

Madam Bones was cursing under her breath, low dire imprecations that were making Minerva McGonagall twitch.

"I'm sorry," Harry said helplessly.

Mad-Eye was grinning, the scarred face twisting up in a smile. "Always knew Albus was up to *something* he never told the rest of us. Lad, you have no idea how hard it is for me not to use my Eye on that scroll."

Harry quickly shoved the scroll into his mokeskin pouch.

"Alastor," Amelia said. The old witch's voice was rising. "You are a man of sense, you cannot think the lad is able to fill Dumbledore's socks! Not *today!*"

"Dumbledore," Harry said, the name tasting strange on his tongue, "did make one wrong assumption, when he made his decisions. He thought we'd be fighting Voldemort for years, all of us together. He didn't know I'd vanquish Voldemort immediately. It was the right thing for me to do, it saved a lot of lives compared to fighting a long battle. But Dumbledore thought you would have years to learn me, trust me... and instead it was all over in an evening." Harry inhaled. "Can't you just *pretend* we've been fighting Voldemort for years and I earned your trust and everything? So that I'm not penalized for winning more quickly than Dumbledore expected?"

"You are still a first-year in Hogwarts!" the old witch said. "You *cannot* take Dumbledore's place, whatever his intentions!"

"Right, that whole 'looking like an eleven-year-old' thing." Harry's hand came up, rubbed at his nose where his glasses lay. *I suppose I could just use the Stone, change myself to look like ninety...* 

"I am not a fool," the old witch said. "I know you are no ordinary child. I have seen you speak to Lucius Malfoy, watched you frighten off a Dementor, and witnessed Fawkes grant your plea. Anyone with wisdom who saw you before the Wizengamot — by which I mean myself and at most two others — could guess that you had absorbed some portion of You-Know-Who's shredded soul on the night of his undeath, but subdued it and turned his knowledge to good ends."

There was a slight pause in the room.

"Well, yes, of course," said Minerva McGonagall. She sighed, slumped a bit in the Headmistress's chair. "As Albus clearly knew *from the very beginning*, but thoughtfully declined to warn me about *in any way whatsoever*."

"Right," Moody said. "I knew that. Yep. Perfectly obvious. Wasn't confused at all."

"I guess that's close enough to the truth," said Harry. "So, um. What's the problem, exactly?"

"The problem," Amelia Bones said, her voice perfectly even, "is that you are a bubbling, unstable blend of a Hogwarts first-year and You-Know-Who." She paused, as though waiting for something.

"I'm getting better about that," Harry said, since she seemed to be waiting

on his reply. "Quite rapidly, in fact. More importantly, it's not something Dumbledore didn't know."

The old witch continued. "Giving away your fortune and going in debt to Lucius Malfoy to keep your best friend out of Azkaban, as much as it demonstrates your upstanding moral character, also demonstrates that you cannot corral the Wizengamot. I can see now that you did the right thing for yourself, the thing you had to do to maintain your lease on sanity and hold back your inner darkness. But you also did a thing that Merlin's heir must not do. A sentimental leader can be far worse than a selfish one. Albus, master and servant of a phoenix, was barely survivable — and even he opposed you that day." Amelia gestured in the direction of Mad-Eye Moody. "Alastor has hardness. He has cunning. He still does not have the talent for government. You, Harry Potter, do not yet have the sternness, the capacity for sacrifice, to direct even the Order of the Phoenix. And being what you are, you must not try to become that person. Not now, not at your age. Align and fuse your divided soul in your own time, if you possibly can. Do not try to be Chief Warlock while you are doing it. If Albus thought that was a good idea, he was crafting a nicer story at the expense of real-world practicality. I do think the man had a problem with that."

Harry's eyes were a bit wide, listening to all this. "Um... what exactly do you think is going on in here?" Harry tapped his head just above his ear.

"I imagine that inside you is the soul of a boy who remains honest and true, gathering his will to force down the fragment of Voldemort's spirit that tries to consume him, even as it howls at him that he is sentimental and weak — did you just giggle?"

"Sorry. But seriously, it wasn't ever *that* bad. More like having a lot of bad habits I needed to break."

"Ahem," said Headmistress McGonagall. "Mr. Potter, I think at the start of this year it was that bad."

"Bad habits that chained into and triggered each other. Yes, those are a bit more of a problem." Harry sighed. "And you, Madam Bones... er. Sorry if I'm wrong about this. But my guess is that you're feeling a bit upset that the Line went to an eleven-year-old?"

"Not the way you are thinking," the old witch said calmly. "Though it is natural for you to suspect me. The position of Chief Warlock is not one I will find pleasant, even compared to the horrors of Magical Law Enforcement.

Albus persuaded me on the matter, and I would say that I took some convincing, but the truth is that I did not waste his time in an argument I expected to lose. I knew I would hate the task, and I knew I would do it anyway. Minerva says you have some amount of common sense, especially when others remind you of it. Can you really see yourself standing upon the Wizengamot's high dais? Are you sure it is not some remnant of You-Know-Who that imagines himself suited to the position, or even desires it at all?"

Harry took off his glasses and massaged his forehead. His scar still ached a bit, from the damage he'd done by picking at it yesterday until it bled in a suitably dramatic fashion. "I do have some common sense, and yes, being Chief Warlock sounds like a huge amount of aggravation and a job that, in reality, does not fit me the tiniest bit. The trouble is. Um. I'm not sure the Line of Merlin is just about being Chief Warlock. There's, um. I suspect... that there's weird other stuff that goes along with it. And that Dumbledore meant me to take responsibility for the... other stuff. And that the other stuff is... possibly quite *amazingly* important."

"Crap," Moody said. Then Alastor Moody repeated, "Crap. Kid, should you even be saying this to us?"

"I don't know," Harry said. "If there's a user manual, I haven't looked at it yet."

"Crap."

"And if these other matters require sternness and sacrifice?" Amelia Bones said, still calmly. "If they test you as you were tested before the Wizengamot? I am old, Harry Potter, and I am not without knowledge of mysteries. You have seen how I was able to perceive your own nature at nearly a glance."

"Amelia," Mad-Eye Moody said. "What would have happened if you'd had to fight You-Know-Who last night?"

The old witch shrugged. "I would have died, I expect."

"You'd have *lost*," said Alastor Moody. "And the Boy-Who-Lived didn't just take out Voldie, he set it up so that his good friend Hermione Granger came *back from the dead* at the same time Voldie resurrected himself. There's no way in hell or double hell that was an accident, and I don't think it was David's idea either. Amy, the truth is, none of us know what the keeper of Merlin's legacy has to *do*. But we're not the right kind of crazy for this crap."

Amelia Bones frowned. "Alastor, you know I've dealt with strange things before. Dealt with them quite well, in my opinion."

"Yeah. You *dealt with* the crap so you could go back to real life. You're not the kind of crazy that builds a castle out of the crap and lives there." Moody sighed. "Amy, on some level you know exactly why Albus had to leave who-knows-what-job to the poor kid."

The old witch's fists clenched on the table. "Do you have any idea of the disaster it would be for Britain? Call me sane, but I cannot accept that outcome! I have worked too long toward this day to see it fall apart now, now of all times!"

"Excuse me," Headmistress McGonagall said, sounding quite precise and Scottish. "Is there any reason why Mr. Potter cannot simply instruct the Line that Madam Bones is his regent for the position of Chief Warlock, but not anything having to do with the Department of Mysteries, until he comes of age? If Albus could tell the Line to appoint a regent only until Voldemort's defeat, it is clearly capable of following complex orders."

Slowly, this unexpected hammer-blow of common sense was absorbed by everyone present.

Harry opened his mouth to agree to appoint Amelia Bones his regent for Wizengamot-related matters, and then hesitated again.

"Um," Harry said. "Um. Madam Bones, I would much prefer if you took charge of handling the Wizengamot instead of me."

"In that we are agreed," said the old witch. "Shall we let it be done?"
"But —"

There was a sort of frustrated dropping-back of the others. "What is the problem, Mr. Potter?" said the Headmistress, in a voice that indicated she hoped it was nothing serious.

"Um. I think there's a couple of things I might have to do very soon that could... prove politically controversial, and in exchange for handing over the Line's political power to Madam Bones I'm going to want her... um, cooperation on some things."

Amelia Bones exchanged another long stare with Minerva McGonagall. Then she looked back at Harry Potter.

"I am indignant at your request!" Amelia Bones said. "Your hesitancy has told me that you are weak and unused to bargaining, and will probably fold if I push back."

Harry closed his eyes.

Slightly dark-tinged Harry opened them.

"All right," Harry said, "let me rephrase. I don't mean to interfere with your work on a day-to-day or even month-to-month basis, but I can't just toss off the final responsibility that Dumbledore left me. I'm not going to owl you bizarre parchments out of nowhere, there can be discussions first, but at some point I may have to give you an order. If you refuse the order I might have to take back the Line's Wizengamot functions and assume direct control. Can you handle that?"

"And if I say no?" said the old witch.

Slight, slight the dark tinge... "I don't have an alternative to you lined up. I could start by asking Augusta Longbottom who she thought might be suitable and work from there. But it may be important that we keep to Dumbledore's plan as much as possible, since I don't know exactly why he did the things he did, and he thought Amelia Bones should be Chief Warlock for a time. I'm not going to pull Merlin's name on you, but... no, strike that, I am going to pull Merlin's name on you, this might or might not be insanely important."

The old witch thought for a time, her eyes going from person to person around the table. "I am not satisfied with this," she said after a time. "But the Wizengamot must be called to order soon. It will do for now."

Slowly the old witch reached into her robes, and took out a short rod of stone, dark stone.

She placed the rod on the table before Harry. "Take what is yours," she said. "And then do please give it back."

Harry reached out his hand to take it.

In the moment that Harry's fingers first touched the dark stone —

nothing happened.

Well, perhaps Merlin hadn't been given to melodrama. That could explain why his final legacy looked like a small, unassuming dark rod. If that was all that was needed for its function, that would be all that was there.

Harry took up the Line, frowning at it. "I'd like to appoint Amelia Bones as my regent for Wizengamot-related functions." Then, the thought occurring to him that he needed to specify a stopping point to define a regency, Harry added, "Until I say that I've taken it back."

Then Harry made a face. He'd been hoping for more from the Line, but it was just a key to places in the Department of Mysteries where interesting things were kept, or to seals where Merlin and his successors had stashed things that shouldn't be destroyed but ought to be kept from general circulation. Aside from that, the Line didn't do much.

The Line didn't let you bypass the Interdict of Merlin either. No, not even if the fate of the galaxy was at stake. Not even if the person seemed sane, had taken an Unbreakable Vow, and honestly believed the world was about to be destroyed otherwise.

Merlin had dreamed of a long run, a world that would last for eons and not just centuries. The world had no reason not to last *forever*, if the truly dangerous powers were removed and kept gone. Conversely, a single loophole in the safeguards made the world's destruction only a matter of time. Someday Merlin's Line would pass to the wrong person. It could reject the obviously unworthy, but eventually it would pass into hands too subtly flawed for the Line to detect. This was inevitable, when dealing with human beings, and Harry needed to keep that in mind before he sealed something where future Line-holders could retrieve it — the disaster of its inevitable misuse *someday* needed to be outweighed by its benefits over the next few thousand years.

Harry let out a sad small sigh, under his breath. Merlin, you idiot...

Thinking that didn't unlock any final safeguards.

There wasn't anything currently on fire in the Department of Mysteries, so Harry carefully placed the Line back on the table.

"Thank you," the old witch said. She picked up the rod of dark stone. "Do you know how I am to use it to call the Wizengamot to order, or — never mind, I shall just try striking the podium. That seems obvious enough. To the rest of the country, of course, I am the Chief Warlock so far as anyone knows except us four."

Harry hesitated. Then he imagined the owls he would receive if anyone knew he was allowed to second-guess the Chief Warlock, and what that would do to Amelia's negotiating power. "Fine."

Amelia tucked the rod back into her robes. "I will not say it was a pleasure doing business with you, Boy-Who-Lived, but it could have been much worse. Thank you kindly for that."

Harry was already feeling worried about the exact balance of power here, from the way Madam Bones was acting. The others had, quite logically, deduced that it had been mostly David Monroe who'd planned the way to defeating Voldemort, which meant they were still underestimating him. It might take a crisis of some type, with Harry figuring it out successfully for once instead of screwing up, before Amelia Bones started to respect his authority. Or believe

in it at all, actually ... "So," Harry said. "Any weirdness for me that you would have brought to Dumbledore while he was around?"

Amelia looked thoughtful. "Since you ask... I can think of three things, indeed. First, we don't have the faintest notion what ritual was used to sacrifice the Death Eaters and resurrect You-Know-Who. It corresponds to no known legend, and the magic traces from the ritual have been eradicated. So far as my Aurors can tell, everyone's heads fell off their necks due to natural causes. Except for Walden MacNair, who was killed by magical fire after firing a Killing Curse from his wand. A very mysterious ritual indeed." She was giving Harry Potter a rather *precise* look.

Harry considered this, choosing his words carefully. Voldemort had said he'd put up wards, so Harry had been confident of not being observed by Time-Turned Aurors, but still... "I think this is a matter you don't need to investigate too hard, Madam Bones."

The old witch grinned slightly. "We can't be seen to go easy on the investigation of so many Noble deaths, Harry Potter. When I heard retold your particular account of David's last stand, I made certain to send investigators whom I considered *reliable* in the usual quality of their work. Auror Nobbs and Auror Colon, in fact, who are widely respected outside my Department. I found their report to be quite fascinating reading." Amelia paused. "There's a possibility that Augustus Rookwood left a ghost —"

"Exorcise it before anyone talks to it," Harry said, conscious of the sudden hammering of his heart.

"Yes, sir," the old witch said dryly. "I shall disrupt the soul's anchoring a little, and none shall be the wiser when it fails to materialize. The second matter is that there was a still-living human arm found among the Dark Lord's things —"

"Bellatrix," Harry said. His mind had leapt back, made the connection that ongoing trauma had blurred. "I think that's Bellatrix Black's arm." *Lesath Lestrange hadn't been named as someone who'd lost a parent.* "Oh, bloody hell. She's still out there, isn't she. Can you use her arm to track her down somehow?"

Amelia Bones had acquired a sour look. "I see. As I was saying, a still-living human arm was found among the Dark Lord's things, but it proved to be easily incinerated."

"What *idiot* —" Harry stopped himself. "No, *not* an idiot. Because immediately destroying Dark objects is Department policy. Because of past experiences

with rings that really should've been dropped into volcanoes immediately. Right?"

Moody and Amelia nodded in unison. "Good guess, son," said Moody.

It might seem inevitable, from a literary standpoint, that Harry's past stupidity was going to come back and haunt him in some horrible fashion later, but that was no reason not to try subverting the plot. "I expect you've thought of this already," Harry said, "but the obvious next step is to put out your equivalent of an international bulletin for a thin witch missing her left arm. Oh, and add twenty-five thousand Galleons pledged from me — Headmistress, it's fine, please trust me on this — to whatever reward is being offered."

"Well said." The old witch leaned forward slightly. "The third and final matter... there was one truly puzzling element to last night's events, and I am curious to see what you make of it, Harry Potter. Found among the corpses was the head and the body of Sirius Black."

"What?" yelled Moody, starting half from his chair. "I thought he was in Azkaban!"

"So he is," said Madam Bones. "We checked that at once. The Azkaban guards reported that Sirius Black was still in his cell. Black's head and body have been transported to the St. Mungo's morgue, and show the same cause of death as the other Death Eaters, that is to say, his head spontaneously fell off. I am also told that Sirius Black is, as of this morning, sitting in the corner of his cell rocking back and forth with his head between his hands. No other duplicate Death Eaters have been found. Yet."

There was a pause filled with ticking and whooping things, as people considered this.

"Ah..." said Minerva. "That's not possible even by You-Know-Who's standards of possibility. Is it?"

"I would have thought so too when I was your age, dear," said Amelia. "It is the sixth strangest thing I have ever seen."

"You see, son?" said Moody. "This sort of thing is why nobody, even me, can ever be paranoid enough." The scarred man tilted his head, looking thoughtful, as his bright blue eye kept ever-roving. "Twin brother, concealed from the rest of the world? Walpurga Black gave birth to twins, couldn't bear to kill one, knew old Pollux would demand it... nah, ain't buyin' it."

"Any ideas, Mr. Potter?" said Amelia Bones. "Or is this another matter into which my Department should not inquire too closely?"

Harry closed his eyes and thought.

Sirus Black had hunted down Peter Pettigrew, instead of fleeing the country as common sense would have suggested.

Black had been found in the middle of the street, surrounded by bodies, laughing.

Nothing left of Pettigrew except one finger.

Pettigrew had been a spy for the Light, not a double agent but somebody who snuck around and found things out.

One of the conspiracy theories about Pettigrew had been that he was an Animagus, since he'd been good at ferreting out secrets even in his Hogwarts years.

Dementors sapped all the magic in their vicinity.

Professor Quirrell had said something about a particular type of magic that rearranged flesh like a Muggle smith reshaping metal with hammer and tongs...

Harry opened his eyes again.

"Was Peter Pettigrew a secret Metamorphmagus?"

Amelia Bones's face changed. She made a single croaking noise and fell backward within her chair.

"Yes, in fact ... "Minerva said slowly. "Why?"

"Sirius Black Confunded Peter Pettigrew," Harry's voice explained patiently, "to force him to change shape and pretend to be Black. By the time the Confundus wore off, Peter was in Azkaban and couldn't change back. The Aurors are used to people in Azkaban saying absolutely anything to get out, so they didn't listen while Peter Pettigrew was screaming about it over and over again until his voice wore out."

Even Mad-Eye Moody's face showed the horror, then.

"In retrospect," said Harry's voice, which seemed to be operating entirely on automatic, "you should have been suspicious when you managed to get that *one* Death Eater hauled off to Azkaban without a trial."

"We thought Malfoy was distracted," whispered the old witch. "That he was only trying to save himself. There were other Death Eaters we managed to get then, like Bellatrix —"

Harry nodded, feeling like his neck and head were moving on puppet strings. "The Dark Lord's most fanatic and devoted servant, a natural nucleus of opposition for anyone who contested Lucius's control of the Death Eaters. You thought Lucius was distracted."

"Get him out of there," said Minerva McGonagall. Her voice rose to a scream. "Get him out of there!"

Amelia Bones shoved herself up from the chair, whirled on the Floo — "Stop."

Everyone looked at Harry with astonishment, none more than Minerva McGonagall.

Something else seemed to have taken over Harry's voice. "There's four things we still need to discuss. An innocent man has been in Azkaban for ten years, eight months, and fourteen days. He can stay there a few minutes longer. That's how urgent those four things are."

"You —" whispered Amelia Bones. "You should not try to be this person, at your age —"

"First. I think I should look at the complete police records on every other Death Eater that went to Azkaban while Lucius was distracted. Can you compile that by tonight?"

"Within the hour," said Amelia Bones. She looked grey.

Harry nodded. "Second. Azkaban is over. You'll need to start preparations now to move the prisoners to Nurmengard or other secure non-Dementor prisons, and to provide treatment for their Dementor exposure."

"I," said Amelia. The old witch seemed bent, diminished. "I... do not think, that even with this... scandal, that the remainder of the Wizengamot will bend... and the Dementors must be fed, not so much as we have fed them, but they must be given some victims, or they will roam the world, prey on innocents..."

"It doesn't matter what the Wizengamot says," Harry said. "Because —" Harry's voice choked. "Because —" Harry took a deep breath, steadied himself. He thought he could see the shape now of the immediate future, could see it stretching out before him like a golden pathway lit with sunlight. Was this also written, in the book of Time that I must not see? "Because if I'm right about what comes next, then sometime very soon, Hermione Granger, the Girl-Who-Revived, is going to go to Azkaban and destroy all the Dementors there."

"Impossible!" spat Mad-Eye Moody.

"Merlin," whispered Amelia Bones. "Oh, dear Merlin. That's what happened to the Dementor that Dumbledore 'lost'. That's why they're afraid of

you — and now her as well?" Her voice trembled. "What is this, what is all this?"

If Hermione believes that Death can be defeated —

Whether or not she could've believed that before, she'll believe it now.

"An authorized Portkey to Azkaban would be appreciated —" Harry's voice broke again. Tears were streaming down his cheeks.

She can't die. I have her Horcrux.

But Hermione doesn't need to know about that. Not for one more week.

If she's willing to risk her own life to end this —

"Though I think, she might make, her own way there ..."

"Harry?" said Headmistress McGonagall.

Harry was crying now, huge ragged breaths bursting from him. But he didn't stop talking. Somewhere out there Peter Pettigrew was waiting while Harry cried.

Somewhere out there, everyone was waiting while he cried.

"Third. Somewhere just inside the wards of Hogwarts. In a highly defensible position. But where emergency cases can be Portkeyed in from just outside the wards. There's going to be a high-security h-h-hospital. With very powerful guards, that have taken Unbreakable Vows, I don't, I don't care how much gold it takes to pay for the Vows, it genuinely does not matter any more. And, and Alastor Moody is going to design the security architecture, and go completely overboard on paranoia without being constrained by a budget or sanity or common sense, only it has to open *soon*." Couldn't stop talking to cry.

"Harry," said the Headmistress, "both of them think you've gone mad, they don't know you well enough to know better. You need to slow down and explain."

Instead Harry reached into his pouch and signed letters with his fingers, and lifted out, his fingers straining, a five-kilo chunk of gold larger than his fist, from when he'd been experimenting this morning. It made a heavy thud as it landed on the table.

Moody reached over and tapped it with his wand, and then his throat made an incomprehensible sound.

"That's your starting budget, Alastor, if you need money right away. Nicholas Flamel didn't make the Philosopher's Stone, he stole it, Dumbledore didn't know the secret history but Monroe did. Once you know how it works, the Stone can do one complete restoration to full health and youth every two

hundred and thirty-four seconds. Three hundred sixty people per day. One hundred and thirty-four thousand healings per year. That should be enough to stop, all the wizards everywhere, and all the goblins and house-elves and whoever, from dying. Of old age, or anything else." Harry was wiping away tears, over and over. "Flamel had more blood on his hands than a hundred Voldemorts, for all the people he could've saved and didn't. The whole time, Moody, the Philosopher's Stone could've healed all your scars and given you back your leg, any time Flamel felt like it. Dumbledore didn't know. I'm sure he didn't know." Harry smiled shakily. "I can't imagine you as a teenage witch, Madam Bones, but I bet it looks good on you. That'll give you more energy for trying to keep the Wizengamot from messing with me, because if they get the idea that the Stone is something they can mess with in any way, tax, regulate, I don't care, Hogwarts is going to secede from Britain and become its own country. Headmistress, Hogwarts is no longer dependent on the Ministry for gold, or for that matter food. You may reform the educational curriculum at will. I'm thinking we may want to add some more advanced courses soon, especially in Muggle studies."

"Slow down!" said Minerva McGonagall.

"Fourth —" Harry said, and then stopped.

Fourth. Begin preparations for an orderly take-down of the Statute of Secrecy and to provide magical healing on a mass scale to the Muggle world. Those who oppose this agenda in any way may be denied services by the Stone...

Harry's lips couldn't move. Not wouldn't, couldn't.

With six billion Muggles thinking creatively about how to use magic . . .

Transfiguring antimatter was just one idea. It wasn't even the most destructive idea. There were also black holes and negatively charged strangelets. And if black holes couldn't be Transfigured because they didn't *already exist* as magic defined that to within some spatial radius, there was just Transfiguring lots and lots of nuclear weapons and Black Death plague that could reproduce before the Transfiguration wore off and Harry hadn't even thought about the problem for five minutes but it didn't matter because he'd already thought of enough. Someone would think of it, someone would talk, someone would try it. The probability was as close to certainty as made no difference.

What happened if you Transfigured a cubic millimeter of up quarks, just the up quarks without any down quarks to bind them? Harry didn't even know, and up quarks were certainly a kind of substance that already existed. All it might take was one single Muggleborn who knew the names of the six quarks deciding to try it. That could *be* the clock ticking down to the prophesied end of the world.

Harry would have tried to deny the thought, rationalize it away.

He couldn't do that either.

It wasn't a thing-Harry-Potter-would-do.

Like water flowing downhill, Harry Potter would take no chances when it came to not destroying the world.

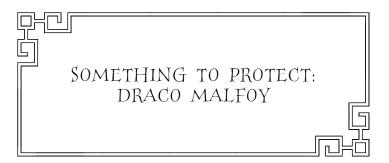
"Fourth?" said Amelia Bones, who was looking like she'd been hit repeatedly in the face with a planet. "What comes fourth?"

"Never mind," said Harry. His voice did not break. He did not fold over sobbing. There were still lives he could save and those took precedence. "Never mind. Chief Warlock Bones, I've given the regency of the Wizengamot into your hands. Please use that position to announce internationally that the Stone's healing power will soon be made available to all, and that meanwhile, all dying patients are to be kept alive at any cost, no matter what magic is required to do it. That announcement is your absolute priority. When you have done that you may rescue Peter Pettigrew and tell your old Department to begin preparations for shutting down Azkaban. Then please have someone prepare a full list of imprisoned Death Eaters and what was said at their trials and whether Lucius seemed strangely uninterested in defending them. Thank you. That's all."

Amelia Bones turned without another word, and dashed into the Floo like it was her own self that was on fire.

"And someone," Harry said, his voice breaking again now that it was all set in motion, and crying wasn't costing time, though the vast majority of total lives at stake had turned out not to be savable just yet, "someone has to, someone tell Remus Lupin."

## CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY



he boy sat in an office near to where the once-Deputy Headmistress had held court. His tears had run dry hours ago. Now there was only the waiting to see what would become of him, the orphan ward of Hogwarts, whose life and happiness lay in the hands of his family's enemies. The boy had been called to this room, and he had come because there was nothing else to do and nowhere else to go. Vincent and Gregory had left his side, called back by their mothers for their fathers' hurried funerals. Perhaps the boy should have gone with them, but he could not bring himself to do so. He would not have been able to act the part of a Malfoy. The feeling of emptiness that filled him up was so profound that it left no room even for pretended courtesy.

Everyone was dead.

His father was dead, and his godfather Mr. MacNair, and his fallback godfather Mr. Avery. Even Sirius Black, his mother's cousin, had somehow managed to die, and the last remnant of House Black was no friend to any Malfoy.

Everyone was dead.

There came a knock upon the office's door; and then, when the boy made no reply, the door opened, revealing —

"Go away," Draco Malfoy said to the Boy-Who-Lived. He couldn't muster any force in the words.

"I will soon," Harry Potter said, as he stepped into the room. "But there's a decision to be made, and only you can make it."

Draco turned his head toward the wall, because just looking at Harry Potter took more energy than he had left in him.

"You have to decide," Harry said, "what happens to Draco Malfoy after this. I don't mean that in any ominous way. No matter what, you're still going to grow up to be the rich heir of a Noble and Most Ancient House. The thing is," Harry's voice was wavering now, "the thing is, there's a horrible truth you don't know, and I keep thinking that if you knew, you'd tell me not to be your friend anymore. And I don't want to stop being your friend. But to just — never tell you — and always maintain that lie so I can go on being your friend — I can't do that. It's also wrong. I don't ... don't want this anymore, I don't want to be *manipulating* you. I've hurt you too much already."

Then stop trying to be my friend, you're no good at it anyway. The words rose up into Draco's consciousness, and were rejected from his lips. He felt like he'd mostly lost Harry already, from the games Harry had played with their friendship, the lies and manipulations; and yet the thought of going back to Slytherin alone, maybe without Vincent and Gregory if their mothers terminated the arrangement ... Draco didn't want to do that, he didn't want to go back to Slytherin and live out his life among only people who'd agreed to be Sorted into Slytherin House. Draco was barely sensible enough to remember how many of his real friends were also friends with Harry, that Padma was a Ravenclaw and even Theodore was a Chaotic Lieutenant. All that remained of Malfoy House was a tradition, now; and that tradition said it wasn't clever to tell the war's victor to go away and stop trying to be friends with you.

"All right," Draco said emptily. "Tell me."

"That's what I'm going to do," Harry said. "And then the Headmistress will come in after I leave, and seal away your last half-hour of memory. But before then, knowing the whole truth, you'll get to decide whether you still want to be involved with me." Harry's voice was shaking. "Um. According to the records I was reading through before I came here, the story really began in 1926 with the birth of a half-blood wizard named Tom Morfin Riddle. His mother died in childbirth, and he grew up in a Muggle orphanage, until his Hogwarts letter was brought to him by Professor Dumbledore..."

The Boy-Who-Lived continued speaking, words that slammed into what was left of Draco's mind like falling houses.

The Dark Lord had been a half-blood. He'd never believed in blood purity for a fraction of a second.

Tom Riddle had come up with the idea of Lord Voldemort as a bad joke.

The Death Eaters had been meant to lose to David Monroe, so Monroe could take over.

After giving up on that, Tom Riddle had gone on playing Voldemort instead of actually trying to win, because he'd liked bossing the Death Eaters around.

Voldemort used me to try to frame Father for my attempted murder, then used me again to go after the Philosopher's Stone. Draco couldn't remember that part, but he'd already been told that he'd been used as a pawn alongside Professor Sprout, and that no charges would be filed.

And then the last horror.

"You —" whispered Draco Malfoy. "You —"

"I'm the one who killed your father and all the other Death Eaters last night. They'd been told to open fire on me the moment I did anything, so I had to kill them in order to have a chance at dealing with Voldemort, who was a danger to the entire world." Harry Potter's voice was strained. "I didn't think about you and Theodore and Vincent and Gregory, but if I had, I'd have done it anyway. My mind managed not to realize until afterwards that Mr. White was Lucius, but if I'd realized, I still wouldn't have risked leaving him alive, in case he knew wandless magic. The thought occurred to me long before that it would be pretty convenient, in terms of the political landscape, for all the Death Eaters to suddenly die. I always thought that the Death Eaters were horrible people, much more strongly than I ever let on to you, since the first day we met. But if your father hadn't been there, and I'd had a button that could kill him remotely, I wouldn't have pressed the button just for political reasons. The way I feel about what I've done, and whether there's remorse ... well, there's a part of me that's screaming in generic horror about having killed anyone. And another part that says that from a moral standpoint, the Death Eaters signed away their lives on the day they signed up with Voldemort. They pointed their wands at me first, blah blah and so on. But right now I just feel sick about what I've done to you. Again. I feel like," Harry Potter's voice wobbled a bit, "everything I do only hurts you, for all my good intentions, that you've only ever lost things from being around me, so if you tell me to stay away entirely from Draco Malfoy after this, then I will. And if you want me to try to be your friend for real this time, without ever trying to manipulate

you again, without ever using you again or risking hurting you again, then I will, I swear I will."

The next Lord Malfoy was crying, openly in front of his enemy, decorum and composure abandoned, because he didn't have anyone left for whose sake he could keep it.

A lie.

A lie.

Everything had been a lie, it was all lies piled on top of lies, lies lies — "You should die," Draco forced out. "You should die for having killed Father." The words only filled him with more emptiness, but they had to be said.

Harry Potter just shook his head. "And if that's not an option?"

"You should hurt."

Harry only shook his head again.

The Boy-Who-Lived pressed the Lord Malfoy for his decision.

The Lord Malfoy refused to give it. He couldn't say it, couldn't bring himself to say it, either way. He didn't want the war's victor and their mutual friends to abandon him, and he wasn't going to give Harry the absolution he wanted, either.

So Draco Malfoy refused to answer, and then the time of that self's memory ended.

The boy sat in an office near to where the once-Deputy Headmistress had held court. His tears had run dry hours ago. Now there was only the waiting to see what would become of him, the orphan ward of Hogwarts, whose life and happiness lay in the hands of his family's enemies. The boy had been called to this room, and he had come, because there was nothing else to do, and nowhere else to go. Vincent and Gregory had left his side, called back by their mothers for their fathers' hurried funerals. Perhaps the boy should have gone with them, but he could not bring himself to do so. He would not have been able to act the part of a Malfoy. The feeling of emptiness that filled him up was so profound that it left no room even for lies.

Everyone was dead.

Everyone was dead, and it had all been futile from the beginning.

There was a knock upon the office door, and then, after a polite pause, it opened to reveal Headmistress McGonagall, dressed much as she had dressed when she was a Professor. "Mr. Malfoy?" his family's victorious enemy said. "Please come with me."

Listlessly, Draco rose up, and followed her out of the office. Seeing Harry Potter waiting beside her gave him some pause, but then his mind simply shut it out.

"Here's the last thing," Harry Potter said. "I found it in a folded parchment whose outside said that it was the last weapon to be used against House Malfoy, telling me not to read any further until the whole war hung in the balance. I didn't want to tell it to you before because I thought it might prejudice your decision unfairly. If you were a good person who never killed or lied, but you had to do one or the other, which would be worse?"

Draco ignored him and continued in Headmistress McGonagall's company, leaving Harry behind looking sadly after.

They came to the Headmistress's old office, where she lit her Floo-fire with a wave of her wand, said to the green flame "Gringotts travel office" and stepped through after a firm glance in his direction.

For lack of any other option, Draco Malfoy followed.

She lay in bed, feeling more listless than usual that morning, awoken too early with the Sun just beginning to rise — though the direct sunlight was blocked by the skyscrapers that shadowed her house. A faint tinge of hangover gnawed at her temples, dried her mouth; she tried to be sparing with the drink (though she didn't know why she bothered) but yesterday she'd felt . . . even more depressed than usual, like she'd lost something, somehow. Not for the first time, not for the hundredth time, she thought about moving — to Adelaide, to Perth, maybe to Perth Amboy if that was what it took. She always had the sense there was somewhere else she ought to be; but while she could live a comfortable life on the payments the insurance company made to her, she couldn't afford luxuries. She couldn't pay to go gallivanting around the world looking for someplace that fit her unsatisfied sense of belonging. She'd watched the TV for long enough, she'd rented enough travelogues, to know that nowhere the VCR showed her gave her any more sense of rightness than

Sydney.

She'd felt frozen, stopped in time, ever since the traffic accident that had stolen her memories — not just of a dead family that meant nothing to her now, but memories like how a stove worked. She suspected, no, she *knew*, that whatever her heart was waiting for, whatever key needed to turn inside her to make her life begin moving again, it was one more thing she'd lost to that runaway minivan. She thought about that almost every morning, trying to guess what she was missing, missing, missing from her life and mind.

Somebody rang her doorbell.

She groaned, turning her head far enough to look at the LED alarm clock at the side of her bed. 6:31, it said, with the AM dot lit. *Seriously?* Well, that idiot could wait while she staggered out of bed at her own pace, then.

Stagger out of bed she did, ignoring the doorbell as it rang again, as she ducked into the bathroom and dressed herself.

She clambered down the stairs, ignoring the ever-nagging sense that someone else ought to be answering her door for her. "Who's there?" she called to the closed door; the door had a peephole, but it was fogged over.

"Are you Nancy Manson?" came a woman's voice, speaking in a precise Scottish accent.

"Yes," she said cautiously.

"Eunoe," spoke the Scottish voice, and Nancy leapt back in shock as a flash of light came from the door and hit her and...

Nancy swayed, putting a hand to her forehead. Flashes of light just going through doors and hitting people, that was... that wasn't particularly surprising...

"Would you please open the door?" said the Scottish woman's voice. "The war is over and your memories should be returning shortly. There's someone here who ought to see you."

My memories —

Nancy's head was already feeling clogged, like she was about to start hacking something out of her brain, but she managed to reach out and yank the door open.

There in front of her was a woman dressed as a *(perfectly normal)* witch, from black robes to tall pointed hat —

— and standing beside her a boy, with short white-blonde hair and wearing *(perfectly normal)* dark robes trimmed in green, staring at her with his jaw

dropped and eyes wide and beginning to fill with tears.

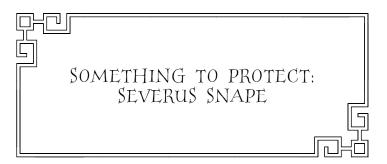
Green-trimmed robes and white-blonde hair...

Something warm stirred in her memory. She felt her heart rising into her throat as she realized that the thing that she'd been looking for these past ten years might be right in front of her this very instant. Somewhere deep inside her, ice was cracking around her heart, the piece of her that had been stopped for so long preparing to move once more.

The boy was staring at her, his mouth working soundlessly.

A mysterious name came into her mind, rose to her lips.

"Lucius?" she whispered.



somber mood pervaded the Headmistress's office. Minerva had returned after dropping off Draco and Narcissa/Nancy at St. Mungo's, where the Lady Malfoy was being examined to see if a decade living as a Muggle had done any damage to her health; and Harry had come up to the Headmistress's office again and then... not been able to think of priorities. There was so *much* to do, so many things, that even Headmistress McGonagall didn't seem to know where to start, and certainly not Harry. Right now Minerva was repeatedly writing words on parchment and then erasing them with a handwave, and Harry had closed his eyes for clarity. Was there any *next* first thing that needed to happen...

There came a knock upon the great oaken door that had been Dumbledore's, and the Headmistress opened it with a word.

The man who entered the Headmistress's office appeared worn, he had discarded his wheelchair but still walked with a limp. He wore black robes that were simple, yet clean and unstained. Over his left shoulder was slung a knapsack, of sturdy grey leather set with silver filigree that held four green pearl-like stones. It looked like a thoroughly enchanted knapsack, one that could contain the contents of a Muggle house.

One look at him, and Harry knew.

Headmistress McGonagall sat frozen behind her new desk.

Severus Snape inclined his head to her.

"What is the meaning of this?" said the Headmistress, sounding... heartsick, like she'd known, upon a glance, just like Harry had.

"I resign my position as the Potions Master of Hogwarts," the man said simply. "I will not stay to draw my last month's salary. If there are students who have been particularly harmed by me, you may use the money for their benefit."

He knows. The thought came to Harry, and he couldn't have said in words just what the Potions Master now knew; except that it was clear that Severus knew it.

"Severus..." Headmistress McGonagall began. Her voice sounded hollow. "Professor Severus Snape, you may not realize how difficult it is to find Potions Masters who can safely teach Muggleborns, or Professors sharp enough to keep Slytherin House in any semblance of order..."

Again the man inclined his head. "I think it need not be said to you, Headmistress, but I recommend in the strongest possible terms that the next Head of Slytherin be nothing like me."

"Severus, you only did as Albus told you to do! You could stay on and act differently!"

"Headmistress," Harry said. His own voice seemed also hollow, and Harry wondered at it, for he hadn't known Severus Snape that well. "If he wants to go, I think you should let him go."

Dumbledore was using him. Maybe not exactly the way Professor Quirrell thought, maybe it was prophecy rather than sabotaging Slytherin, but Dumbledore was still using him. There were things that could have been said long ago to Severus, to free him. It's clear why Dumbledore didn't risk that, but still, Severus wasn't being used kindly. Even his blindness and grief were being used, the way he didn't grasp the consequences of his actions as Potions Master...

"It is well to find you here, Mr. Potter," Severus said. "There is unfinished business between us."

Harry didn't know what to say, so he just nodded.

Severus seemed to be having some difficulty speaking, as he stood before the two of them with the grey knapsack on his shoulder. Finally he seemed to find the words he'd come to speak. "Your mother. Lily. She was —"

"I know," Harry said, through the thickness of his throat. "You don't have

to say it."

"Lily was a fine upstanding witch, Mr. Potter. I would not have you think otherwise from any words I said to you."

"Severus?" said Minerva McGonagall, looking as shocked as if she'd been bitten by her own shoes.

The former Potions Master kept his eyes on Harry. "More than one bar lay between myself and Lily, most notably my ill-advised attempts to curry favor with the purebloods of my house. If I made it sound like one mistake upon a muddy field ended it all, if I pretended that she had no reason but shallowness not to love me, I hope your books have also told you why fools may say such things."

"They did," Harry said. He was looking at the fine grey knapsack on Severus Snape's left shoulder, unable to meet the Potions Master's eyes. "They did."

"However," the former Potions Master continued, "I'm afraid I have nothing more to say about your father than what I've already told you."

"Severus!"

The former Potions Master seemed to have eyes only for Harry. "The Dark Mark upon my arm is not dead, nor is the prophecy fulfilled by that story you recounted before the crowd. How did you destroy all but a remnant of the Dark Lord?"

Harry hesitated. "I Obliviated most of his memories and... sealed him, I guess is how wizards say it. Even if the seal breaks, he won't come back as himself."

Severus frowned briefly and then shrugged. "I suppose that is acceptable."

"Professor Snape," Harry said, because this too was now his responsibility, "the Order of the Phoenix owes you for services rendered. I'm in an excellent position to repay it, both financially and magically. Just in case you want to start your next life in a position of wealth, or with better hair, or something."

"Strange words to say to such as me," the former Potions Master said in a soft drawl. "I went to the Dark Lord intending to sell him the prophecy in exchange for Lily's love becoming mine, by whatever darkness was required to achieve it. That is hardly something to be forgiven lightly. And then, in the years after when I was a Potions Master... that you experienced yourself. Do you think my service to the Order of the Phoenix has repaid all my sins?"

"People are always broken," Harry said, though the words stuck in his

throat. "They always make mistakes. At least you tried to repay them."

"Perhaps," said the former Potions Master. "My final duty was to fail in guarding the Stone, to be struck down. This I have done, and I survived it, which I never expected to do." Severus was leaning against the door through which he'd entered, taking his weight off his left leg. "I would not have thought to ask for your forgiveness, but since you offer it so freely, I will accept with thanks. From this day on I wish to take less unkindly ways, and I think that is best done by starting over."

Tears glistened on Minerva McGonagall's nose and cheeks, when she spoke her voice was without hope. "Surely you could start over inside Hogwarts."

Severus shook his head. "Too many students would remember me as the evil Potions Master. No, Minerva. I will go someplace new, and take a new name, and find someone new to love."

"Severus Snape," Harry said, because it was his responsibility to say it, "has all your will been done?"

"Lily's killer is vanquished," the man said. "I am content."

The Headmistress lowered her head. "Be well, Severus," she whispered.

"I do have one last piece of advice," Harry said. "If you want it."

"What is it?" said Severus Snape.

"Ruminating about the past can contribute to depression. You have my blanket permission to just never think about your past, ever. You shouldn't think that it's your responsibility to Lily to bear your guilt for her, or anything like that. Just keep your mind on your future and whatever new people you meet."

"I shall take your wisdom into consideration," Severus said neutrally.

"Also, try a different brand of hair shampoo."

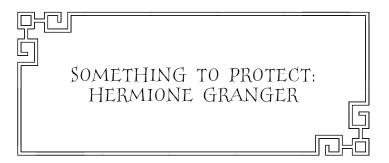
A wry grin crossed Severus's face, and Harry thought it might have been, for the first time, that man's true smile. "Drop dead, Potter."

Harry laughed.

Severus laughed.

Minerva was sobbing.

Without saying anything else, the free man took a pinch of Floo powder, and cast it into the office's fireplace, and strode into the green flame whispering something that nobody caught; and that was the last that anyone ever heard of Severus Snape.



And it was evening and it was morning, the last day. June 15th, 1992.

The beginning light of morning, the pre-dawn before sunrise, was barely brightening the sky. To the east of Hogwarts, where the Sun would rise, that faintest tinge of grey made barely visible the hilly horizon beyond the Quidditch stands.

The stone terrace-platform where Harry now sat would be high enough to see the dawn beyond the hills below; he'd asked for that, when he was describing his new office.

Harry was currently sitting cross-legged on a cushion, chilly pre-morning breezes stirring over his exposed hands and face. He'd ordered the house-elves to bring up the hand-glittered throne from his previous office as General Chaos... and then he'd told the elves to put it back, once it had occurred to Harry to start worrying about where his taste in decorations had come from and whether Voldemort had once possessed a similar throne. Which, itself, wasn't a knockdown argument — it wasn't like sitting on a glittery throne to survey the lands below Hogwarts was *unethical* in any way Harry's moral philosophy could make out — but Harry had decided that he needed to take time and think it through. Meanwhile, simple cushions would do well enough.

In the room below, connected to the rooftop by a simple wooden ladder, was Harry's new office inside Hogwarts. A wide room, surrounded by full-wall

windows on four sides for sunlight; currently bare of furnishings but for four chairs and a desk. Harry had told Headmistress McGonagall what he was looking for, and Headmistress McGonagall had put on the Sorting Hat and then told Harry the series of twists and turns that would take him where he wanted to be. High enough in Hogwarts that the castle shouldn't have been that tall, high enough in Hogwarts that nobody looking from the outside would see a piece of castle corresponding to where Harry now sat. It seemed like an elementary precaution against snipers that there was no reason *not* to take.

Though, on the flip side, Harry had no idea where he currently was in any real sense. If his office couldn't be seen from the lands below, then how was Harry seeing the lands, how were photons making it from the landscape to him? On the western side of the horizon, stars still glittered, clear in the pre-dawn air. Were those photons the actual photons that had been emitted by huge plasma furnaces in the unimaginable distance? Or did Harry now sit within some dreaming vision of the Hogwarts castle? Or was it all, without any further explanation, 'just magic'? He needed to get electricity to work better around magic so he could experiment with shining lasers downward and upward.

And yes, Harry had his own office on Hogwarts now. He didn't have any official title yet, but the Boy-Who-Lived was now a true fixture of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the soon-to-be-home of the Philosopher's Stone and the world's only wizarding institution of genuinely higher education. It wasn't fully secured, but Professor Vector had put up some preliminary Charms and Runes to screen the office and its rooftop against eavesdropping.

Harry sat on his cushion, near the edge of his office's roof, and gazed down upon trees and lakes and flowering grass. Far below, carriages sat motionlessly, not yet harnessed to skeletal horses. Small boats littered the shore, prepared to ferry younger students across the lake when the time came. The Hogwarts Express had arrived overnight, and now the train cars and the huge old-fashioned engine awaited on the other side of the southern lake. All was ready to take the students home after the Leave-Taking Feast in the morning.

Harry stared across the lake, at the great old-fashioned locomotive he wouldn't be riding home this time. Again. There was a strange sadness and worry to that thought, like Harry was already starting to miss out on the bonding experiences with *the other students his age*— if you could say that at all,

when a significant part of Harry had been born in 1926. It had felt to Harry, last night in the Ravenclaw common room, like the gap between him and the other students had, yes, widened even further. Though that might only have been from the questions Padma Patil and Anthony Goldstein had excitedly asked each other about the Girl-Who-Revived, the rapid-fire speculations shooting through the air from Ravenclaw to Ravenclaw. Harry had known the answers, he'd known all the answers, and he hadn't been able to say them.

There was a part of Harry that was tempted to go on the Hogwarts Express and then come back to Hogwarts by Floo. But when Harry imagined finding five other students for his compartment, and then spending the next eight hours keeping secrets from Neville or Padma or Dean or Tracey or Lavender... it didn't seem like an attractive prospect. Harry felt like he ought to do it for reasons of Socializing with the Other Children, but he did not *want* to do it. He could meet with everyone again at the start of the next school year, when there would be other topics of which he could speak more freely.

Harry stared south across the lake, at the huge old locomotive, and thought about the rest of his life.

About the Future.

The prophecy Dumbledore's letter had mentioned about him tearing apart the stars in heaven... well, *that* sounded optimistic. That part had an obvious interpretation to anyone who'd grown up with the right sort of upbringing. It described a future where humanity had won, more or less. It wasn't what Harry usually thought about when he gazed at the stars, but from a truly *adult* perspective, the stars were enormous heaps of valuable raw materials that had unfortunately caught fire and needed to be scattered and put out. If you were tapping the huge hydrogen-helium reservoirs for raw materials, that meant your species had successfully grown up.

Unless the prophecy had been referring to something else entirely. Dumble-dore might have been misinterpreting some seer's words... but his message to Harry had been phrased as if there'd been a prophecy about Harry *personally* tearing apart stars, in the foreseeable future. Which seemed potentially more worrisome, though by no means certain to be true, or a bad thing if it was true...

Harry vented a sigh. He'd begun to understand, in the long hours before sleep had taken him last night, just what Dumbledore's last message implied.

Looking back on the events of the 1991-1992 Hogwarts school year was

nothing short of bone-freezingly terrifying, now that Harry understood what he was seeing.

It wasn't just that Harry had kept the frequent company of his good friend Lord Voldemort. It wasn't even *mostly* that.

It was the vision of a narrow line of Time that Albus Dumbledore had steered through fate's narrow keyhole, a hair-thin strand of possibility threaded through a needle's eye.

The prophecies had instructed Dumbledore to have Tom Riddle's intelligence copied onto the brain of a wizarding infant who would then grow up learning Muggle science. What did it say about the likely shape of the Future, if *that* was the first or best strategy the seers could find that *didn't* lead to catastrophe?

Harry could look back now on the Unbreakable Vow that he'd made, and guess that if not for that Vow, disaster might have already been set in motion yesterday when Harry had wanted to tear down the International Statute of Secrecy. Which in turn strongly suggested that the many prophecies Dumbledore had read and whose instructions he'd followed, had somehow ensured that Harry and Voldemort would collide in *exactly the right* way to cause Voldemort to force Harry to make that Unbreakable Vow. That the Unbreakable Vow had been part of Time's narrow keyhole, one of the improbable preconditions for allowing the Earth's peoples to survive.

A Vow whose sole purpose was to protect everyone from Harry's current *stupidity*.

It was like watching a videotape of an almost-traffic-accident that had happened to you, where you remembered another car missing you by centimeters, and the video showing that somebody had *also* thrown a pebble in exactly the right way to cause an enormous lorry to miss that near-collision, and if they hadn't thrown that pebble then you and all your family in the automobile and your *entire planet* would have been hit by the lorry, which, in the metaphor, represented your own *sheer obliviousness*.

Harry had been *warned*, he'd *known* on some level or the Vow wouldn't have stopped him, and yet he'd *still* almost made the wrong choice and destroyed the world. Harry could look back now and see that, yes, the alternate-Harry with no Vow would've had trouble accepting the reasoning that said you couldn't get magical healing to Muggles as fast as possible. If the alternate-Harry had acknowledged the danger at all, he would have rationalized it, tried

to figure out some clever way around the problem and refused to accept *taking* a few years longer to do it, and so the world would have ended. Even after all the warnings Harry had received, it *still* wouldn't have worked without the Unbreakable Vow.

One tiny strand of Time, being threaded through a needle's eye.

Harry didn't know how to handle this revelation. It wasn't a sort of situation that human beings had evolved emotions to handle. All Harry could do was stare at how close he had come to disaster, might come *again* to disaster if that Vow was fated to trigger more than once, and think...

Think ...

'I don't want that to happen again' didn't seem like the right thought. He'd never *wanted* to destroy the world in the first place. Harry hadn't lacked for protective feelings about Earth's sapient population, those protective feelings had been the *problem* in a way. What Harry had lacked was some element of clear vision, of being willing to consciously acknowledge what he'd already known deep down.

And the whole thing with Harry having spent the last year cozying up to the Defense Professor didn't speak highly of his intellect either. It seemed to point to the same problem, even. There were things Harry had known or strongly suspected on some level, but never promoted to conscious attention. And so he had failed and nearly died.

I need to raise the level of my game.

That was the thought Harry was looking for. He had to do better than this, become a less stupid person than this.

I need to raise the level of my game, or fail.

Dumbledore had destroyed the recordings in the Hall of Prophecy and arranged for no further recordings to be made. There'd apparently been a prophecy that said Harry mustn't look upon those prophecies. And the obvious next thought, which might or might not be true, was that saving the world was beyond the reach of prophetic instruction. That winning would take plans that were too complex for seers' messages, or that Divination couldn't see somehow. If there'd been some way for Dumbledore to save the world himself, then prophecy would probably have told Dumbledore how to do that. Instead the prophecies had told Dumbledore how to create the preconditions for a particular sort of person existing; a person, maybe, who could unravel a challenge more difficult than prophecy could solve directly. That was why

Harry had been placed on his own, to think without prophetic guidance. If all Harry did was follow mysterious orders from prophecies, then he wouldn't mature into a person who could perform that unknown task.

And right now, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres was still a walking catastrophe who'd needed to be constrained by an Unbreakable Vow to prevent him from *immediately* setting the Earth on an inevitable course toward destruction when he'd already been warned against it. That had happened literally yesterday, just one day after he'd helped Voldemort almost take over the planet.

A certain line from Tolkien kept running through Harry's mind, the part where Frodo upon Mount Doom put on the ring, and Sauron suddenly realized what a *complete idiot* he'd been. 'And the magnitude of his own folly was at last laid bare', or however that had gone.

There was a huge gap between who Harry needed to become, and who he was right now.

And Harry didn't think that time, life experience, and puberty would take care of that automatically, though they might help. Though if Harry could grow into an adult that was to *this* self what a normal adult was to a normal eleven-year-old, maybe *that* would be enough to steer through Time's narrow keyhole...

He had to grow up, somehow, and there was no traditional path laid out before him for accomplishing that.

The thought came then to Harry of another work of fiction, more obscure than Tolkien:

You can only arrive at mastery by practicing the techniques you have learned, facing challenges and apprehending them, using to the fullest the tools you have been taught, until they shatter in your hands and you are left in the midst of wreckage absolute... I cannot create masters. I have never known how to create masters. Go, then, and fail... You have been shaped into something that may emerge from the wreckage, determined to remake your Art. I cannot create masters, but if you had not been taught, your chances would be less. The higher road begins after the Art seems to fail you; though the reality will be that it was you who failed your Art.

It wasn't that Harry had gone down the *wrong* path, it wasn't that the road to sanity lay somewhere outside of science. But reading science papers hadn't been *enough*. All the cognitive psychology papers about known bugs in the human brain and so on had *helped*, but they hadn't been *sufficient*. He'd failed to reach what Harry was starting to realize was a *shockingly* high standard of

being so incredibly, unbelievably rational that you actually started to *get things right*, as opposed to having a handy language in which to describe afterwards everything you'd just done wrong. Harry could look back now and apply ideas like 'motivated cognition' to see where he'd gone astray over the last year. That counted for something, when it came to being saner in the future. That was better than having no idea what he'd done wrong. But that wasn't yet being the person who could pass through Time's narrow keyhole, the adult form whose *possibility* Dumbledore had been instructed by seers to create.

I need to think faster, grow up faster... How alone am I, how alone will I be? Am I making the same mistake I made during Professor Quirrell's first battle, when I didn't realize Hermione had captains? The mistake I made when I didn't tell Dumbledore about the sense of doom, once I realized Dumbledore probably wasn't mad or evil?

It would help if Muggles had classes for this sort of thing, but they didn't. Maybe Harry could recruit Daniel Kahneman, fake his death, rejuvenate him with the Stone, and put him in charge of inventing better training methods...

Harry took the Elder Wand out of his robes, gazed again at the dark-grey wood that Dumbledore had passed down to him. Harry had *tried* to think faster this time, he'd tried to complete the pattern implied by the Cloak of Invisibility and the Resurrection Stone. The Cloak of Invisibility had possessed the legendary power of hiding the wearer, and the hidden power of allowing the wearer to hide from Death itself in the form of Dementors. The Resurrection Stone had the legendary power of summoning an image of the dead, and then Voldemort had incorporated it into his Horcrux system to allow his spirit to move freely. The second Deathly Hallow was a potential component of a system of true immortality that Cadmus Peverell had never completed, maybe due to his having ethics.

And then there was the third Deathly Hallow, the Elder Wand of Antioch Peverell, that legend said passed from wizard to stronger wizard, and made its holder invincible against ordinary attacks; that was the known and overt characteristic...

The Elder Wand that had belonged to Dumbledore, who'd been trying to prevent the Death of the world itself.

The purpose of the Elder Wand always going to the victor might be to find the strongest living wizard and empower them still further, in case there was any threat to their entire species; it could secretly be a tool to defeat Death in its form as the destroyer of worlds.

But if there was some higher power locked within the Elder Wand, it had not presented itself to Harry based on that guess. Harry had raised up the Elder Wand and spoken to it, named himself a descendant of Peverell who accepted his family's quest; he'd promised the Elder Wand that he would do his best to save the world from Death, and take up Dumbledore's duty. And the Elder Wand had answered no more strongly to his hand than before, refusing his attempt to jump ahead in the story. Maybe Harry needed to strike his first true blow against the Death of worlds before the Elder Wand would acknowledge him; as the heir of Ignotus Peverell had already defeated Death's shadow, and the heir of Cadmus Peverell had already survived the Death of his body, when their respective Deathly Hallows had revealed their secrets.

At least Harry had managed to guess that, contrary to legend, the Elder Wand didn't contain a core of 'Thestral hair'. Harry had seen Thestrals, and they were skeletal horses with smooth skin and no visible mane on their skull-like heads, nor tufts on their bony tails. But what core was truly inside the Elder Wand, Harry hadn't yet felt himself knowing; nor had he been able to find, anywhere on the Elder Wand, the circle-triangle-line of the Deathly Hallows that should have been present.

"I don't suppose," Harry murmured to the Elder Wand, "you could just tell me?"

There came back no answer from the globe-knobbed wand; only a sense of glory and contained power, watching him skeptically.

Harry sighed, and put the most powerful wand in the world back into his school robes. He'd get it eventually, and hopefully in time.

Maybe faster, if there was someone to help him do the research.

Harry was aware on some level — no, he needed to stop being aware of things on some level and start just being aware of them — Harry was explicitly and consciously aware that he was ruminating about the Future mostly to distract himself from the imminent arrival of Hermione Granger. Who would receive a clear bill of health from St. Mungo's, when she woke up very early this morning, and who would then Floo with Professor Flitwick back to Hogwarts. Whereupon she'd tell Professor Flitwick that she needed to speak with Harry Potter immediately. There'd been a note from Harry to himself about that, when Harry had woken up later this morning with the sun already risen in the Ravenclaw dorm. He'd read the note, and then Time-Turned back to before

the dawn hour when Hermione Granger would arrive.

She won't actually be angry with me.

. . .

Seriously. Hermione isn't that kind of person. Maybe she was at the start of the year but she's too self-aware to fall for that one now.

. . .

What do you mean, '...'? If you have something to say, inner voice, just say it! We're trying to be more aware of our own thought processes, remember?

The sky had gone full blue-grey, dawn barely short of sunrise, by the time that Harry heard the sound of footsteps coming from the ladder that opened into his new office. Hastily Harry stood up and began to brush off his robes; and then, realizing what he was doing, stopped the nervous motions. He'd just defeated Voldemort, damn it, he ought not to be this nervous.

The young witch's head and chestnut curls appeared in the opening and peered around. Then she rose up higher, seemed almost to run up the ladder steps, like she was walking along an ordinary sidewalk but vertically; Harry could have blinked and missed it, how her one shoe came down on the top rung of the ladder and then she leapt lightly onto the roof an instant later.

Hermione. Harry's lips moved around the word, but made no sound.

There'd been something Harry had meant to say, but it had gone right out of his mind.

Maybe a quarter of the minute passed, on the rooftop, before Hermione Granger spoke. She was wearing a blue-edged uniform now, and the bluebronze-striped tie of her proper House.

"Harry," said Hermione Granger, a terribly familiar voice that almost brought tears to Harry's eyes, "before I ask you all the questions, I'd like to start by saying thank you very much for, um, whatever it is you did. I mean it, really. Thank you."

"Hermione," Harry said, and swallowed. The phrase *may I have permission* to hug you, which Harry had imagined using for his opening line, seemed impossible to say. "Welcome back. Hold on while I put up some privacy spells." Harry took the Elder Wand out of his robes, got a book from his pouch that he opened to a bookmark, and then carefully pronounced "Homenum Revelio,"

along with two other recently-acquired security Charms that Harry had found himself barely able to cast if he wielded the Elder Wand. It wasn't much, but it was marginally better security than just relying on Professor Vector.

"You have Dumbledore's wand," Hermione said. Her voice was hushed, and sounded as loud as an avalanche in the still dawn air. "And you can use it to cast fourth-year spells?"

Harry nodded, making a mental note to be more careful who else saw him do that. "Is it okay if I hug you?"

Hermione moved lightly over to him; her movements were peculiarly swift, more graceful than they'd been before. Her motions seemed to radiate an air of something pure and untouched, reminding Harry again of how peaceful Hermione had looked when she was sleeping on Voldemort's altar —

Realization hit Harry like a ton of bricks, or at least a kilogram of brick.

And Harry hugged Hermione, feeling how very *alive* she seemed. He felt like crying, and suppressed it, because he didn't know whether that was just her aura affecting him or not.

Hermione's arms around him were gentle, exceedingly light in their pressure, as if she were being deliberately careful not to snap his body in half like a used toothpick.

"So," Hermione said, once Harry had let go of her. Her young face looked very serious, as well as pure and innocent. "I didn't tell the Aurors you were there, or that it was Professor Quirrell and not You-Know-Who who killed all the Death Eaters. Professor Flitwick only let them give me one drop of Veritaserum, so I didn't have to say. I just told them the troll was the last thing I remembered."

"Ah," Harry said. He had somehow found himself staring at Hermione's nose instead of her eyes. "What do you think happened, exactly?"

"Well," Hermione Granger said, "I got eaten by a troll, which I'd frankly rather not do again, and then there was a really loud *bang* and my legs were back, and I was lying on a stone altar in the middle of a graveyard in a dark moonlit forest I'd never seen before, with somebody's severed hands clutched around my throat. So you see, Mr. Potter, finding myself in a situation that weird and dark and scary, I wasn't going to make the same mistake I did last time with Tracey. I knew *right away* that it was you."

Harry nodded. "Good call."

"I said your name, but you didn't answer," said Hermione. "I sat up and

one of the bloody hands slid down over my shirt, leaving little bits of flesh behind. I didn't scream though, even when I looked around and saw all the heads and bodies and realized what the smell was." Hermione stopped, took another deep breath. "I saw the skull masks and realized that the dead people had been Death Eaters. I knew right away that the Defense Professor had been there with you and killed them all, but I didn't notice Professor Quirrell's body was also there. I didn't realize it was him even when I saw Professor Flitwick checking the body. He looked... different, when he was dead." Hermione's voice became quieter. She looked humbled somehow, in a way Harry couldn't often remember seeing. "They said David Monroe sacrificed his life to bring me back, the same way your mother sacrificed herself for you, so that the Dark Lord would explode again when he tried to touch me. I'm *pretty* sure that's not the whole truth, but... I've thought a lot of nasty things about our Defense Professor that I never should've thought."

"Um," Harry said.

Hermione nodded solemnly, her hands clasped in front of her as though in penitence. "I know you're probably too nice to say the things to me that you have a right to say now, so I'll say them for you, Harry. You were right about Professor Quirrell, and I was wrong. You told me so. David Monroe was a little bit Dark and a whole lot Slytherin, and it was childish of me to think that was the same thing as being evil."

"Ah..." Harry said. This was very hard to say. "Actually, the rest of the world doesn't know this part, not even the Headmistress. But in point of fact you were one hundred and twelve percent correct about him being evil, and I'll remember for future reference that although 'Dark' and 'evil' may not technically be the same thing, there's a great big statistical correlation."

"Oh," said Hermione, and fell silent again.

"You're not saying that you told me so?" said Harry. His mental model of Hermione was yelling: I told you so! Didn't I tell you so, Mr. Potter? Didn't I tell you? Professor Quirrell is EEEEVIIIL, I said, but YOU DIDN'T LISTEN TO ME!

The actual Hermione just shook her head. "I know you cared about him a lot," she said softly. "Since I was right after all... I knew you'd probably be hurting a lot after Professor Quirrell turned out to be evil, and that it wouldn't be a good time to say I told you so. I mean, that's what I decided when I was thinking that part through several months earlier."

Thank you, Miss Granger. Harry was glad she'd said that much, though, it

just wouldn't have felt like Hermione otherwise.

"So, Mr. Potter," said Hermione Granger, tapping her fingers on her robe at around thigh level. "After the medi-witch drew my blood, it stopped hurting right away, and when I brushed away the little bit of blood on my arm, I couldn't find where the needle had poked me. I bent some of the metal in my bedframe without trying hard, and though I haven't had a chance to test it yet, I feel like I should be able to run really *fast*. My fingernails are pearly-white and shiny even though I don't remember painting them. And my teeth look like that too, which, being the daughter of dentists, makes me nervous. So it's not that I'm ungrateful, but just what exactly did you do?"

"Um," Harry said. "And I'm expecting you're also wondering why you're radiating an aura of purity and innocence?"

"I'm WHAT?"

"That part wasn't my idea. Honestly." Harry's voice went small. "Please don't kill me."

Hermione Granger raised her hands in front of her face, staring somewhat cross-eyed at her fingers. "Harry, are you saying... I mean, my radiating innocence and being all fast and graceful and my teeth being pearly white... is it *alicorn* my fingernails are made of?"

"Alicorn?"

"It's the term for unicorn horn, Mr. Potter." Hermione Granger seemed to be trying to nibble her fingernails, and not having much luck. "So, I guess if you bring a girl back from the dead she ends up as, what did Daphne call it, a Sparkling Unicorn Princess?"

"That's not exactly what happened," Harry said, though it was frighteningly close.

Hermione took her finger out of her mouth, frowning at it. "I can't bite through it either. Mr. Potter, did you consider the problems now that it's literally impossible for me to trim my fingernails and toenails?"

"The Weasley twins have a magical sword that should work," Harry volunteered.

"I think," Hermione Granger said firmly, "that I would like to know the whole story behind all this, Mr. Potter. Because knowing you and knowing Professor Quirrell, there was some sort of *plan* going on."

Harry took a deep breath. Then he exhaled. "Sorry, it's... classified. I could tell you if you studied Occlumency, but... do you want to?"

"Do I want to study Occlumency?" Hermione said, looking slightly surprised. "That's at least a sixth-year thing, isn't it?"

"I learned it," Harry said. "I started with an unusual boost, but I doubt that really mattered in the long run. I mean, I'm sure you could learn calculus if you studied hard, regardless of what age Muggles usually learn it. The question is, um." Harry was having to control his breathing. "The question is, do you still want to do... that kind of stuff."

Hermione turned, and looked at where the sky was lightening in the east. "You mean," she said quietly, "do I still want to be a hero now that it's earned me a horrible death that one time."

Harry nodded, then said "Yes" because Hermione wasn't turning toward him, though the word felt blocked in his throat.

"I've been thinking about that," Hermione said. "It was, in fact, an exceptionally gruesome and painful death."

"I, um. I did set some things up *just in case* you still wanted to be a hero. There were some short windows of opportunity where I didn't have time to consult you, I couldn't let you see me because I expected you to be given Veritaserum later. But if you don't like it, I can undo most of what I did and you can just ignore the rest."

Hermione nodded distantly. "Like making everyone think that I... Harry, *did* I actually do anything to You-Know-Who?"

"No, that was all me, though please don't tell anyone that. Just so you know, that time the Boy-Who-Lived supposedly defeated Voldemort, on the night of Halloween in 1981, that was Dumbledore's victory and he let everyone think it was me. So now I've defeated a Dark Lord once, and gotten credit for it once. It all balances out eventually, I guess."

Hermione went on gazing to the east. "I'm not really comfortable with this," she said after a while. "People thinking I defeated the Dark Lord Voldemort, when I haven't done anything at all... oh, that's the same thing you went through, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Sorry about inflicting that on you. I was... well, I was trying to create a separate identity for you in people's minds, I guess. There was just the one opportunity and everything was sort of *rushed* and... I realized afterwards that maybe I shouldn't have, but it was too late." Harry cleared his throat. "Though, um. If you're feeling like you want to do something that's actually worthy of the way people think about the Girl-Who-Revived, um. I might

have an idea for what you can do. Very soon, if you want."

Hermione Granger was giving him a look.

"But you don't *have* to!" Harry said hastily. "You can just ignore this whole thing and be the best student in Ravenclaw! If that's what you prefer."

"Are you trying to use reverse psychology on me, Mr. Potter?"

"No! Honestly!" Harry took a deep breath. "I'm trying not to decide your life for you. I thought I saw, yesterday, I thought I saw what might come next for you — but then I remembered how much of this year I'd spent being a total idiot. I thought of some things Dumbledore said to me. I realized it genuinely wasn't my place to say. That you could do anything you wanted with your life, and that above all, the choice had to be your own. Maybe you don't want to be a hero after this, maybe you want to become a great magical researcher because that's who Hermione Granger really was all along, never mind what your fingernails are made out of now. Or you could go to the Salem Witches' Institute in America instead of Hogwarts. I won't lie and say I'd like that, but it really is up to you." Harry turned to the horizon and swept his hand wide, as though to indicate all the world that lay beyond Hogwarts. "You can go anywhere from here. You can do anything with your life. If you want to be a wealthy sixty-year-old merman, I can make it happen. I'm serious."

Hermione nodded slowly. "I'm curious about how you'd do that exactly, but what I want isn't to have things done *for* me."

Harry sighed. "I understand. Um..." Harry hesitated. "I think... if it helps you to know... in my case, things were being arranged for me a *lot*. By Dumbledore, mostly, though Professor Quirrell too. Maybe the power to earn your own way in life is itself something you have to earn."

"Why, that sounds very wise," Hermione said. "Like having my parents pay for me to go to university, so I can someday get my own job. Professor Quirrell bringing me back to life as a Sparkling Unicorn Princess and you telling everyone that I offed the Dark Lord Voldemort is just like that, really."

"I am sorry," Harry said. "I know I should've done it differently, but... I didn't have much time to plan and I was exhausted and not really thinking straight —"

"I'm grateful, Harry," Hermione said, her voice softer now. "You're being too harsh on yourself, even. Please don't take it so seriously when I'm snarky at you. I don't want to be the sort of girl who comes back from the dead, and then starts complaining about which superpowers she got and that her alicorn

fingernails are the wrong shade of pearly white." Hermione had turned, was again gazing off at the east. "But, Mr. Potter... if I do decide that dying a horrible death isn't enough to make me rethink my life choices... not that I'm saying that just yet... then what happens next?"

"I do my best to support you in your life choices," Harry said firmly. "Whatever they are."

"You have a quest already lined up for me, I'm guessing. A nice safe quest where there's no chance of my getting hurt again."

Harry rubbed his eyes, feeling tired inside. It was like he could hear the voice of Albus Dumbledore inside his head. *Forgive me, Hermione Granger...* "I'm sorry, Hermione. If you go down that path I'm going to have to Dumbledore you, and not tell you some things. Manipulate you, if only for a short while. I do believe there's something you might be able to do now, something real, something worthy of the way people are thinking about the Girl-Who-Revived... that you might have a destiny, even... but in the end that's just a guess, I know a lot less than Dumbledore did. Are you willing to risk the life you just got back?"

Hermione turned to look at him, her eyes widening in surprise. "Risk my life?"

Harry didn't nod, because that would have been outright lying. "Are you willing to do that?" Harry said instead. "The quest that I think might be your destiny — and no, I don't know any specific prophecies, it's just a guess — involves literal descent-into-Hell type stuff."

"I thought ..." Hermione said. She sounded uncertain. "I thought for sure that after this, you and Professor McGonagall wouldn't ... you know ... let me do anything the least bit dangerous ever again."

Harry said nothing, feeling guilty about the false relationship credit he was getting. It was in fact the case that Hermione was modeling him with tremendous accuracy, and that if not for Hermione having a Horcrux, the surface of the planet Venus would have dropped to fractional-Kelvin temperatures before Harry tried this.

"On a scale of zero to a hundred, *how* literal a descent into Hell are we talking about here?" said Hermione. The girl now looked a bit worried.

Harry mentally calibrated his scales, remembering Azkaban. "I'd say maybe eighty-seven?"

"This sounds like something I should do when I'm older, Harry. There's a

difference between being a hero and being a complete lunatic."

Harry shook his head. "I don't think the risk would change much," Harry said, leaving aside the question of how much risk that really was, "and it's the sort of thing that's better done sooner, if someone does it at all."

"And my parents don't get a vote," Hermione said. "Or do they?"

Harry shrugged. "We both know how they'd vote, and you can take that into account if you like. Um, I said for Dr. and Dr. Granger not to be told yet that you're alive. They'll find out after you come back from your mission, if you choose to accept it. That seems a bit... kinder on your parents' nerves, they just get the one pleasant surprise, instead of having to worry about, um, stuff."

"Why, that's very thoughtful of you," Hermione said. "It's nice that you're so concerned about their feelings. May I think about this for a few minutes, please?"

Harry gestured toward the cushion he'd set down opposite his own, and Hermione moved over with fluid grace, and sat down to look out over the castle-edge, still radiating peacefulness all over the place. They'd really need to do something about that, maybe pay someone to invent an Anti-Purity Potion.

"Do I have to decide without knowing what the mission is?" Hermione asked.

"Oh *hell* no," Harry said, thinking of a similar conversation before his own trip to Azkaban. "This is the sort of thing you have to choose freely if you do it at all. I mean that's an actual mission requirement. If you say that you still want to be a hero, I'll tell you afterwards about the mission — after you've had some time to eat and talk to people and recover a bit — and you'll decide then if it's something you want to do. And we'll test in advance whether returning from death has allowed you to cast the spell that normal wizards think is impossible, *before* you go out."

Hermione nodded, and fell back into silence.

The sky had lightened further by the time Hermione spoke again.

"I'm afraid," Hermione said, almost in a whisper. "Not of dying again, or not *just* that. I'm afraid I won't be good enough. I had my chance to defeat a troll, and instead I just died —"

"That was a troll empowered by Voldemort as a weapon, plus he sabotaged all your magic items, just so you know."

"I died. And you killed the troll, somehow, I think I remember that part,

it didn't even slow you down." Hermione wasn't crying, no tears glistened on her cheeks, she simply gazed off at the lightening sky where the Sun would rise. "And then you brought me back from the dead as a Sparkling Unicorn Princess. I *know* I couldn't have done that. I'm afraid I'll *never* be able to do that, no matter what people think about me."

"This situation is where your journey begins, I think —" Harry paused. "Excuse me, I shouldn't be trying to influence your decision."

"No," Hermione whispered, still gazing at the hills below her. She raised her voice. "No, Harry, I want to hear this."

"Okay. Um. I think this is where you start. Everything that's happened up until now... it places you in the same place I started out in September, when I'd thought of myself as just being a child prodigy before, and then I found something new I needed to live up to. If you weren't comparing yourself to me and my," adult cognitive patterns copied off Tom Riddle, "dark side . . . then you'd be the brightest star of Ravenclaw, who organized her own company to fight school bullies and kept her sanity under assault by Voldemort, all while she was only twelve years old. I looked it up, you got better grades than Dumbledore did in his first year." Leaving aside the Defense grade, because that was just Voldemort being Voldemort. "Now you have some powers, and a reputation to live up to, and the world is about to hand you some difficult tasks. That's where it all begins for you, the same as it began for me. Don't sell yourself short." And then Harry shut his mouth hard, because he was talking Hermione into it and that wasn't right. He'd at least managed to stop before the part where he asked, if she couldn't be a hero with all that going for her, who exactly she thought was going to do it.

"You know," Hermione said to the horizon, still not looking at Harry, "I had a conversation like this with Professor Quirrell, once, about being a hero. He was taking the other side, of course. But apart from that, this is feeling like when he argued with me, somehow."

Harry kept his lips pressed shut. Letting people make their own decisions was hard, because it meant they were allowed to make the *wrong* ones, but it still had to be done.

Hermione spoke carefully, the blue fringes of her Hogwarts uniform now seeming brighter against her black robes as the sky all around them became illuminated; there were no more stars in the west. "Professor Quirrell told me, he said he'd been a hero once. But people weren't helping him enough, so he gave up and went off to do something more interesting. I told Professor Quirrell that it hadn't been right for him to do that — what I actually said was 'that's horrible'. Professor Quirrell said that, yes, maybe he was an awful person, but then what about all the other people who'd never tried to be heroes at all? Were they even worse than him? And I didn't know what to say back. I mean, it's wrong to say that only Gryffindor-style heroes are good people — though I think from Professor Quirrell's perspective it was more like only people with big ambitions had a right to breathe. And I didn't believe that. But it also seemed wrong to *stop* being a hero, to walk away like he'd done. So I just stood there looking silly. But now I know what I should've told him back then."

Harry controlled his breathing.

Hermione stood up from her cushion, and turned to face Harry. "I'm done with trying to be a heroine," said Hermione Granger with the eastern sky brightening around her. "I shouldn't ever have gone along with that entire line of thinking. There are just people who do what they can, whatever they can. And there are also people who don't even try to do what they can, and yes, those people are doing something wrong. I'm not ever going to try to be a hero again. I'm not going to think in heroic terms if I can help it. But I won't do any less than I can — or not a lot less, I mean, I'm only human." Harry had never understood what was supposed to be mysterious about the Mona Lisa, but if he could have taken a picture of Hermione's resigned/joyous smile just then, he had the sense that he could have looked at it for hours without understanding, and that Dumbledore could have read through it at a glance. "I won't learn my lesson. I will be that stupid. I'll go on trying to do most of what I can, or at least some of what I can — oh, you know what I mean. Even if it means risking my life again, so long as it's worth the risk and isn't being, you know, actually stupid. That's my answer." Hermione took a deep breath, her face resolute. "So, is there something I can do?"

Harry's throat was choked. He reached into his pouch, and signed C-L-O-A-K since he couldn't speak, and drew forth the fuliginous spill of the Cloak of Invisibility, offering it to Hermione for the last time. Harry had to force the words from his throat. "This is the True Cloak of Invisibility," Harry said in almost a whisper, "the Deathly Hallow passed down from Ignotus Peverell to his heirs, the Potters. And now to you —"

"Harry!" Hermione said. Her hands flew up across her chest, as though to

protect herself from the attacking gift. "You don't have to do this!"

"I do have to do this. I've left the part of the path that lets me be a hero, I can't risk myself adventuring, ever. And you... can." Harry reached up the hand that wasn't holding the Cloak, and wiped at his eyes. "This was made for you, I think. For the person you're going to become." A weapon to fight Death, in its form as the shadow of despair that falls on human minds and drains away their hope for the future; you will fight that, I expect, in more forms than just Dementors... "I do not loan you, my Cloak, but give you, unto Hermione Jean Granger. Protect her well forevermore."

Slowly, Hermione reached out, and took hold of the Cloak, looking like she was trying not to cry herself. "Thank you," she whispered. "I think ... even though I'm done with the notion of heroing... I think that you always were, from the day I met you, my mysterious old wizard."

"And I think," Harry said, his own throat half-closed, "even if you deny that way of thinking now, I think that you were always destined to become, from the very beginning of the story, the hero." Who must Hermione Granger become, what adult form must she take when she grows up, to pass through Time's narrow keyhole? I don't know the answer to that either, any more than I can imagine my own adult self. But her next few steps ahead seem clearer than mine...

Harry let the Cloak go, and it passed from his hands to hers.

"It sings," Hermione said. "It's singing to me." She reached up, and wiped at her own eyes. "I can't believe you did that, Harry."

Harry's other hand came out of his pouch, now bearing a long golden chain, at the end of which dangled a closed golden shell. "And this is your personal time machine."

There was a pause, during which the planet Earth rotated a bit further in its orbit.

"What?" said Hermione.

"A Time-Turner, they call it. Hogwarts has a stock they give out to some students, I got one at the start of the year to treat my sleep disorder. It lets the user go backwards in time, in up to six one-hour increments, which I used to get six extra hours per day to study. And to vanish out of Potions class and so on. Don't worry, a Time-Turner can't change history or generate paradoxes that destroy the universe."

"You were keeping up with me in lessons by studying six extra hours per day using a *time machine*." Hermione Granger seemed to be having trouble

with this concept for some unaccountable reason.

Harry made his face look puzzled. "Is there something odd about that?"

Hermione reached out and took the golden necklace. "I guess *not by wizard standards*," she said. For some reason her voice sounded rather sharp. She arranged the chain around her neck, placing the hourglass inside her shirt. "I do feel better now about keeping up with you, though, so thank you for that."

Harry cleared his throat. "Also, since Voldemort wiped out the House of Monroe and then, so far as everyone believes, you avenged them by killing Voldemort, I got Amelia Bones to railroad a bill through what's left of the Wizengamot, saying that Granger is now a Noble House of Britain."

"Excuse me?" said Hermione.

"That also makes you the only scion of a Noble House, which means that to get your legal majority you just need to pass your Ordinary Wizarding Levels, which I've set us up to do at the end of the summer so we'll have some time to study first. If you're okay with that, I mean."

Hermione Granger was making some sort of high-pitched noise that would, in a less organic device, have indicated an engine malfunction. "I have two months to study for my O. W.L.s?"

"Hermione, it's a test designed so that most fifteen-year-olds can pass. Ordinary fifteen year-olds. We can get a passing grade with a low third-year's power level if we learn the right set of spells, and that's all we need for our majorities. Though you'll need to come to terms with getting Acceptable scores instead of your usual Outstandings."

The high-pitched noises coming from Hermione Granger rose in pitch.

"Here's your wand back." Harry took it from his pouch. "And your mokeskin pouch, I made sure they put back everything that was there when you died." That pouch Harry withdrew from a normal pocket of his robes, since he was reluctant to put a *bag of holding* inside a *bag of holding* no matter what was supposed to be harmless so long as both devices had been crafted observing all safety precautions.

Hermione took her wand back, and then her pouch, the motions somehow managing to look graceful even though her fingers were a bit shaky.

"Let's see, what else... the oath you swore before to House Potter only said you had to serve until 'the day you die', so you're now free and clear. And right after your death I got the Malfoys to publicly declare that you were innocent of all charges in Draco's attempted murder."

"Why, thank you again, Harry," said Hermione Granger. "That was very nice of you, and them too, I guess." She was repeatedly running her fingers through her chestnut curls, as though, by organizing her hair, she could restore sanity to her life.

"Last but not least, I had the goblins start the process of building a vault in Gringotts for House Granger," Harry said. "I didn't put any money into it, because that was something where I could wait and ask you first. But if you're going to be a superhero who goes around righting certain kinds of wrongs, it will help a lot if people consider you to be part of the upper social strata and, um, I think it may help if they know you can afford lawyers. I can put in as much gold into your vault as you want, since after Voldemort killed Nicholas Flamel, I ended up holding the Philosopher's Stone."

"I feel like I ought to be fainting," Hermione said in a high-pitched voice, "only I can't because of my superpowers and *why* do I have those again?"

"If it's all right with you, your Occlumency lessons will start on Wednesday with Mr. Bester, he can work with you once per day. Until then, I think it might be better for the true origin of your powers not to become known just because a Legilimens looks you in the eyes. I mean, obviously there's a normal magical explanation, nothing *super*-supernatural, but people do tend to worship their own ignorance and, well, I think the Girl-Who-Revived will be more effective if you remain mysterious. Once you can keep out Mr. Bester and beat Veritaserum, I'll tell you the entire backstory, I promise, including all the secrets you can never tell anyone else."

"That sounds lovely," said Hermione Granger. "I'm quite looking forward to it."

"Though you'll need to take an Unbreakable Vow to not do anything that might destroy the world before I can tell you the more dangerous parts of the story. I mean, I literally can't tell you otherwise, because I took an Unbreakable Vow myself. Is that okay?"

"Sure," said Hermione. "Why shouldn't it be okay? I wouldn't want to destroy the world anyhow."

"Do you need to sit down again?" Harry said, feeling alarmed by the way Hermione was swaying slightly, as though in rhythm with the words being spoken.

Hermione Granger took several deep breaths. "No, I'm perfectly peachy," she said. "Is there anything else I should know about?"

"That was it. I'm finished, at least for now." Harry paused. "I do understand that you want to do things for yourself, not just have them done for you. It's just ... you're going to be a more serious kind of hero, and the only sane choice is for me to give you all the advantages I can manage —"

"I understand that quite well," Hermione said. "Now that I've actually lost a fight and died. I didn't used to understand, but now I do." A breeze ruffled Hermione's chestnut hair and stirred her robes, making her look even more peaceful in the dawn air, as she raised one hand and carefully clenched it into a fist. "If I'm going to do this, I'm going to do it right. We need to measure how hard I can punch, and how high I can jump, and figure out a safe way to test if my fingernails can kill Lethifolds like a real unicorn's horn, and I should practice using my speed to dodge spells I can't let hit me and ... and it sounds like you could maybe arrange for me to get Auror training, like from whoever taught Susan Bones." Hermione was smiling again now, a strange light in her eyes that would've puzzled Dumbledore for hours and that Harry understood immediately, not without a twinge of apprehension. "Oh! And I want to start carrying Muggle weapons, maybe hidden so nobody knows I have them. I thought of incendiary grenades when I was fighting the troll, but I knew I couldn't Transfigure them fast enough, even after I stopped caring about obeying the rules."

"I have the feeling," Harry said, imitating Professor McGonagall's Scottish accent as best he could, "that I ought to be doing something about this."

"Oh, it's much, much, MUCH too late for that, Mr. Potter. Say, can you get me a bazooka? The rocket launcher, I mean, not the chewing gum? I bet they won't be expecting *that* from a young girl, especially if I'm radiating an aura of innocence and purity."

"All right," Harry said calmly, "now you're starting to scare me."

Hermione paused from where she was experimenting with balancing on the tip of her left shoe, her arm reaching in one direction and her right leg stretched in the other, like a ballet dancer. "Am I? I was just thinking that I didn't see what I could do that a Ministry squad of Hit Wizards couldn't. They have broomsticks for mobility and spells that hit harder than I possibly could." She gracefully lowered her leg back down. "I mean, now that I can try a few things without worrying about who's watching, I'm starting to think that I really really like having superpowers. But I still don't see how I could win a fight that Professor Flitwick couldn't, not unless it involves me taking a

Dark Wizard by surprise."

You can take risks other people shouldn't, and try again with the knowledge of what killed you. You can experiment with new spells, more than anyone else could try without dying for sure. But Harry couldn't say any of that yet, so instead he said, "I think it's okay to think more about the future, not just what you can do this very minute."

Hermione jumped high in the air, clicked her heels together three times on the way down, and landed on her tiptoes, perfectly posed. "But you said there was something I could do right away. Or were you just testing?"

"That part is a special case," Harry said, feeling the chill of the dawn air against his skin. He was increasingly not looking forward to telling super-Hermione that her Ordeal would involve facing her literal worst nightmare, under conditions where all her newfound physical strength would be useless.

Hermione nodded, then glanced to the east. At once she went to the side of the roof and sat down, her feet dangling over the rooftop ledge. Harry went to her side and sat down too, sitting crosslegged and further back of the roof-edge.

In the distance, a brilliant tinge of red was rising above the hills to the east of Hogwarts.

Watching the tip of the sunrise made Harry feel better, somehow. So long as the Sun was in the sky, things were still all right on some level, like his having not yet destroyed the Sun.

"So," Hermione said. Her voice rose a bit. "Speaking of the future, Harry. I had time to think about a lot of things while I was waiting in St. Mungo's, and... maybe it's silly of me, but there's a question I still want to know the answer to. Do you remember the last thing we talked about together? Before, I mean?"

"What?" Harry said blankly.

"Oh..." Hermione said. "It was two months ago for you... I guess you don't recall, then."

And Harry remembered.

"Don't panic!" Hermione said, as a sort of strangled half-gurgle came from Harry's throat. "I promise no matter what you say, I won't burst into tears and run away and get eaten by a troll again! I know it's been less than two days for me, but I think that dying has made a lot of things I used to fret about seem much less important compared to what I've been through!"

"Oh," Harry said, his own voice now high-pitched. "That's a good use of a

major trauma, I guess?"

"Only, see, I was still wondering about it, Harry, because for me it hasn't been very long at all since our last conversation, and we didn't finish talking which was admittedly all my own fault for losing control of my emotions and then being eaten by a troll which I am definitely not going to do again. I've been thinking I ought to reassure you that's not going to happen every time you say the wrong thing to a girl." Hermione was fidgeting, leaning from one side to the other where she sat, slightly back and forth. "But, well, even most people who are in love don't do literally one hundredth of what you've done for me. So, Mr. Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, if it's not love, I want to know exactly what I am to you. You never said."

"That's a good question," Harry said, controlling the rising panic. "Do you mind if I think about it?"

Bit by bit, more of the searingly brilliant circle became visible beyond the hills.

"Hermione," Harry said when the Sun was halfway above the horizon, "did you ever invent any hypotheses to explain my mysterious dark side?"

"Just the obvious one," Hermione said, kicking her legs slightly over the rooftop's edge. "I thought maybe when You-Know-Who died right next to you, he happened to give off the burst of magic that makes a ghost, and some of it imprinted on your brain instead of the floor. But that never felt right to me, like it was just a clever explanation that wasn't actually *true*, and it makes even less sense if You-Know-Who didn't really die that night."

"Good enough," Harry said. "Let's imagine that scenario for now." His inner rationalist was looking back and facepalming *again* at how he'd managed to not-think-about hypotheses like that one. It wasn't true but it was *reasonable* and Harry had never thought of any causal model that concrete, just vaguely suspected a connection.

Hermione nodded. "You probably know this already, but I just thought I'd say it to be sure: You're not Voldemort, Harry."

"I know. And *that's* what you mean to me." Harry took a breath, finding it still painful to say aloud. "Voldemort . . . he wasn't a happy person. I don't know if he was ever happy, a single day in his life." *He never could cast the Patronus Charm.* "That's one reason his cognitive patterns didn't take me over, my dark side didn't feel like a good place to be, it didn't get positively reinforced. Being friends with you means that my life doesn't have to go the way Voldemort's

did. And I was pretty lonely before Hogwarts, although I didn't realize it then, so ... yeah. I might've been slightly more desperate to bring you back from the dead than the average boy my age would've been. Though I also maintain that my decision was strictly normative moral reasoning, and if other people care less about their friends, that's their problem, not mine."

"I see," Hermione said softly. She hesitated. "Harry, don't take this the wrong way, but I'm not one hundred percent comfortable with that. It's a big responsibility that I didn't choose, and I don't think it's healthy for you to lay it on just one person."

Harry nodded. "I know. But there's more to the point I'm trying to make. There was a prophecy about my vanquishing Voldemort —"

"A prophecy? There was a prophecy about you? Seriously, Harry?"

"Yeah, I know. Anyway, part of it went, 'And the Dark Lord shall mark him as his equal, but he shall have power the Dark Lord knows not.' What would you guess that meant?"

"Hmmm," Hermione said. Her fingers tapped thoughtfully on the roof's stone. "Your mysterious dark side is You-Know-Who's mark on you that made you his equal. The power he knew not... was the scientific method, right?"

Harry shook his head. "That's what I thought too at first — that it was going to be Muggle science, or the methods of rationality. But..." Harry exhaled. The Sun had now fully risen above the hills. This felt embarrassing to say, but he was going to say it anyway. "Professor Snape, who originally heard the prophecy — yes, that's also a thing that happened — Professor Snape said he didn't think it could just be science, that the 'power the Dark Lord knows not' needed to be something more alien to Voldemort than just that. Even if I think of it in terms of rationality, well, it turns out that the person Voldemort really was," why, Professor Quirrell, why, the thought still stabbing sickness at Harry's heart, "he'd have been able to learn the methods of rationality too, if he read the same science papers I did. Except, maybe, for one last thing . . . " Harry drew a breath. "At the end of all of it, during my final showdown with Voldemort, he threatened to put my parents, and my friends, into Azkaban. Unless I came up with interesting secrets to tell him, one person saved per secret. But I knew I couldn't find enough secrets to save everyone. And in the moment that I saw no way at all left to save everyone ... that's when I actually started thinking. Maybe for the first time in my life, I started thinking. I thought faster than Voldemort, even though he was older than me and smarter, because ... because

I had a *reason to think*. Voldemort had a drive to be immortal, he strongly preferred not to die, but that wasn't a positive desire, it was *fear*, and Voldemort made mistakes because of that fear. I think the power that Voldemort knew not... was that I had something to protect."

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said gently. She hesitated. "Is that what I am to you, then? The thing that you protect?"

"No, I mean, the whole reason I'm telling you this, is that Voldemort wasn't threatening to put *you* in Azkaban. Even if he'd taken over the whole world, you'd have been fine. He'd already made a binding promise not to harm you, because of, um, because of reasons. So in my moment of ultimate crisis, when I reached deep down and found the power Voldemort knew not, I did it to protect everyone except you."

Hermione considered this, a slow smile spreading over her face. "Why, Harry," she said. "That's the least romantic thing I've ever heard."

"You're welcome."

"No, really, it *does* help," Hermione said. "I mean, it makes the whole thing much less stalker-y."

"I know, right?"

The two of them shared a companionable nod, both of them looking more relaxed now, and watched the sunrise together.

"I've been thinking," Harry said, his own voice going soft, "about the alternate Harry Potter, the person I might have been if Voldemort hadn't attacked my parents." If Tom Riddle hadn't tried to copy himself onto me. "That other Harry Potter wouldn't have been as smart, I guess. He probably wouldn't have studied much Muggle science, even if his mother was a Muggleborn. But that other Harry Potter would've had... the capacity for warmth, that he inherited from James Potter and Lily Evans, he would've cared about other people and tried to save his friends, I know that would have been true, because that's something that Lord Voldemort never did, you see..." Harry's eyes were watering. "So that part must be, the remnant."

The Sun was well above the horizon now, the golden light illuminating both of them, casting long shadows off the other side of the rooftop platform.

"I think you're just fine the way you are," Hermione said. "I mean, that other Harry Potter might've been a nice boy, maybe, but it sounds like I would've had to do all his thinking for him."

"Going by heredity, alter-Harry would have been in Gryffindor like his

parents, and the two of you wouldn't have become friends. Though James Potter and Lily Evans were the Head Boy and Head Girl of Hogwarts back in their day, so he wouldn't have been *that* bad."

"I can just imagine it," Hermione said. "Harry James Potter, Sorted into Gryffindor, aspiring Quidditch player —"

"No. Just no."

"Remembered by history as the sidekick of Hermione Jean Granger, who'd send out Mr. Potter to get into trouble for her, and then solve the mystery from the library by reading books and using her incredible memory."

"You're really enjoying this alternate universe, aren't you."

"Maybe he'd be best mates with Ron Weasley, the *smartest* boy in Gryffindor, and they'd fight side by side in my army in Defense class, and afterwards help each other with their homework —"

"Okay, enough, this is starting to creep me out."

"Sorry," Hermione said, though she was still smiling to herself, appearing rapt in some private vision.

"Apology accepted," Harry said dryly.

The Sun rose a little further in the sky.

After a while, Hermione spoke. "Do you suppose we'll fall in love with each other later on?"

"I don't know any better than you do, Hermione. But why does it have to be about that? Seriously, why does it always have to be about that? Maybe when we're older we'll fall in love, and maybe we won't. Maybe we'll stay in love, and maybe we won't." Harry turned his head slightly, the Sun was hot on his cheek and he wasn't wearing sunscreen. "No matter how it goes, we shouldn't try to force our lives into a pattern. I think when people try to *force* patterns onto this sort of thing, that's when they end up unhappy."

"No forced patterns?" Hermione said. Her eyes had taken on a mischievous look. "That sounds like a more complicated way of saying *no rules*. Which I guess seems a lot more reasonable to me than it would've at the start of this year. If I'm going to be a Sparkling Unicorn Princess and have my own time machine, I might as well give up on rules, I suppose."

"I'm not saying that rules are always bad, especially when they actually fit people, instead of them being blindly imitated like Quidditch. But weren't you the one who rejected the 'hero' pattern in favor of just doing the things she could?"

"I suppose so." Hermione turned her head again to gaze down at the grounds below Hogwarts, for the Sun was too bright to look at now — though, Harry thought, Hermione's retinas would always heal now, it was safe for her alone to look directly into the light. "You said, Harry, that you thought I was always destined to be the hero. I've been considering, and I suspect you're completely wrong. If this had been *meant* to be, things would've been a lot easier all round. Just doing the things you can do — you have to *make* that happen, you have to choose it, over and over again."

"That might not conflict with your being a destined hero," Harry said, thinking of compatibilist theories of free will, and prophecies that he must not look upon in order to fulfill. "But we can talk about that later."

"You have to choose it," Hermione repeated. She pushed herself up on her hands, then popped herself backwards and onto the rooftop, rising to her feet in a smooth motion. "Just like I'm choosing to do this."

"No kissing!" Harry said, scrambling to his feet and preparing to dodge; though the realization came to him that the Girl-Who-Revived would be much, much faster.

"I won't try to kiss you again, Mr. Potter. Not until you ask me, if you ever do. But there are all these warm feelings bubbling up inside me and I feel like I might burst if I don't do *something*, though it does now occur to me that it's unhealthy if girls don't know any way of expressing gratitude to boys besides kissing them." Hermione took out her wand and offered it crosswise, in the position she'd used to swear her oath of fealty to House Potter before the Wizengamot.

"Oh *hell* no," Harry said. "Do you realize what it took to get you out of that oath *last* time —"

"Don't go jumping to conclusions, you. I wasn't about to swear fealty to your House again. You've got to start trusting me to be sensible if you're going to be my mysterious young wizard. Now please hold out your wand."

Slowly, Harry took out the Elder Wand and crossed it with Hermione's ten-and-three-quarter-inches of vinewood, forcing down a last worry about her choosing the wrong thing. "Can you at least not say anything about 'until death takes me', because did I mention I have the Philosopher's Stone now? Or anything about 'the end of the world and its magic'? I'm a lot more nervous around phrases like that than I used to be."

Upon a roof floored in square stony tiles, the brilliant morning Sun blazes down upon two not-really-children-anymore, both in blue-fringed black robes, facing each other across crossed wands. One has brown eyes beneath chaotic chestnut curls, and radiates an aura of strength and beauty that is not magic only; the other has green eyes under glasses, with messy black hair above a recently inflamed scar. Below, a stone tower nobody remembers seeing from ground level stretches downwards into the broad base of the castle Hogwarts. Far beneath them are visible the green hills, and the lake. In the distance a huge red-and-black line of railcars and an engine, appearing tiny from this height, a train neither Muggle nor fully magical. The sky is nearly unclouded, but for faint tinges of orange-white where wisps of moisture reflect the sunlight. A light breeze carries the crisp chill of dawn, and the dampness of morning; but the huge blazing golden globe is now risen high above the horizon, and its incandescence casts warmth on everything it touches.

"Well, maybe after this you'll be less nervous," the hero says to her enigmatic wizard. She knows she doesn't know the whole story, but the fragment of truth that she does hold shines bright like sunlight within her, casting warmth on her insides the way the Sun warms her face. "I do choose this, now."

Upon my life and magic I swear friendship to Harry Potter,
To help him and trust in him,
To stand with him and, um, stand by him,
And sometimes go where he can't go,
'Till the day that death takes me for real, if it ever does, I mean,
And if the world or its magic ends, we'll deal with that together.



This is the end of Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality.

I will write no sequel myself; I have said what I set out to say, and it is done. You have my enthusiastic consent to write within this universe yourself, if you wish.

Please subscribe to the notification email list at hpmor dot com, if you want to see the separate epilogue when it appears (not for months, at least), or any side stories I might or might not write some day, and to be notified when I embark on my next major work of fiction.

Over the next week or two, I may publish some of my thoughts upon the project now that it's done, and venture an Opinion of God on some questions, at **hpmor** dot com slash notes.

I am happy to have written this book for you, and I am honored that you read it. Many of you have declared yourselves my friends, and that knowledge is shining warmly inside me.

I wish for you to live long, and prosper — EXPECTO PATRONUM!

This book was formatted by fans of the story. Typesetting was done using LaTeX; the starting point source code can be found at github.com/knuesel/hpmor. This book was built on January 2, 2024.