

HARRY JAMES POTTER-EVANS-VERRES
AND THE PROFESSOR'S GAMES

Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality

I

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
PROFESSOR'S GAMES

Book One of
Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality

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Find the original text at:
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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

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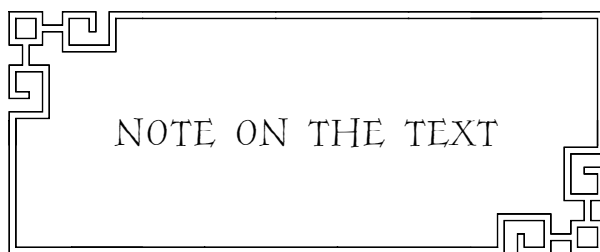
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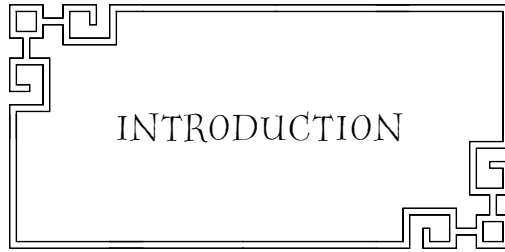


This story was originally published chapter by chapter on the website fanfiction.net. In preparing the present edition, a few decisions were made to balance conflicting interests: preserving the character of the fan fiction as it was published, and adapting the text to a form more appropriate for a printed book.

The text is divided in six books, as was suggested by the author, who also proposed the book titles. As a service to the reader who might want to research or discuss the material on internet, it was deemed preferable to keep the original chapter numbering, so that book 2 starts at chapter 22, book 3 at chapter 38 and so on.

The fan fiction as published on the Web includes material that is not part of the story. Chapters 11 and 64 are *omake*, i.e. bonuses for the fans. These were kept in the present edition. The *final exam* section of chapter 113, a challenge addressed to the reader, is also included. On the other hand, the epigraphs at the beginning of the early chapters, most of the author's notes, and the reminders on the Harry Potter copyright were left out.

Following their publication online, chapters 1–17 were subjected to *Brit-picks*. This is a procedure commonly applied to American fan fiction of British books, in which native British speakers correct the text to better conform it to the language and culture of its setting. Since only 17 chapters out of 122 were corrected, an attempt was made here to undo the Britpicks, for consistency throughout the text.



Disclaimer: J. K. Rowling owns Harry Potter, and no one owns the methods of rationality.

This fic is widely considered to have really hit its stride starting at around Chapter 5. If you still don't like it after Chapter 10, give up.

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- Fan translations;
- The OKCupid keyword for HPMOR readers;
- Links to TV Tropes page and discussion forum;
- Trigger warnings page (warnings about possible traumatic associations for some readers; to avoid spoilers for most readers, there are *no* warnings inside the main story);
- How to learn everything the main character knows;
- Open job positions at a related nonprofit;

- And ever so much more.

Reviews make me happy. You can leave reviews on any chapter, no login required, and there's no need to finish reading it all before you start reviewing chapters — but do please leave at most *one* review per chapter.

This is *not* a strict single-point-of-departure fic — there exists a primary point of departure, at some point in the past, but also other alterations. The best term I've heard for this fic is “parallel universe”.

The text contains many clues: obvious clues, not-so-obvious clues, truly obscure hints which I was shocked to see some readers successfully decode, and massive evidence left out in plain sight. This is a rationalist story; its mysteries are solvable, and meant to be solved.

The pacing of the story is that of serial fiction, i.e., that of a TV show running for a predetermined number of seasons, whose episodes are individually plotted but with an overall arc building to a final conclusion.

The story has been corrected to British English up to Ch. 17, and further Britpicking is currently in progress (see the /HPMOR subreddit).*

All science mentioned is real science. But please keep in mind that, beyond the realm of science, the views of the characters may not be those of the author. Not everything the protagonist does is a lesson in wisdom, and advice offered by darker characters may be untrustworthy or dangerously double-edged.

* *Editor's note:* Britpicking was never completed, and was undone in this edition; see the *Note on the Text* on page ix.

Beneath the moonlight glints a tiny fragment of silver, a fraction of a line...

(black robes, falling)

... blood spills out in litres, and someone screams a word.

CHAPTER ONE



A DAY OF VERY LOW PROBABILITY

Every inch of wall space is covered by a bookcase. Each bookcase has six shelves, going almost to the ceiling. Some bookshelves are stacked to the brim with hardback books: science, maths, history, and everything else. Other shelves have two layers of paperback science fiction, with the back layer of books propped up on old tissue boxes or lengths of wood, so that you can see the back layer of books above the books in front. And it still isn't enough. Books are overflowing onto the tables and the sofas and making little heaps under the windows.

This is the living-room of the house occupied by the eminent Professor Michael Verres-Evans, and his wife, Mrs. Petunia Evans-Verres, and their adopted son, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres.

There is a letter lying on the living-room table, and an unstamped envelope of yellowish parchment, addressed to *Mr. H. Potter* in emerald-green ink.

The Professor and his wife are speaking sharply at each other, but they are not shouting. The Professor considers shouting to be uncivilised.

"You're joking," Michael said to Petunia. His tone indicated that he was very much afraid that she was serious.

"My sister was a witch," Petunia repeated. She looked frightened, but stood her ground. "Her husband was a wizard."

"This is absurd!" Michael said sharply. "They were at our wedding — they visited for Christmas —"

"I told them you weren't to know," Petunia whispered. "But it's true. I've seen things —"

The Professor rolled his eyes. "Dear, I understand that you're not familiar with the sceptical literature. You may not realise how easy it is for a trained magician to fake the seemingly impossible. Remember how I taught Harry to bend spoons? If it seemed like they could always guess what you were thinking, that's called cold reading —"

"It wasn't bending spoons —"

"What was it, then?"

Petunia bit her lip. "I can't just tell you. You'll think I'm —" She swallowed. "Listen. Michael. I wasn't — always like this —" She gestured at herself, as though to indicate her lithe form. "Lily did this. Because I — because I *begged* her. For years, I begged her. Lily had *always* been prettier than me, and I'd... been mean to her, because of that, and then she got *magic*, can you imagine how I felt? And I *begged* her to use some of that magic on me so that I could be pretty too, even if I couldn't have her magic, at least I could be pretty."

Tears were gathering in Petunia's eyes.

"And Lily would tell me no, and make up the most ridiculous excuses, like the world would end if she were nice to her sister, or a centaur told her not to — the most ridiculous things, and I hated her for it. And when I had just graduated from university, I was going out with this boy, Vernon Dursley, he was fat and he was the only boy who would talk to me. And he said he wanted children, and that his first son would be named Dudley. And I thought to myself, *what kind of parent names their child Dudley Dursley?* It was like I saw my whole future life stretching out in front of me, and I couldn't stand it. And I wrote to my sister and told her that if she didn't help me I'd rather just —"

Petunia stopped.

"Anyway," Petunia said, her voice small, "she gave in. She told me it was dangerous, and I said I didn't care any more, and I drank this potion and I was sick for weeks, but when I got better my skin cleared up and I finally filled out and... I was beautiful, people were *nice* to me," her voice broke, "and after that I couldn't hate my sister any more, especially when I learned what her magic brought her in the end —"

"Darling," Michael said gently, "you got sick, you gained some weight while

resting in bed, and your skin cleared up on its own. Or being sick made you change your diet —”

“She was a witch,” Petunia repeated. “I saw it.”

“Petunia,” Michael said. The annoyance was creeping into his voice. “You *know* that can’t be true. Do I really have to explain why?”

Petunia wrung her hands. She seemed to be on the verge of tears. “My love, I know I can’t win arguments with you, but please, you have to trust me on this —”

“*Dad! Mum!*”

The two of them stopped and looked at Harry as though they’d forgotten there was a third person in the room.

Harry took a deep breath. “Mum, *your* parents didn’t have magic, did they?”

“No,” Petunia said, looking puzzled.

“Then no one in your family knew about magic when Lily got her letter. How did *they* get convinced?”

“Ah . . .” Petunia said. “They didn’t just send a letter. They sent a professor from Hogwarts. He —” Petunia’s eyes flicked to Michael. “He showed us some magic.”

“Then you don’t have to fight over this,” Harry said firmly. Hoping against hope that this time, just this once, they would listen to him. “If it’s true, we can just get a Hogwarts professor here and see the magic for ourselves, and Dad will admit that it’s true. And if not, then Mum will admit that it’s false. That’s what the experimental method is for, so that we don’t have to resolve things just by arguing.”

The Professor turned and looked down at him, dismissive as usual. “Oh, come now, Harry. Really, *magic*? I thought *you’d* know better than to take this seriously, son, even if you’re only ten. Magic is just about the most unscientific thing there is!”

Harry’s mouth twisted bitterly. He was treated well, probably better than most genetic fathers treated their own children. Harry had been sent to the best primary schools — and when that didn’t work out, he was provided with tutors from the endless pool of starving students. Always Harry had been encouraged to study whatever caught his attention, bought all the books that caught his fancy, sponsored in whatever maths or science competitions he entered. He was given anything reasonable that he wanted, except, maybe, the

slightest shred of respect. A Doctor teaching biochemistry at Oxford could hardly be expected to listen to the advice of a little boy. You would listen to Show Interest, of course; that's what a Good Parent would do, and so, if you conceived of yourself as a Good Parent, you would do it. But take a ten-year-old *seriously*? Hardly.

Sometimes Harry wanted to scream at his father.

"Mum," Harry said. "If you want to win this argument with Dad, look in chapter two of the first book of the Feynman Lectures on Physics. There's a quote there about how philosophers say a great deal about what science absolutely requires, and it is all wrong, because the only rule in science is that the final arbiter is observation — that you just have to look at the world and report what you see. Um . . . off the top of my head I can't think of where to find something about how it's an ideal of science to settle things by experiment instead of arguments —"

His mother looked down at him and smiled. "Thank you, Harry. But —" her head rose back up to stare at her husband. "I don't want to win an argument with your father. I want my husband to, to listen to his wife who loves him, and trust her just this once —"

Harry closed his eyes briefly. *Hopeless*. Both of his parents were just hopeless.

Now his parents were getting into one of *those* arguments again, one where his mother tried to make his father feel guilty, and his father tried to make his mother feel stupid.

"I'm going to go to my room," Harry announced. His voice trembled a little. "Please try not to fight too much about this, Mum, Dad, we'll know soon enough how it comes out, right?"

"Of course, Harry," said his father, and his mother gave him a reassuring kiss, and then they went on fighting while Harry climbed the stairs to his bedroom.

He shut the door behind him and tried to think.

The funny thing was, he *should* have agreed with Dad. No one had ever seen any evidence of magic, and according to Mum, there was a whole magical world out there. How could anyone keep something like that a secret? More magic? That seemed like a rather suspicious sort of excuse.

It should have been a clean case for Mum joking, lying or being insane, in ascending order of awfulness. If Mum had sent the letter herself, that would

explain how it arrived at the letterbox without a stamp. A little insanity was far, far less improbable than the universe really working like that.

Except that some part of Harry was utterly convinced that magic was real, and had been since the instant he saw the putative letter from the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Harry rubbed his forehead, grimacing. *Don't believe everything you think*, one of his books had said.

But this bizarre certainty . . . Harry was finding himself just *expecting* that, yes, a Hogwarts professor would show up and wave a wand and magic would come out. The strange certainty was making no effort to guard itself against falsification — wasn't making excuses in advance for why there wouldn't be a professor, or the professor would only be able to bend spoons.

Where do you come from, strange little prediction? Harry directed the thought at his brain. *Why do I believe what I believe?*

Usually Harry was pretty good at answering that question, but in this particular case, he had no *clue* what his brain was thinking.

Harry mentally shrugged. A flat metal plate on a door affords pushing, and a handle on a door affords pulling, and the thing to do with a testable hypothesis is to go and test it.

He took a piece of lined paper from his desk, and started writing.

Dear Deputy Headmistress

Harry paused, reflecting; then discarded the paper for another, tapping another millimetre of graphite from his mechanical pencil. This called for careful calligraphy.

*Dear Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall,
Or Whomsoever It May Concern:*

I recently received your letter of acceptance to Hogwarts, addressed to Mr. H. Potter. You may not be aware that my genetic parents, James Potter and Lily Potter (formerly Lily Evans) are dead. I was adopted by Lily's sister, Petunia Evans-Verres, and her husband, Michael Verres-Evans.

I am extremely interested in attending Hogwarts, conditional on such a place actually existing. Only my mother Petunia says she knows about magic, and she can't use it herself. My father is highly sceptical. I myself am

uncertain. I also don't know where to obtain any of the books or equipment listed in your acceptance letter.

Mother mentioned that you sent a Hogwarts representative to Lily Potter (then Lily Evans) in order to demonstrate to her family that magic was real, and, I presume, help Lily obtain her school materials. If you could do this for my own family it would be extremely helpful.

Sincerely,

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres.

Harry added their current address, then folded up the letter and put it in an envelope, which he addressed to Hogwarts. Further consideration led him to obtain a candle and drip wax onto the flap of the envelope, into which, using a penknife's tip, he impressed the initials H.J.P.E.V. If he was going to descend into this madness, he was going to do it with style.

Then he opened his door and went back downstairs. His father was sitting in the living-room and reading a book of higher maths to show how smart he was; and his mother was in the kitchen preparing one of his father's favourite meals to show how loving she was. It didn't look like they were talking to one another at all. As scary as arguments could be, *not arguing* was somehow much worse.

"Mum," Harry said into the unnerving silence, "I'm going to test the hypothesis. According to your theory, how do I send an owl to Hogwarts?"

His mother turned from the kitchen sink to stare at him, looking shocked. "I — I don't know, I think you just have to own a magic owl."

That should've sounded highly suspicious, *oh, so there's no way to test your theory then*, but the peculiar certainty in Harry seemed willing to stick its neck out even further.

"Well, the letter got here somehow," Harry said, "so I'll just wave it around outside and call 'letter for Hogwarts!' and see if an owl picks it up. Dad, do you want to come and watch?"

His father shook his head minutely and kept on reading. *Of course*, Harry thought to himself. Magic was a disgraceful thing that only stupid people believed in; if his father went so far as to *test* the hypothesis, or even *watch* it being tested, that would feel like *associating* himself with that . . .

Only as Harry stumped out the back door, into the back garden, did it occur to him that if an owl *did* come down and snatch the letter, he was going

to have some trouble telling Dad about it.

But — well — that can't really happen, can it? No matter what my brain seems to believe. If an owl really comes down and grabs this envelope, I'm going to have worries a lot more important than what Dad thinks.

Harry took a deep breath, and raised the envelope into the air.

He swallowed.

Calling out *Letter for Hogwarts!* while holding an envelope high in the air in the middle of your own back garden was . . . actually pretty embarrassing, now that he thought about it.

No. I'm better than Dad. I will use the scientific method even if it makes me feel stupid.

"Letter —" Harry said, but it actually came out as more of a whispered croak.

Harry steeled his will, and shouted into the empty sky, "*Letter for Hogwarts! Can I get an owl?*"

"Harry?" asked a bemused woman's voice, one of the neighbours.

Harry pulled down his hand like it was on fire and hid the envelope behind his back like it was drug money. His whole face was hot with shame.

An old woman's face peered out from above the neighbouring fence, grizzled grey hair escaping from her hairnet. Mrs. Figg, the occasional babysitter. "What are you doing, Harry?"

"Nothing," Harry said in a strangled voice. "Just — testing a really silly theory —"

"Did you get your acceptance letter from Hogwarts?"

Harry froze in place.

"Yes," Harry's lips said a little while later. "I got a letter from Hogwarts. They say they want my owl by the 31st of July, but —"

"But you don't *have* an owl. Poor dear! I can't imagine *what* someone must have been thinking, sending you just the standard letter."

A wrinkled arm stretched out over the fence, and opened an expectant hand. Hardly even thinking at this point, Harry gave over his envelope.

"Just leave it to me, dear," said Mrs. Figg, "and in a jiffy or two I'll have someone over."

And her face disappeared from over the fence.

There was a long silence in the garden.

Then a boy's voice said, calmly and quietly, "What."

CHAPTER TWO



EVERYTHING I BELIEVE IS FALSE

"Row, just to be clear," Harry said, "if the professor does levitate you, Dad, when you know you haven't been attached to any wires, that's going to be sufficient evidence. You're not going to turn around and say that it's a magician's trick. That wouldn't be fair play. If you feel that way, you should say so *now*, and we can figure out a different experiment instead."

Harry's father, Professor Michael Verres-Evans, rolled his eyes. "Yes, Harry."

"And you, Mum, your theory says that the professor should be able to do this, and if that doesn't happen, you'll admit you're mistaken. Nothing about how magic doesn't work when people are sceptical of it, or anything like that."

Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall was watching Harry with a bemused expression. She looked quite witchy in her black robes and pointed hat, but when she spoke she sounded formal and Scottish, which didn't go together with the look at all. At first glance she looked like someone who ought to cackle and put babies into cauldrons, but the whole effect was ruined as soon as she opened her mouth. "Is that sufficient, Mr. Potter?" she said. "Shall I go ahead and demonstrate?"

"*Sufficient?* Probably not," Harry said. "But at least it will *help*. Go ahead, Deputy Headmistress."

"Just Professor will do," said she, and then, "*Wingardium Leviosa*."

Harry looked at his father.

"Huh," Harry said.

His father looked back at him. "Huh," his father echoed.

Then Professor Verres-Evans looked back at Professor McGonagall. "All right, you can put me down now."

His father was lowered carefully to the ground.

Harry ruffled a hand through his own hair. Maybe it was just that strange part of him which had *already* been convinced, but . . . "That's a bit of an anticlimax," Harry said. "You'd think there'd be some kind of more dramatic mental event associated with updating on an observation of infinitesimal probability —" Harry stopped himself. Mum, the witch, and even his Dad were giving him *that look* again. "I mean, with finding out that everything I believe is false."

Seriously, it should have been more dramatic. His brain ought to have been flushing its entire current stock of hypotheses about the universe, none of which allowed this to happen. But instead his brain just seemed to be going, *All right, I saw the Hogwarts Professor wave her wand and make your father rise into the air, now what?*

The witch-lady was smiling benevolently upon them, looking quite amused. "Would you like a further demonstration, Mr. Potter?"

"You don't have to," Harry said. "We've performed a definitive experiment. But . . ." Harry hesitated. He couldn't help himself. Actually, under the circumstances, he *shouldn't* be helping himself. It was right and proper to be curious. "What else *can* you do?"

Professor McGonagall turned into a cat.

Harry scrambled back unthinkingly, backpedalling so fast that he tripped over a stray stack of books and landed hard on his bottom with a *thwack*. His hands came down to catch himself without quite reaching properly, and there was a warning twinge in his shoulder as the weight came down unbraced.

At once the small tabby cat morphed back up into a robed woman. "I'm sorry, Mr. Potter," said the witch, sounding sincere, though the corners of her lips were twitching upwards. "I should have warned you."

Harry was breathing in short gasps. His voice came out choked. "*You can't DO that!*"

"It's only a Transfiguration," said Professor McGonagall. "An Animagus transformation, to be exact."

“You turned into a cat! A *SMALL* cat! You violated Conservation of Energy! That’s not just an arbitrary rule, it’s implied by the form of the quantum Hamiltonian! Rejecting it destroys unitarity and then you get FTL signalling! And cats are *COMPLICATED*! A human mind can’t just visualise a whole cat’s anatomy and, and all the cat biochemistry, and what about the *neurology*? How can you go on *thinking* using a cat-sized brain?”

Professor McGonagall’s lips were twitching harder now. “Magic.”

“Magic *isn’t enough* to do that! You’d have to be a god!”

Professor McGonagall blinked. “That’s the first time I’ve ever been called *that*.”

A blur was coming over Harry’s vision, as his brain started to comprehend what had just broken. The whole idea of a unified universe with mathematically regular laws, that was what had been flushed down the toilet; the whole notion of *physics*. Three thousand years of resolving big complicated things into smaller pieces, discovering that the music of the planets was the same tune as a falling apple, finding that the true laws were perfectly universal and had no exceptions anywhere and took the form of simple maths governing the smallest parts, *not to mention* that the mind was the brain and the brain was made of neurons, a brain was what a person *was* —

And then a woman turned into a cat, so much for all that.

A hundred questions fought for priority over Harry’s lips and the winner poured out: “And, and what kind of incantation is *Wingardium Leviosa*? Who invents the words to these spells, nursery schoolers?”

“That will do, Mr. Potter,” Professor McGonagall said crisply, though her eyes shone with suppressed amusement. “If you wish to learn about magic, I suggest that we finalise the paperwork so that you can go to Hogwarts.”

“Right,” Harry said, somewhat dazed. He pulled his thoughts together. The March of Reason would just have to start over, that was all; they still had the experimental method and that was the important thing. “How do I get to Hogwarts, then?”

A choked laugh escaped Professor McGonagall, as if extracted from her by tweezers.

“Hold on a moment, Harry,” his father said. “Remember why you haven’t been going to school up until now? What about your condition?”

Professor McGonagall spun to face Michael. “His condition? What’s this?”

“I don’t sleep right,” Harry said. He waved his hands helplessly. “My sleep

cycle is twenty-six hours long, I always go to sleep two hours later, every day. I can't fall asleep any earlier than that, and then the next day I go to sleep two hours later than *that*. 10 PM, 12 AM, 2 AM, 4 AM, until it goes around the clock. Even if I try to wake up early, it makes no difference and I'm a wreck that whole day. That's why I haven't been going to a normal school up until now."

"One of the reasons," said his mother. Harry shot her a glare.

McGonagall gave a long *hmmmmmm*. "I can't recall hearing about such a condition before . . ." she said slowly. "I'll check with Madam Pomfrey to see if she knows any remedies." Then her face brightened. "No, I'm sure this won't be a problem — I'll find a solution in time. Now," and her gaze sharpened again, "what are these *other* reasons?"

Harry sent his parents a glare. "I am a conscientious objector to child conscription, on grounds that I should not have to suffer for a disintegrating school system's failure to provide teachers or study materials of even minimally adequate quality."

Both of Harry's parents howled with laughter at that, like they thought it was all a big joke. "Oh," said Harry's father, eyes bright, "is *that* why you bit a maths teacher in third year."

"*She didn't know what a logarithm was!*"

"Of course," seconded Harry's mother. "Biting her was a very mature response to that."

Harry's father nodded. "A well-considered policy for addressing the problem of teachers who don't understand logarithms."

"I was *seven years old!* How long are you going to keep on bringing that up?"

"I know," said his mother sympathetically, "you bite *one* maths teacher and they never let you forget it, do they?"

Harry turned to Professor McGonagall. "There! You see what I have to deal with?"

"Excuse me," said Petunia, and fled through the backdoor into the garden, from which her screams of laughter were clearly audible.

"There, ah, there," Professor McGonagall seemed to be having trouble speaking for some reason, "there is to be no biting of teachers at Hogwarts, is that quite clear, Mr. Potter?"

Harry scowled at her. "Fine, I won't bite anyone who doesn't bite me first."

Professor Michael Verres-Evans also had to leave the room briefly upon

hearing that.

“Well,” Professor McGonagall sighed, after Harry’s parents had composed themselves and returned. “Well. I think, under the circumstances, that I should avoid taking you to purchase your study materials until a day or two before school begins.”

“What? Why? The other children already know magic, don’t they? I have to start catching up right away!”

“Rest assured, Mr. Potter,” replied Professor McGonagall, “Hogwarts is quite capable of teaching the basics. And I suspect, Mr. Potter, that if I leave you alone for two months with your schoolbooks, even without a wand, I will return to this house only to find a crater billowing purple smoke, a depopulated city surrounding it and a plague of flaming zebras terrorising what remains of England.”

Harry’s mother and father nodded in perfect unison.

“Mum! Dad!”

CHAPTER THREE



COMPARING REALITY TO ITS ALTERNATIVES

"Good Lord," said the barman, peering at Harry, "is this — can this be — ?"

Harry leaned towards the bar of the Leaky Cauldron as best he could, though it came up to somewhere around the tips of his eyebrows. A question like *that* deserved his very best.

"Am I — could I be — maybe — you never know — if I'm *not* — but then the question is — *who?*"

"Bless my soul," whispered the old barman. "Harry Potter... what an honour."

Harry blinked, then rallied. "Well, yes, you're quite perceptive; most people don't realise that so quickly —"

"That's enough," Professor McGonagall said. Her hand tightened on Harry's shoulder. "Don't pester the boy, Tom, he's new to all this."

"But it is him?" quavered an old woman. "It's Harry Potter?" With a scraping sound, she got up from her chair.

"Doris —" McGonagall said warningly. The glare she shot around the room should have been enough to intimidate anyone.

"I only want to shake his hand," the woman whispered. She bent low and stuck out a wrinkled hand, which Harry, feeling confused and more uncomfortable than he ever had in his life, carefully shook. Tears fell from the woman's eyes onto their clasped hands. "My grandson was an Auror," she

whispered to him. “Died in seventy-nine. Thank you, Harry Potter. Thank heavens for you.”

“You’re welcome,” Harry said automatically, and then he turned his head and shot Professor McGonagall a frightened, pleading look.

Professor McGonagall slammed her foot down just as the general rush was about to start. It made a noise that gave Harry a new referent for the phrase “Crack of Doom”, and everyone froze in place.

“We’re in a hurry,” Professor McGonagall said in a voice that sounded perfectly, utterly normal.

They left the bar without any trouble.

“Professor?” Harry said, once they were in the courtyard. He had meant to ask what was going on, but oddly found himself asking an entirely different question instead. “Who was that pale man, by the corner? The man with the twitching eye?”

“Hm?” said Professor McGonagall, sounding a bit surprised; perhaps she hadn’t expected that question either. “That was Professor Quirinus Quirrell. He’ll be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts this year at Hogwarts.”

“I had the strangest feeling that I knew him . . .” Harry rubbed his forehead. “And that I shouldn’t ought to shake his hand.” Like meeting someone who had been a friend, once, before something went drastically wrong . . . that wasn’t really it at all, but Harry couldn’t find words. “And what *was* . . . all of that?”

Professor McGonagall was giving him an odd glance. “Mr. Potter . . . do you know . . . how *much* have you been told . . . about how your parents died?”

Harry returned a steady look. “My parents are alive and well, and they always refused to talk about how my *genetic* parents died. From which I infer that it wasn’t good.”

“An admirable loyalty,” said Professor McGonagall. Her voice went low. “Though it hurts a little to hear you say it like that. Lily and James were friends of mine.”

Harry looked away, suddenly ashamed. “I’m sorry,” he said in a small voice. “But I *have* a Mum and Dad. And I know that I’d just make myself unhappy by comparing that reality to . . . something perfect that I built up in my imagination.”

“That is amazingly wise of you,” Professor McGonagall said quietly. “But your *genetic* parents died very well indeed, protecting you.”

Protecting me?

Something strange clutched at Harry's heart. "What . . . *did* happen?"

Professor McGonagall sighed. Her wand tapped Harry's forehead, and his vision blurred for a moment. "Something of a disguise," she said, "so that this doesn't happen again, not until you're ready." Then her wand licked out again, and tapped three times on a brick wall . . .

. . . which hollowed into a hole, and dilated and expanded and shivered into a huge archway, revealing a long row of shops with signs advertising cauldrons and dragon livers.

Harry didn't blink. It wasn't like anyone was turning into a cat.

And they walked forwards, together, into the wizarding world.

There were merchants hawking Bounce Boots ("Made with real Flubber!") and "Knives +3! Forks +2! Spoons with a +4 bonus!" There were goggles that would turn anything you looked at green, and a lineup of comfy armchairs with ejection seats for emergencies.

Harry's head kept rotating, rotating like it was trying to wind itself off his neck. It was like walking through the magical items section of an *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* rulebook (he didn't play the game, but he did enjoy reading the rulebooks). Harry desperately didn't want to miss a single item for sale, in case it was one of the three you needed to complete the cycle of infinite *wish* spells.

Then Harry spotted something that made him, entirely without thinking, veer off from the Deputy Headmistress and start heading straight into the shop, a front of blue bricks with bronze-metal trim. He was brought back to reality only when Professor McGonagall stepped right in front of him.

"Mr. Potter?" she said.

Harry blinked, then realised what he'd just done. "I'm sorry! I forgot for a moment that I was with you instead of my family." Harry gestured at the shop window, which displayed fiery letters that shone piercingly bright and yet remote, spelling out *Bigham's Brilliant Books*. "When you walk past a bookshop you haven't visited before, you have to go in and look around. That's the family rule."

"That is the most Ravenclaw thing I have ever heard."

"What?"

"Nothing. Mr. Potter, our first step is to visit Gringotts, the bank of the wizarding world. Your *genetic* family vault is there, with the inheritance your *genetic* parents left you, and you'll need money for school supplies." She sighed.

“And, I suppose, a certain amount of spending money for books could be excused as well. Though you might want to hold off for a time. Hogwarts has quite a large library on magical subjects. And the tower in which, I strongly suspect, you will be living, has a more broad-ranging library of its own. Any book you bought now would probably be a duplicate.”

Harry nodded, and they walked on.

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s a *great* distraction,” Harry said as his head kept swivelling, “probably the best distraction anyone has ever tried on me, but don’t think I’ve forgotten about our pending discussion.”

Professor McGonagall sighed. “Your parents — or your mother at any rate — may have been very wise not to tell you.”

“So you wish that I could continue in blissful ignorance? There is a certain flaw in that plan, Professor McGonagall.”

“I suppose it would be rather pointless,” the witch said tightly, “when anyone on the street could tell you the story. Very well.”

And she told him of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, the Dark Lord, Voldemort.

“Voldemort?” Harry whispered. It should have been funny, but it wasn’t. The name burned with a cold feeling, ruthlessness, diamond clarity, a hammer of pure titanium descending upon an anvil of yielding flesh. A chill swept over Harry even as he pronounced the word, and he resolved then and there to use safer terms like You-Know-Who.

The Dark Lord had raged upon wizarding Britain like a wilding wolf, tearing and rending at the fabric of their everyday lives. Other countries had wrung their hands but hesitated to intervene, whether out of apathetic selfishness or simple fear, for whichever was first among them to oppose the Dark Lord, their peace would be the next target of his terror.

(*The bystander effect*, thought Harry, thinking of Latane and Darley’s experiment which had shown that you were more likely to get help if you had an epileptic fit in front of one person than in front of three. *Diffusion of responsibility*, everyone hoping that someone else would go first.)

The Death Eaters had followed in the Dark Lord’s wake and in his vanguard, carrion vultures to pick at wounds, or snakes to bite and weaken. The Death Eaters were not as terrible as the Dark Lord, but they were terrible, and they were many. And the Death Eaters wielded more than wands; there was wealth within those masked ranks, and political power, and secrets held in blackmail,

to paralyse a society trying to protect itself.

An old and respected journalist, Yermy Wibble, called for increased taxes and conscription. He shouted that it was absurd for the many to cower in fear of the few. His skin, only his skin, had been found nailed to the newsroom wall that next morning, next to the skins of his wife and two daughters. Everyone wished for something more to be done, and no one dared take the lead to propose it. Whoever stood out the most became the next example.

Until the names of James and Lily Potter rose to the top of that list.

And those two might have died with their wands in their hands and not regretted their choices, for they *were* heroes; but for that they had an infant child, their son, Harry Potter.

Tears were coming into Harry's eyes. He wiped them away in anger or maybe desperation, *I didn't know those people, not really, they aren't my parents now, it would be pointless to feel so sad for them —*

When Harry was done sobbing into the witch's robes, he looked up, and felt a little bit better to see tears in Professor McGonagall's eyes as well.

"So what happened?" Harry said, his voice trembling.

"The Dark Lord came to Godric's Hollow," Professor McGonagall said in a whisper. "You should have been hidden, but you were betrayed. The Dark Lord killed James, and he killed Lily, and he came in the end to you, to your cot. He cast the Killing Curse at you, and that was where it ended. The Killing Curse is formed of pure hate, and strikes directly at the soul, severing it from the body. It cannot be blocked, and whomever it strikes, they die. But you survived. You are the only person ever to survive. The Killing Curse rebounded and struck the Dark Lord, leaving only the burnt hulk of his body and a scar upon your forehead. That was the end of the terror, and we were free. That, Harry Potter, is why people want to see the scar on your forehead, and why they want to shake your hand."

The storm of weeping that had washed through Harry had used up all his tears; he could not cry again, he was done.

(And somewhere in the back of his mind was a small, small note of confusion, a sense of something wrong about that story; and it should have been a part of Harry's art to notice that tiny note, but he was distracted. For it is a sad rule that whenever you are most in need of your art as a rationalist, that is when you are most likely to forget it.)

Harry detached himself from Professor McGonagall's side. "I'll — have to

think about this,” he said, trying to keep his voice under control. He stared at his shoes. “Um. You can go ahead and call them my parents, if you want, you don’t have to say ‘genetic parents’ or anything. I guess there’s no reason I can’t have two mothers and two fathers.”

There was no sound from Professor McGonagall.

And they walked together in silence, until they came before a great white building with vast bronze doors, and carven words above saying *Gringotts Bank*.

CHAPTER FOUR



THE EFFICIENT MARKET HYPOTHESIS

Heaps of gold Galleons. Stacks of silver Sickles. Piles of bronze Knuts.

Harry stood there, and stared with his mouth open at the family vault. He had so many questions he didn't know *where* to start.

From just outside the door of the vault, Professor McGonagall watched him, seeming to lean casually against the wall, but her eyes intent. Well, that made sense. Being plopped in front of a giant heap of gold coins was a test of character so pure it was archetypal.

"Are these coins the pure metal?" Harry said finally.

"What?" hissed the goblin Griphook, who was waiting near the door. "Are you questioning the integrity of Gringotts, Mr. Potter-Evans-Verres?"

"No," said Harry absently, "not at all, sorry if that came out wrong, sir. I just have no idea at all how your financial system works. I'm asking if Galleons in general are made of pure gold."

"Of course," said Griphook.

"And can anyone coin them, or are they issued by a monopoly that thereby collects seigniorage?"

"What?" said Professor McGonagall.

Griphook grinned, showing sharp teeth. "Only a fool would trust any but goblin coin!"

“In other words,” Harry said, “the coins aren’t supposed to be worth any more than the metal making them up?”

Griphook stared at Harry. Professor McGonagall looked bemused.

“I mean, suppose I came in here with a ton of silver. Could I get a ton of Sickles made from it?”

“For a fee, Mr. Potter-Evans-Verres.” The goblin watched him with glittering eyes. “For a certain fee. Where would you find a ton of silver, I wonder?”

“I was speaking hypothetically,” Harry said. *For now, at any rate.* “So . . . how much would you charge in fees, as a fraction of the whole weight?”

Griphook’s eyes were intent. “I would have to consult my superiors . . .”

“Give me a wild guess. I won’t hold Gringotts to it.”

“A twentieth part of the metal would well pay for the coining.”

Harry nodded. “Thank you very much, Mr. Griphook.”

So not only is the wizarding economy almost completely decoupled from the Muggle economy, no one here has ever heard of arbitrage. The larger Muggle economy had a fluctuating trading range of gold to silver, so every time the Muggle gold-to-silver ratio got more than 5% away from the weight of seventeen Sickles to one Galleon, either gold or silver should have drained from the wizarding economy until it became impossible to maintain the exchange rate. Bring in a ton of silver, change to Sickles (and pay 5%), change the Sickles for Galleons, take the gold to the Muggle world, exchange it for more silver than you started with, and repeat.

Wasn’t the Muggle gold to silver ratio somewhere around fifty to one? Harry didn’t think it was seventeen, anyway. And it looked like the silver coins were actually *smaller* than the gold coins.

Then again, Harry was standing in a bank that *literally* stored your money in vaults full of gold coins guarded by dragons, where you had to go in and take coins out of your vault whenever you wanted to spend money. The finer points of arbitraging away market inefficiencies might well be lost on them. He’d been tempted to make snide remarks about the crudity of their financial system . . .

But the sad thing is, their way is probably better.

On the other hand, one competent hedge fundie could probably own the whole wizarding world within a week. Harry filed away this notion in case he ever ran out of money, or had a week free.

Meanwhile, the giant heaps of gold coins within the Potter vault ought to

suit his near-term requirements.

Harry stumped forward, and began picking up gold coins with one hand and dumping them into the other.

When he had reached twenty, Professor McGonagall coughed. "I think that will be more than enough to pay for your school supplies, Mr. Potter."

"Hm?" Harry said, his mind elsewhere. "Hold on, I'm doing a Fermi calculation."

"A *what?*" said Professor McGonagall, sounding somewhat alarmed.

"It's a mathematical thing. Named after Enrico Fermi. A way of getting rough numbers quickly in your head..."

Twenty gold Galleons weighed a tenth of a kilogram, maybe? And gold was, what, ten thousand British pounds a kilogram? So a Galleon would be worth about fifty pounds... The mounds of gold coins looked to be about sixty coins high and twenty coins wide in either dimension of the base, and a mound was pyramidal, so it would be around one-third of the cube. Eight thousand Galleons per mound, roughly, and there were around five mounds of that size, so forty thousand Galleons or 2 million pounds sterling.

Not bad. Harry smiled with a certain grim satisfaction. It was too bad that he was right in the middle of discovering the amazing new world of magic, and couldn't take time out to explore the amazing new world of being rich, which a quick Fermi estimate said was roughly a billion times less interesting.

Still, that's the last time I ever mow a lawn for one lousy pound.

Harry wheeled from the giant heap of money. "Pardon me for asking, Professor McGonagall, but I understand that my parents were in their twenties when they died. Is this a *usual* amount of money for a young couple to have in their vault, in the wizarding world?" If it was, a cup of tea probably cost five thousand pounds. Rule one of economics: you can't eat money.

Professor McGonagall shook her head. "Your father was the last heir of an old family, Mr. Potter. It's also possible..." The witch hesitated. "Some of this money may be from bounties placed on You-Know-Who, payable to his ki — ah, to whoever might defeat him. Or those bounties might not have been collected yet. I am not sure."

"Interesting..." Harry said slowly. "So some of this really is, in a sense, mine. That is, earned by me. Sort of. Possibly. Even if I don't remember the occasion." Harry's fingers tapped against his trouser-leg. "That makes me feel less guilty about spending a *very tiny fraction of it!* Don't panic, Professor

McGonagall!”

“Mr. Potter! You are a minor, and as such, you will only be allowed to make *reasonable* withdrawals from —”

“I am *all about* reasonable! I am totally on board with fiscal prudence and impulse control! But I *did* see some things on the way here which would constitute *sensible, grown-up* purchases . . .”

Harry locked gazes with Professor McGonagall, engaging in a silent staring contest.

“Like what?” Professor McGonagall said finally.

“Trunks whose insides hold more than their outsides?”

Professor McGonagall’s face grew stern. “Those are *very* expensive, Mr. Potter!”

“Yes, but —” Harry pleaded. “I’m sure that when I’m an adult I’ll want one. And I *can* afford one. Logically, it would make just as much sense to buy it now instead of later, and get the use of it right away. It’s the same money either way, right? I mean, I *would* want a good one, with *lots* of room inside, good enough that I wouldn’t have to just get a better one later . . .” Harry trailed off hopefully.

Professor McGonagall’s gaze didn’t waver. “And just what would you *keep* in a trunk like that, Mr. Potter —”

“Books.”

“Of course,” sighed Professor McGonagall.

“You should have told me *much earlier* that sort of magic item existed! And that I could afford one! Now my father and I are going to have to spend the next two days *frantically* hitting up all the secondhand bookshops for old textbooks, so I can have a decent science library with me at Hogwarts — and maybe a small science fiction collection, if I can assemble something decent out of the bargain bins. Or better yet, I’ll make the deal a little sweeter for you, okay? Just let me buy —”

“*Mr. Potter!* You think you can *bribe* me?”

“What? *No!* Not like that! I’m saying, Hogwarts can keep some of the books I bring, if you think that any of them would make good additions to the library. I’m going to be getting them cheap, and *I* just want to have them around somewhere or other. It’s okay to bribe people with *books*, right? That’s a —”

“Family tradition.”

“Yes, exactly.”

Professor McGonagall’s body seemed to slump, the shoulders lowering within her black robes. “I cannot deny the sense of your words, though I much wish I could. I will allow you to withdraw an additional hundred Galleons, Mr. Potter.” She sighed again. “I *know* that I shall regret this, and I am doing it anyway.”

“That’s the spirit! And does a ‘mokeskin pouch’ do what I think it does?”

“It can’t do as much as a trunk,” the witch said with visible reluctance, “but . . . a mokeskin pouch with a Retrieval Charm and Undetectable Extension Charm can hold a number of items until they are called forth by the one who emplaced them —”

“Yes! I definitely need one of those too! It would be like the super backpack of ultimate awesomeness! Batman’s utility belt of holding! Never mind my swiss army knife, I could carry a whole tool set in there! Or *books*! I could have the top three books I was reading on me at all times, and just pull one out anywhere! I’ll never have to waste another minute of my life! What do you say, Professor McGonagall? It’s for the sake of children’s reading, the best of all possible causes.”

“ . . . I suppose you may add another ten Galleons.”

Griphook was favouring Harry with a gaze of frank respect, possibly even outright admiration.

“And a little spending money, like you mentioned earlier. I think I can remember seeing one or two other things I might want to store in that pouch.”

“*Don’t push it, Mr. Potter.*”

“But oh, Professor McGonagall, why rain on my parade? Surely this is a *happy* day, when I discover all things wizarding for the first time! Why act the part of the grumpy grownup when instead you could smile and remember your own innocent childhood, watching the look of delight upon my young face as I buy a few toys using an insignificant fraction of the wealth that I earned by defeating the most terrible wizard Britain has ever known, not that I’m accusing you of being ungrateful or anything, but still, what are a few toys compared to that?”

“*You,*” growled Professor McGonagall. There was a look on her face so fearsome and terrible that Harry squeaked and stepped back, knocking over a pile of gold coins with a great jingling noise and sprawling backwards into a heap of money. Griphook sighed and put a palm over his face. “I would be

doing a great service to wizarding Britain, Mr. Potter, if I locked you in this vault and left you here.”

And they left without any more trouble.

CHAPTER FIVE



THE FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR

The Moke Shop was a quaint little shop (some might even say cute) ensconced behind a vegetable stall that was behind a magical glove shop that was on an alleyway off a side street of Diagon Alley. Disappointingly, the shopkeeper was not a wizened ancient crone; just a nervous-looking young woman wearing faded yellow robes. Right now she was holding out a Moke Super Pouch QX31, whose selling point was that it had a Widening Lip as well as an Undetectable Extension Charm: you could actually fit big things in it, though the total volume was still limited.

Harry had *insisted* on coming here straight away, first thing — insisted as hard as he thought he could without making Professor McGonagall suspicious. Harry had something he needed to put into the pouch as soon as possible. It wasn't the bag of Galleons that Professor McGonagall had allowed him to withdraw from Gringotts. It was all the other Galleons that Harry had surreptitiously shoved into his pocket after falling into a heap of gold coins. That *had* been a real accident, but Harry was never one to discard an opportunity . . . though it'd really been more of a spur-of-the-moment thing. Ever since Harry had been awkwardly carrying the allowed bag of Galleons next to his trouser pocket, so that any jingling would seem to come from the right place.

This still left the question of how he was actually going to get the *other* coins into the pouch without getting caught. The golden coins might have been his, but they were still stolen — self-stolen? Auto-thieved?

Harry looked up from the Moke Super Pouch QX31 on the counter in front of him. “Can I try this for a bit? To make sure it works, um, reliably?” He widened his eyes in an expression of boyish, playful innocence.

Sure enough, after ten repetitions of putting the coin-bag into the pouch, reaching in, whispering “bag of gold”, and taking it out, Professor McGonagall took a step away and began examining some of the other items in the shop, and the shopkeeper turned her head to watch.

Harry dropped the bag of gold into the mokeskin pouch with his *left* hand; his *right* hand came out of his pocket tightly holding some of the gold coins, reached into the mokeskin pouch, dropped the loose Galleons, and (with a whisper of “bag of gold”) retrieved the original bag. Then the bag went back into his *left* hand, to be dropped in again, and Harry’s *right* hand went back into his pocket . . .

Professor McGonagall looked back at him once, but Harry managed to avoid freezing or flinching, and she didn’t seem to notice anything. Though you never *did* quite know, with the adults that had a sense of humor. It took three iterations to get the job done, and Harry guessed he’d managed to steal maybe thirty Galleons from himself.

Harry reached up, wiped a bit of sweat from his forehead, and exhaled. “I’d like this one, please.”

Fifteen Galleons lighter (twice the price of a wizard’s wand, apparently) and one Moke Super Pouch QX31 heavier, Harry and Professor McGonagall pushed their way out of the door. The door formed a hand and waved goodbye to them as they left, extruding its arm in a way that made Harry feel a bit queasy.

And then, unfortunately . . .

“Are you *really* Harry Potter?” whispered the old man, one huge tear sliding down his cheek. “You wouldn’t lie about that, would you? Only I’d heard rumors that you didn’t *really* survive the Killing Curse and that’s why no one ever heard from you again.”

. . . it seemed that Professor McGonagall’s disguise spell was less than perfectly effective against more experienced magical practitioners.

Professor McGonagall had laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder and yanked

him into the nearest alleyway the moment she'd heard "Harry Potter?" The old man had followed, but at least it looked like no one else had heard.

Harry considered the question. *Was he really Harry Potter?* "I only know what other people have told me," Harry said. "It's not like I remember being born." His hand brushed his forehead. "I've had this scar as long as I remember, and I've been told my name was Harry Potter as long as I remember. But," Harry said thoughtfully, "if there's already sufficient cause to postulate a conspiracy, there's no reason why they wouldn't just find another orphan and raise him to believe that *he* was Harry Potter —"

Professor McGonagall drew her hand over her face in exasperation. "You look just about exactly like your father, James, the year he first attended Hogwarts. And I can attest on the basis of *personality alone* that you are related to the Scourge of Gryffindor."

"*She* could be in on it too," Harry observed.

"No," quavered the old man. "She's right. You have your mother's eyes."

"Hmm," Harry frowned. "I suppose *you* could be in on it too —"

"Enough, Mr. Potter."

The old man raised up a hand as if to touch Harry, but then let it fall. "I'm just glad that you're alive," he murmured. "Thank you, Harry Potter. Thank you for what you did . . . I'll leave you alone now."

And his cane slowly tapped away, out the alley and down the main street of Diagon Alley.

The Professor looked around, her expression tense and grim. Harry automatically looked around himself. But the alley seemed empty of all but old leaves, and from the mouth leading out into Diagon Alley, only swiftly striding passersby could be seen.

Finally Professor McGonagall seemed to relax. "That was not well done," she said in a low voice. "I know you're not used to this, Mr. Potter, but people do care about you. Please be kind to them."

Harry looked down at his shoes. "They shouldn't," he said with a tinge of bitterness. "Care about me, I mean."

"You saved them from You-Know-Who," said Professor McGonagall. "How should they not care?"

Harry looked up at the witch-lady's strict expression beneath her pointed hat, and sighed. "I suppose there's no chance that if I said *fundamental attribution error* you'd have any idea what that meant."

“No,” said the Professor in her precise Scottish accent, “but please explain, Mr. Potter, if you would be so kind.”

“Well . . .” Harry said, trying to figure out how to describe that particular bit of Muggle science. “Suppose you come into work and see your colleague kicking his desk. You think, ‘what an angry person he must be’. Your colleague is thinking about how someone bumped him into a wall on the way to work and then shouted at him. *Anyone* would be angry at that, he thinks. When we look at others we see personality traits that explain their behavior, but when we look at ourselves we see circumstances that explain our behavior. People’s stories make internal sense to them, from the inside, but we don’t see people’s histories trailing behind them in the air. We only see them in one situation, and we don’t see what they would be like in a different situation. So the fundamental attribution error is that we explain by permanent, enduring traits what would be better explained by circumstance and context.” There were some elegant experiments which confirmed this, but Harry wasn’t about to go into them.

The witch’s eyebrows drew up beneath her hat’s brim. “I think I understand . . .” Professor McGonagall said slowly. “But what does that have to do with you?”

Harry kicked the brick wall of the alley hard enough to make his foot hurt. “People think that I saved them from You-Know-Who because I’m some kind of great warrior of the Light.”

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord . . .” murmured the witch, a strange irony leavening her voice.

“Yes,” Harry said, annoyance and frustration warring in him, “like I destroyed the Dark Lord because I have some kind of permanent, enduring destroy-the-Dark-Lord trait. I was fifteen months old at the time! I don’t *know* what happened, but I would *suppose* it had something to do with, as the saying goes, contingent environmental circumstances. And certainly nothing to do with my personality. People don’t care about *me*, they aren’t even paying attention to *me*, they want to shake hands with a *bad explanation*.” Harry paused, and looked at McGonagall. “Do *you* know what really happened?”

“I *have* formed an idea . . .” said Professor McGonagall. “After meeting you, that is.”

“Yes?”

“You triumphed over the Dark Lord by being more awful than *he* was, and

survived the Killing Curse by being more terrible than Death.”

“Ha. Ha. Ha.” Harry kicked the wall again.

Professor McGonagall chuckled. “Let’s get you to Madam Malkin’s next. I fear your Muggle clothing may be attracting attention.”

They ran into two more well-wishers along the way.

Madam Malkin’s Robes had a genuinely boring storefront, red ordinary brick, and glass windows showing plain black robes within. Not robes that shone or changed or spun, or radiated strange rays that seemed to go right through your shirt and tickle you. Just plain black robes, that was all you could see through the window. The door was propped wide open, as if to advertise that there were no secrets here and nothing to hide.

“I’m going to go off for a few minutes while you get fitted for your robes,” said Professor McGonagall. “Will you be all right with that, Mr. Potter?”

Harry nodded. He hated clothes shopping with a fiery passion and couldn’t blame the older witch for feeling the same way.

Professor McGonagall’s wand came out of her sleeve, tapped Harry’s head lightly. “And as you’ll need to be clear to Madam Malkin’s senses, I am removing the Obfuscation.”

“Uh . . .” Harry said. That did worry him a little; he still wasn’t used to the ‘Harry Potter’ thing.

“I went to Hogwarts with Madam Malkin,” McGonagall said. “Even then, she was one of the most *composed* people I knew. She wouldn’t turn a hair if You-Know-Who himself walked into her shop.” McGonagall’s voice was reminiscent, and very approving. “Madam Malkin won’t bother you, and she won’t let anyone else bother you.”

“Where *are* you going?” Harry inquired. “Just in case, you know, something *does* happen.”

McGonagall gave Harry a hard look. “I am going *there*,” she said, pointing at a building across the street which showed the sign of a wooden keg, “and buying a drink, which I desperately need. *You* are to get fitted for your robes, *nothing else*. I will come back to check up on you *shortly*, and I *expect* to find Madam Malkin’s shop still standing and not in any way on fire.”

Madam Malkin was a bustling old woman who didn’t say a word about Harry when she saw the scar on his forehead, and she shot a sharp look at an assistant when that girl seemed about to say something. Madam Malkin got out a set of animated, writhing bits of cloth that seemed to serve as tape

measures and set to work examining the medium of her art.

Next to Harry, a pale young boy with a pointed face and *awesomecool* blonde-white hair seemed to be going through the final stages of a similar process. One of Malkin's two assistants was examining the white-haired boy and the checkerboard-gridded robe he was wearing; occasionally she would tap a corner of the robe with her wand, and the robe would loosen or tighten.

"Hello," said the boy. "Hogwarts, too?"

Harry could predict where this conversation was about to go, and he decided in a split second of frustration that enough was enough.

"Good heavens," whispered Harry, "it couldn't be." He let his eyes widen. "Your . . . name, sir?"

"Draco Malfoy," said Draco Malfoy, looking slightly puzzled.

"It *is* you! Draco Malfoy. I — I never thought I'd be so honored, sir." Harry wished he could make tears come out of his eyes. The others usually started crying at around this point.

"Oh," said Draco, sounding a little confused. Then his lips stretched in a smug smile. "It's good to meet someone who knows his place."

One of the assistants, the one who'd seemed to recognize Harry, made a muffled choking sound.

Harry bumbled on. "I'm delighted to meet you, Mr. Malfoy. Just unutterably delighted. And to be attending Hogwarts in your very year! It makes my heart swoon."

Oops. That last part might have sounded a little odd, like he was flirting with Draco or something.

"And *I* am pleased to learn that I shall be treated with the respect due to the family of Malfoy," the other boy lobbed back, accompanied by a smile such as the highest of kings might bestow upon the least of his subjects, if that subject were honest, though poor.

Eh . . . Damn, Harry was having trouble thinking up his next line. Well, everyone *did* want to shake the hand of Harry Potter, so — "When my clothes are fitted, sir, might you deign to shake my hand? I should wish nothing more to put the capper upon this day, nay, this month, indeed, my whole lifetime."

The white-blond-haired boy glared in return. "And what have *you* done for the Malfoys that entitles you to such a favor?"

Oh, I am so totally trying this routine on the next person who wants to shake my hand. Harry bowed his head. "No, no, sir, I understand. I'm sorry for

asking. I should be honored to clean your boots, rather.”

“Indeed,” snapped the other boy. His stern face lightened somewhat. “Tell me, what House do you think you might be sorted into? I’m bound for Slytherin House, of course, like my father Lucius before me. And for you, I’d guess House Hufflepuff, or possibly House Elf.”

Harry grinned sheepishly. “Professor McGonagall says that I’m the most Ravenclaw person she’s ever seen or heard tell of in legend, so much so that Rowena herself would tell me to get out more, whatever *that* means, and that I’ll undoubtedly end up in Ravenclaw House if the hat isn’t screaming too loudly for the rest of us to make out any words, end quote.”

“Wow,” said Draco Malfoy, sounding slightly impressed. The boy gave a sort of wistful sigh. “Your flattery was great, or I thought so, anyway — you’d do well in Slytherin House, too. Usually it’s only my father who gets that sort of groveling. I’m *hoping* the other Slytherins will suck up to me now I’m at Hogwarts . . . I guess this is a good sign, then.”

Harry coughed. “Actually, sorry, I’ve got no idea who you are really.”

“*Oh come on!*” the boy said with fierce disappointment. “Why’d you go and do that, then?” Draco’s eyes widened with sudden suspicion. “And how do you *not* know about the Malfoys? And what are those *clothes* you’re wearing? Are your parents *Muggles*?”

“Two of my parents are dead,” Harry said. His heart twinged. When he put it that way — “My other two parents are Muggles, and they’re the ones that raised me.”

“*What?*” said Draco. “Who *are* you?”

“Harry Potter, pleased to meet you.”

“*Harry Potter?*” gasped Draco. “*The Harry* —” and the boy cut off abruptly. There was a brief silence.

Then, with bright enthusiasm, “Harry Potter? *The Harry Potter*? Gosh, I’ve always wanted to meet you!”

Draco’s attendant emitted a sound like she was strangling but kept on with her work, lifting Draco’s arms to carefully remove the checkered robe.

“Shut up,” Harry suggested.

“Can I have your autograph? No, wait, I want a picture with you first!”

“*Shutupshutupshutup.*”

“I’m just so *delighted* to meet you!”

“Burst into flames and die.”

“But you’re Harry Potter, the glorious savior of the wizarding world! Everyone’s hero, Harry Potter! I’ve always wanted to be just like you when I grow up so I can —”

Draco cut off the words in mid-sentence, his face freezing in absolute horror.

Tall, white-haired, coldly elegant in black robes of the finest quality. One hand gripping a silver-handled cane which took on the character of a deadly weapon just by being in that hand. His eyes regarded the room with the dispassionate quality of an executioner, a man to whom killing was not painful, or even deliciously forbidden, but just a routine activity like breathing.

That was the man who had, just that moment, strolled in through the open door.

“Draco,” said the man, low and very angry, “*what* are you *saying*?”

In one split second of sympathetic panic, Harry formulated a rescue plan.

“Lucius Malfoy!” gasped Harry Potter. “*The* Lucius Malfoy?”

One of Malkin’s assistants had to turn away and face the wall.

Coolly murderous eyes regarded him. “Harry Potter.”

“I am so, so honored to meet you!”

The dark eyes widened, shocked surprise replacing deadly threat.

“Your son has been telling me *all* about you,” Harry gushed on, hardly even knowing what was coming out of his mouth but just talking as fast as possible. “But of course I knew about you all before then, everyone knows about you, the great Lucius Malfoy! The most honored laureate of all the House of Slytherin, I’ve been thinking about trying to get into Slytherin House myself just because I heard you were in it as a child —”

“*What* are you *saying*, Mr. Potter?” came a near-scream from outside the shop, and Professor McGonagall burst in a second later.

There was such pure horror on her face that Harry’s mouth opened automatically, and then blocked on nothing-to-say.

“Professor McGonagall!” cried Draco. “Is it really you? I’ve heard so much about you from my father, I’ve been thinking of trying to get Sorted into Gryffindor so I can —”

“*What?*” bellowed Lucius Malfoy and Professor McGonagall in perfect unison, standing side-by-side. Their heads swiveled to look at each other in duplicate motions, and then the two recoiled from one another as though performing a synchronized dance.

There was a sudden flurry of action as Lucius seized Draco and dragged him out of the shop.

And then there was silence.

In Professor McGonagall's left hand lay a small drinking-glass, tilted over to one side in the forgotten rush, now slowly dripping drops of alcohol into the tiny puddle of red wine that had appeared on the floor.

Professor McGonagall strode forward into the shop until she was opposite Madam Malkin.

"Madam Malkin," said Professor McGonagall, her voice calm. "What has been happening here?"

Madam Malkin looked back silently for four seconds, and then cracked up. She fell against the wall, wheezing out laughter, and that set off both of her assistants, one of whom fell to her hands and knees on the floor, giggling hysterically.

Professor McGonagall slowly turned to look at Harry, her expression chilly. "I leave you alone for six minutes. Six minutes, Mr. Potter, by the very clock."

"I was only joking around," Harry protested, as the sounds of hysterical laughter went on nearby.

"Draco Malfoy said in front of his father that he wanted to be sorted into Gryffindor! Joking around isn't enough to do that!" Professor McGonagall paused, visibly taking breaths. "What part of 'get fitted for robes' sounded to you like *please cast a Confundus Charm on the entire universe!*"

"He was in a situational context where those actions made internal sense —"

"No. Don't explain. I don't want to know what happened in here, ever. Whatever dark power inhabits you, it is *contagious*, and I don't want to end up like poor Draco Malfoy, poor Madam Malkin and her two poor assistants."

Harry sighed. It was clear that Professor McGonagall wasn't in a mood to listen to reasonable explanations. He looked at Madam Malkin, who was still wheezing against the wall, and Malkin's two assistants, who had now *both* fallen to their knees, and finally down at his own tape-measure-draped body.

"I'm not quite done being fitted for clothes," Harry said kindly. "Why don't you go back and have another drink?"

CHAPTER SIX



THE PLANNING FALLACY

Some children would have waited until *after* their first trip to Diagon Alley. “Bag of element 79,” Harry said, and withdrew his hand, empty, from the mokeskin pouch.

Most children would have at least waited to get their *wands* first.

“Bag of *okane*,” said Harry. The heavy bag of gold popped up into his hand.

Harry withdrew the bag, then plunged it again into the mokeskin pouch. He took out his hand, put it back in, and said, “Bag of tokens of economic exchange.” That time his hand came out empty.

“Give me back the bag that I just put in.” Out came the bag of gold once more.

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres had gotten his hands on at least one magical item. Why wait?

“Professor McGonagall,” Harry said to the bemused witch strolling beside him, “can you give me two words, one word for gold, and one word for something else that isn’t money, in a language that I wouldn’t know? But don’t tell me which is which.”

“*Ahava* and *zahav*,” said Professor McGonagall. “That’s Hebrew, and the other word means love.”

“Thank you, Professor. Bag of *ahava*.” Empty.

“Bag of *zahav*.” And it popped up into his hand.

“*Zahav* is gold?” Harry questioned, and Professor McGonagall nodded.

Harry thought over his collected experimental data. It was only the most crude and preliminary sort of effort, but it was enough to support at least one conclusion:

“Aaaaaaarrrrgh *this doesn’t make any sense!*”

The witch beside him lifted a lofty eyebrow. “Problems, Mr. Potter?”

“I just falsified every single hypothesis I had! How can it know that ‘bag of 115 Galleons’ is okay but not ‘bag of 90 plus 25 Galleons’? It can *count* but it can’t *add*? It can understand nouns, but not some noun phrases that mean the same thing? The person who made this probably didn’t speak Japanese and *I* don’t speak any Hebrew, so it’s not using *their* knowledge, and it’s not using *my* knowledge —” Harry waved a hand helplessly. “The rules seem *sorta* consistent but they don’t *mean* anything! I’m not even going to ask how a *pouch* ends up with voice recognition and natural language understanding when the best Artificial Intelligence programmers can’t get the fastest supercomputers to do it after thirty-five years of hard work,” Harry gasped for breath, “but *what* is going *on*?”

“Magic,” said Professor McGonagall.

“That’s just a *word*! Even after you tell me that, I can’t make any new predictions! It’s exactly like saying ‘phlogiston’ or ‘elan vital’ or ‘emergence’ or ‘complexity’!”

The black-robed witch laughed aloud. “But it *is* magic, Mr. Potter.”

Harry slumped over a little. “With respect, Professor McGonagall, I’m not quite sure you understand what I’m trying to do here.”

“With respect, Mr. Potter, I’m quite sure I don’t. Unless — this is just a guess, mind — you’re trying to take over the world?”

“No! I mean yes — well, *no*!”

“I think I should perhaps be alarmed that you have trouble answering the question.”

Harry glumly considered the Dartmouth Conference on Artificial Intelligence in 1956. It had been the first conference ever on the topic, the one that had coined the phrase “Artificial Intelligence”. They had identified key problems such as making computers understand language, learn, and improve themselves. They had suggested, in perfect seriousness, that significant advances on these problems might be made by ten scientists working together for two months.

No. Chin up. You're just starting on the problem of unraveling all the secrets of magic. You don't actually know whether it's going to be too difficult to do in two months.

"And you *really* haven't heard of other wizards asking these sorts of questions or doing this sort of scientific experimenting?" Harry asked again. It just seemed so *obvious* to him.

Then again, it'd taken more than two hundred years *after* the invention of the scientific method before any Muggle scientists had thought to systematically investigate which sentences a *human four-year-old* could or couldn't understand. The developmental psychology of linguistics could've been discovered in the eighteenth century, in principle, but no one had even thought to look until the twentieth. So you couldn't really blame the much smaller wizarding world for not investigating the Retrieval Charm.

Professor McGonagall pursed her lips, then shrugged. "I'm still not sure what you mean by 'scientific experimenting', Mr. Potter. As I said, I've seen Muggleborn students try to get Muggle science to work inside Hogwarts, and people invent new Charms and Potions every year."

Harry shook his head. "Technology isn't the same thing as science at all. And trying lots of different ways to do something isn't the same as experimenting to figure out the rules." There were plenty of people who'd tried to invent flying machines by trying out lots of things-with-wings, but only the Wright Brothers had built a wind tunnel to measure lift . . . "Um, how many Muggle-raised children *do* you get at Hogwarts every year?"

"Perhaps ten or so?"

Harry missed a step and almost tripped over his own feet. "*Ten?*"

The Muggle world had a population of six billion and counting. If you were one in a million, there were seven of you in London and a thousand more in China. It was inevitable that the Muggle population would produce *some* eleven-year-olds who could do calculus — Harry knew he wasn't the only one. He'd met other prodigies in mathematical competitions. In fact he'd been thoroughly trounced by competitors who probably spent literally *all day* practicing mathematics problems and who'd *never* read a science-fiction book and who would burn out *completely* before *puberty* and *never* amount to *anything* in their future lives because they'd just practiced *known* techniques instead of learning to think *creatively*. (Harry was something of a sore loser.)

But . . . in the wizarding world . . .

Ten Muggle-raised children per year, who'd all ended their Muggle educations at the age of eleven? And Professor McGonagall might be biased, but she had claimed that Hogwarts was the largest and most eminent wizarding school in the world . . . and it only educated up to the age of seventeen.

Professor McGonagall undoubtedly knew every last detail of how you went about turning into a cat. But she seemed to have literally never *heard* of the scientific method. To her it was just Muggle magic. And she didn't even seem *curious* about what secrets might be hiding behind the natural language understanding of the Retrieval Charm.

That left two possibilities, really.

Possibility one: Magic was so incredibly opaque, convoluted, and impenetrable, that even though wizards and witches had tried their best to understand, they'd made little or no progress and eventually given up; and Harry would do no better.

Or . . .

Harry cracked his knuckles in determination, but they only made a quiet sort of clicking sound, rather than echoing ominously off the walls of Diagon Alley.

Possibility two: He'd be taking over the world.

Eventually. Perhaps not right away.

That sort of thing *did* sometimes take longer than two months. Muggle science hadn't gone to the moon in the first week after Galileo.

But Harry still couldn't stop the huge smile that was stretching his cheeks so wide they were starting to hurt.

Harry had always been frightened of ending up as one of those child prodigies that never amounted to anything and spent the rest of their lives boasting about how far ahead they'd been at age ten. But then most adult geniuses never amounted to anything either. There were probably a thousand people as intelligent as Einstein for every actual Einstein in history. Because those other geniuses hadn't gotten their hands on the one thing you absolutely needed to achieve greatness. They'd never found an important problem.

You're mine now, Harry thought at the walls of Diagon Alley, and all the shops and items, and all the shopkeepers and customers; and all the lands and people of wizarding Britain, and all the wider wizarding world; and the entire greater universe of which Muggle scientists understood so much less than they believed. *I, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, do now claim this territory in the*

name of Science.

Lightning and thunder completely failed to flash and boom in the cloudless skies.

“What are you smiling about?” inquired Professor McGonagall, warily and wearily.

“I’m wondering if there’s a spell to make lightning flash in the background whenever I make an ominous resolution,” explained Harry. He was carefully memorizing the exact words of his ominous resolution so that future history books would get it right.

“I have the distinct feeling that I ought to be doing something about this,” sighed Professor McGonagall.

“Ignore it, it’ll go away. Ooh, shiny!” Harry put his thoughts of world conquest temporarily on hold and skipped over to a shop with an open display, and Professor McGonagall followed.



Harry had now bought his potions ingredients and cauldron, and, oh, a few more things. Items that seemed like good things to carry in Harry’s Bag of Holding (aka Moke Super Pouch QX31 with Undetectable Extension Charm, Retrieval Charm, and Widening Lip). Smart, sensible purchases.

Harry genuinely didn’t understand why Professor McGonagall was looking so *suspicious*.

Right now, Harry was in a shop expensive enough to display in the twisting main street of Diagon Alley. The shop had an open front with merchandise laid out on slanted wooden rows, guarded only by slight grey glows and a young-looking salesgirl in a much-shortened version of witch’s robes that exposed her knees and elbows.

Harry was examining the wizarding equivalent of a first-aid kit, the Emergency Healing Pack Plus. There were two self-tightening tourniquets. A syringe of what looked like liquid fire, which was supposed to drastically slow circulation in a treated area while maintaining oxygenation of the blood for up to three minutes, if you needed to prevent a poison from spreading through the body. White cloth that could be wrapped over a part of the body to temporarily numb pain. Plus any number of other items that Harry totally failed to comprehend, like the “Dementor Exposure Treatment”, which looked and

smelled like ordinary chocolate. Or the “Bafflesnaffle Counter”, which looked like a small quivering egg and carried a placard showing how to jam it up someone’s nostril.

“A definite buy at five Galleons, wouldn’t you agree?” Harry said to Professor McGonagall, and the teenage salesgirl hovering nearby nodded eagerly.

Harry had expected the Professor to make some sort of approving remark about his prudence and preparedness.

What he was getting instead could only be described as the Evil Eye.

“And just *why*,” Professor McGonagall said with heavy skepticism, “do you expect to *need* a healer’s kit, young man?” (After the unfortunate incident at the Potions shop, Professor McGonagall was trying to avoid saying “Mr. Potter” while anyone else was nearby.)

Harry’s mouth opened and closed. “I don’t *expect* to need it! It’s just in case!”

“Just in case of *what*?”

Harry’s eyes widened. “You think I’m *planning* to do something dangerous and *that’s* why I want a medical kit?”

A look of grim suspicion and ironic disbelief was the answer.

“Great Scott!” said Harry. (This was an expression he’d learned from the mad scientist Doc Brown in *Back to the Future*.) “Were you also thinking that when I bought the Feather-Falling Potion, the Gillyweed, and the bottle of Food and Water Pills?”

“Yes.”

Harry shook his head in amazement. “Just what sort of plan do you think I have *going*, here?”

“I don’t know,” Professor McGonagall said darkly, “but it ends either in you delivering a ton of silver to Gringotts, or in world domination.”

“World domination is such an ugly phrase. I prefer to call it world optimization.”

This hilarious joke failed to reassure the witch giving him the Look of Doom.

“Wow,” Harry said, as he realized that she was serious. “You really think that. You really think I’m planning to do something dangerous.”

“Yes.”

“Like that’s the *only* reason anyone would ever buy a first-aid kit? Don’t take this the wrong way, Professor McGonagall, but *what sort of crazy children*

are you used to dealing with?"

"Gryffindors," spat Professor McGonagall, the word carrying a freight of bitterness and despair that fell like an eternal curse on all youthful enthusiasm and high spirits.

"Deputy Headmistress Professor Minerva McGonagall," Harry said, putting his hands sternly on his hips. "I am not going to be in Gryffindor —"

At this point the Deputy Headmistress interjected something about how if he *was* she would figure out how to kill a hat, which odd remark Harry let pass without comment, though the salesgirl seemed to be having a sudden coughing fit.

"— I am going to be in Ravenclaw. And if you really think that I'm planning to do something dangerous, then, honestly, you don't understand me *at all*. I don't *like* danger, it is *scary*. I am being *prudent*. I am being *cautious*. I am preparing for *unforeseen contingencies*. Like my parents used to sing to me: *Be prepared! That's the Boy Scout's marching song! Be prepared! As through life you march along! Don't be nervous, don't be flustered, don't be scared — be prepared!*"

(Harry's parents had in fact only ever sung him those *particular* lines of that Tom Lehrer song, and Harry was blissfully unaware of the rest.)

Professor McGonagall's stance had slightly softened — though mostly when Harry had said that he was heading for Ravenclaw. "What sort of *contingency* do you imagine this kit might prepare you for, *young man?*"

"One of my classmates gets bitten by a horrible monster, and as I scabble frantically in my moleskin pouch for something that could help her, she looks at me sadly and with her last breath says, '*Why weren't you prepared?*' And then she dies, and I know as her eyes close that she won't ever forgive me —"

Harry heard the salesgirl gasp, and he looked up to see her staring at him with her lips pressed tight. Then the young woman whirled and fled into the deeper recesses of the shop.

What . . . ?

Professor McGonagall reached down, and took Harry's hand in hers, gently but firmly, and pulled Harry out of the main street of Diagon Alley, leading him into an alleyway between two shops which was paved in dirty bricks and dead-ended in a wall of solid black dirt.

The tall witch pointed her wand at the main street and spoke, "*Quietus*" she said, and a screen of silence descended around them, blocking out all the street noises.

What did I do wrong...

Professor McGonagall turned to regard Harry. She didn't have a full adult Wrongdoing Face, but her expression was flat, controlled. "You must remember, Mr. Potter," she said, "that there was a war in this country not ten years ago. Everyone has lost someone, and to speak of friends dying in your arms — is not done lightly."

"I — I didn't mean to —" The inference dropped like a falling stone into Harry's exceptionally vivid imagination. He'd talked about someone breathing their last breath — and then the salesgirl had run away — and the war had ended ten years ago so that girl would have been at most eight or nine years old, when, when, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..." Harry choked up, and turned away to run from the older witch's gaze but there was a wall of dirt blocking his way and he didn't have his wand yet. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm *sorry!*"

There came a heavy sigh from behind him. "I know you are, Mr. Potter."

Harry dared to peek behind him. Professor McGonagall only seemed sad, now. "I'm sorry," Harry said again, feeling wretched. "Did anything like that happen to —" and then Harry shut his lips and slapped a hand over his mouth for good measure.

The older witch's face grew a little sadder. "You must learn to think before you speak, Mr. Potter, or else go through life without many friends. That has been the fate of many a Ravenclaw, and I hope it will not be yours."

Harry wanted to just run away. He wanted to pull out a wand and erase the whole thing from Professor McGonagall's memory, be back with her outside the shop again, *make it didn't happen* —

"But to answer your question, Mr. Potter, no, nothing like *that* has ever happened to me. Certainly I've watched a friend breathe their last, once or seven times. But not one of them ever cursed me as they died, and I never thought that they wouldn't forgive me. Why would you *say* such a thing, Mr. Potter? Why would you even *think* it?"

"I, I, I," Harry swallowed. "It's just that I always try to imagine the worst thing that could happen," and maybe he'd also been joking around a little but he would rather have bitten off his own tongue than say that now.

"What?" said Professor McGonagall. "But *why*?"

"So I can stop it from happening!"

"Mr. Potter..." the older witch's voice trailed off. Then she sighed, and knelt down beside him. "Mr. Potter," she said, gently now, "it's not your

responsibility to take care of the students at Hogwarts. It's mine. I won't let anything bad happen to you or anyone else. Hogwarts is the safest place for magical children in all the wizarding world, and Madam Pomfrey has a full healer's office. You won't need a healer's kit at all, let alone a five-Galleon one."

"But I *do*!" Harry burst out. "*Nowhere* is perfectly safe! And what if my parents have a heart attack or get in an accident when I go home for Christmas — Madam Pomfrey won't be there, I'll need a healer's kit of my own —"

"*What* in Merlin's name . . ." Professor McGonagall said. She stood up, and looked down at Harry an expression torn between annoyance and concern. "There's no need to think about such terrible things, Mr. Potter!"

Harry's expression twisted up into bitterness, hearing that. "Yes there *is*! If you don't think, you don't just get hurt yourself, you end up hurting other people!"

Professor McGonagall opened her mouth, then closed it. The witch rubbed the bridge of her nose, looking thoughtful. "Mr. Potter . . . if I were to offer to listen to you for a while . . . is there anything you'd like to talk to me about?"

"About what?"

"About why you're convinced you must always be on your guard against terrible things happening to you."

Harry stared at her in puzzlement. That was a self-evident axiom. "Well . . ." Harry said slowly. He tried to organize his thoughts. How *could* he explain himself to a Professor-witch, when she didn't even know the basics? "Muggle researchers have found that people are always very optimistic, compared to reality. Like they say something will take two days and it takes ten days, or they say it'll take two months and it takes over thirty-five years. For example, in one experiment, they asked students for times by which they were 50% sure, 75% sure, and 99% sure they'd complete their homework, and only 13%, 19%, and 45% of the students finished by those times. And they found that the reason was that when they asked one group for their best-case estimates if everything went as well as possible, and another group for their average-case estimates if everything went as usual, they got back answers that were statistically indistinguishable. See, if you ask someone what they expect in the *normal* case, they visualize what looks like the line of maximum probability at each step along the way — everything going according to plan, with no surprises. But actually, since more than half the students didn't finish by the time they were 99% sure they'd be done, reality usually delivers results a little

worse than the ‘worst-case scenario’. It’s called the planning fallacy, and the best way to fix it is to ask how long things took the last time you tried them. That’s called using the outside view instead of the inside view. But when you’re doing something new and can’t do that, you just have to be really, really, really pessimistic. Like, so pessimistic that reality actually comes out *better* than you expected around as often and as much as it comes out worse. It’s actually *really hard* to be *so* pessimistic that you stand a decent chance of *undershooting* real life. Like I make this big effort to be gloomy and I imagine one of my classmates getting bitten, but what actually happens is that the surviving Death Eaters attack the whole school to get at me. But on a happier note —”

“Stop,” said Professor McGonagall.

Harry stopped. He had just been about to point out that at least they knew the Dark Lord wouldn’t attack, since he was dead.

“I think I might not have made myself clear,” the witch said, her precise Scottish voice sounding even more careful. “Did anything happen to *you personally* that frightened you, Mr. Potter?”

“What happened to me personally is only anecdotal evidence,” Harry explained. “It doesn’t carry the same weight as a replicated, peer-reviewed journal article about a controlled study with random assignment, many subjects, large effect sizes and strong statistical significance.”

Professor McGonagall pinched the bridge of her nose, inhaled, and exhaled. “I would still like to hear about it,” she said.

“Um . . .” Harry said. He took a deep breath. “There’d been some muggings in our neighborhood, and my mother asked me to return a pan she’d borrowed to a neighbor two streets away, and I said I didn’t want to because I might get mugged, and she said, ‘Harry, don’t say things like that!’ Like thinking about it would *make* it happen, so if I didn’t talk about it, I would be safe. I tried to explain why I wasn’t reassured, and she made me carry over the pan anyway. I was too young to know how statistically unlikely it was for a mugger to target me, but I was old enough to know that not-thinking about something doesn’t stop it from happening, so I was really scared.”

“Nothing else?” Professor McGonagall said after a pause, when it became clear that Harry was done. “There isn’t anything *else* that happened to you?”

“I know it doesn’t *sound* like much,” Harry defended. “But it was just one of those critical life moments, you see? I mean, I *knew* that not thinking about something doesn’t stop it from happening, I *knew* that, but I could see

that Mum really thought that way.” Harry stopped, struggling with the anger that was starting to rise up again when he thought about it. “She *wouldn’t listen*. I tried to tell her, I *begged* her not to send me out, and she *laughed it off*. Everything I said, she treated like some sort of big joke . . .” Harry forced the black rage back down again. “That’s when I realized that everyone who was supposed to protect me was actually crazy, and that they wouldn’t listen to me no matter how much I begged them, and that I couldn’t ever rely on them to get anything right.” Sometimes good intentions weren’t enough, sometimes you had to be sane . . .

There was a long silence.

Harry took the time to breathe deeply and calm himself down. There was no point in getting angry. There was no point in getting angry. *All* parents were like that, *no* adult would lower themselves far enough to place themselves on level ground with a child and listen, his genetic parents would have been no different. Sanity was a tiny spark in the night, an infinitesimally rare exception to the rule of madness, so there was no point in getting angry.

Harry didn’t like himself when he was angry.

“Thank you for sharing that, Mr. Potter,” said Professor McGonagall after a while. There was an abstracted look on her face (almost exactly the same look that had appeared on Harry’s own face while experimenting on the pouch, if Harry had only seen himself in a mirror to realize that). “I shall have to think about this.” She turned towards the alley mouthway, and raised her wand —

“Um,” Harry said, “can we go get the healer’s kit now?”

The witch paused, and looked back at him steadily. “And if I say no — that it is too expensive and you won’t need it — then what?”

Harry’s face twisted in bitterness. “Exactly what you’re thinking, Professor McGonagall. *Exactly* what you’re thinking. I conclude you’re another crazy adult I can’t talk to, and I start planning how to get my hands on a healer’s kit anyway.”

“I am your guardian on this trip,” Professor McGonagall said with a tinge of danger. “I *will not* allow you to push me around.”

“I understand,” Harry said. He kept the resentment out of his voice, and didn’t say any of the other things that came to mind. Professor McGonagall had told him to think before he spoke. He probably wouldn’t remember that tomorrow, but he could at least remember it for five minutes.

The witch’s wand made a slight circle in her hand, and the noises of Diagon

Alley came back. "All right, young man," she said. "Let's go get that healer's kit."

Harry's jaw dropped in surprise. Then he hurried after her, almost stumbling in his sudden rush.



The shop was the same as they had left it, recognizable and unrecognizable items still laid out on the slanted wooden display, the grey glow still protecting and the salesgirl back in her old position. The salesgirl looked up as they approached, her face showing surprise.

"I'm sorry," she said as they got closer, and Harry spoke at almost the same moment, "I apologize for —"

They broke off and looked at each other, and then the salesgirl laughed a little. "I didn't mean to get you in trouble with Professor McGonagall," she said. Her voice lowered conspiratorially. "I hope she wasn't *too* awful to you."

"*Della!*" said Professor McGonagall, sounding scandalized.

"Bag of gold," Harry said to his pouch, and then looked back up at the salesgirl while he counted out five Galleons. "Don't worry, I understand that she's only awful to me because she loves me."

He counted out five Galleons to the salesgirl while Professor McGonagall was spluttering something unimportant. "One Emergency Healing Pack Plus, please."

It was actually sort of unnerving to see how the Widening Lip swallowed the briefcase-sized medical kit. Harry couldn't help wondering what would happen if he tried climbing into the mokeskin pouch himself, given that only the person who put something in was supposed to be able to take it out again.

When the pouch was done . . . eating . . . his hard-won purchase, Harry swore he heard a small burping sound afterward. That *had* to have been spelled in on purpose. The alternative hypothesis was too horrifying to contemplate . . . in fact Harry couldn't even *think* of any alternative hypotheses. Harry looked back up at the Professor, as they began walking through Diagon Alley once more. "Where to next?"

Professor McGonagall pointed toward a shop that looked as if it had been made from flesh instead of bricks and covered in fur instead of paint. "Small pets are permitted at Hogwarts — you could get an owl to send letters, for

example —”

“Can I pay a Knut or something and *rent* an owl when I need to send mail?”

“Yes,” said Professor McGonagall.

“Then I think emphatically *no*.”

Professor McGonagall nodded, as though ticking off a point. “Might I ask why not?”

“I had a pet rock once. It died.”

“You don’t think you could take care of a pet?”

“I *could*,” Harry said, “but I would end up obsessing all day long about whether I’d remembered to feed it that day or if it was slowly starving in its cage, wondering where its master was and why there wasn’t any food.”

“That poor owl,” the older witch said in a soft voice. “Abandoned like that. I wonder what it would do.”

“Well, I expect it’d get really hungry and start trying to claw its way out of the cage or the box or whatever, though it probably wouldn’t have much luck with that —” Harry stopped short.

The witch went on, still in that soft voice. “And what would happen to it afterward?”

“Excuse me,” Harry said, and he reached up to take Professor McGonagall by the hand, gently but firmly, and steered her into yet another alleyway; after ducking so many well-wishers the process had become almost unnoticeably routine. “Please cast that silencing spell.”

“*Quietus*.”

Harry’s voice was shaking. “That owl does *not* represent me, my parents *never* locked me in a cupboard and left me to starve, I do *not* have abandonment fears and I *don’t like the trend of your thoughts, Professor McGonagall!*”

The witch looked down at him gravely. “And what thoughts would those be, Mr. Potter?”

“You think I was,” Harry was having trouble saying it, “I was *abused*?”

“Were you?”

“*No!*” Harry shouted. “No, I never was! Do you think I’m *stupid*? I *know* about the concept of child abuse, I *know* about inappropriate touching and all of that and if anything like that happened I would call the police! And report it to the head teacher! And look up social services in the phone book! And tell Grandpa and Grandma and Mrs. Figg! But my parents *never* did anything like that, never ever *ever*! How *dare* you suggest such a thing!”

The older witch gazed at him steadily. "It is my duty as Deputy Headmistress to investigate possible signs of abuse in the children under my care."

Harry's anger was spiraling out of control into pure, black fury. "Don't you ever *dare* breathe a word of these, these *insinuations* to anyone else! *No one*, do you hear me, McGonagall? An accusation like that can ruin people and destroy families even when the parents are completely innocent! I've read about it in the newspapers!" Harry's voice was climbing to a high-pitched scream. "The *system* doesn't know how to *stop*, it doesn't believe the parents or the children when they say nothing happened! *Don't you dare threaten my family with that! I won't let you destroy my home!*"

"Harry," the older witch said softly, and she reached out a hand towards him —

Harry took a fast step back, and his hand snapped up and knocked hers away.

McGonagall froze, then she pulled her hand back, and took a step backwards. "Harry, it's all right," she said. "I believe you."

"*Do you*," Harry hissed. The fury still roaring through his blood. "Or are you just waiting to get away from me so you can file the papers?"

"Harry, I saw your house. I saw you with your parents. They love you. You love them. I do believe you when you say that your parents are not abusing you. But I *had* to ask, because there is something strange at work here."

Harry stared at her coldly. "Like what?"

"Harry, I've seen many abused children in my time at Hogwarts; it would break your heart to know how many. And, when you're happy, you don't behave like one of those children, not at *all*. You smile at strangers, you hug people, I put my hand on your shoulder and you didn't flinch. But sometimes, only sometimes, you say or do something that seems *very* much like . . . someone who spent his first eleven years locked in a cellar. Not the loving family that I saw." Professor McGonagall tilted her head, her expression growing puzzled again.

Harry took this in, processing it. The black rage began to drain away, as it dawned on him that he was being listened to respectfully, and that his family wasn't in danger.

"And how *do* you explain your observations, Professor McGonagall?"

"I don't know," she said. "But it's possible that something could have happened to you that you don't remember."

Fury rose up again in Harry. That sounded all too much like what he'd read in the newspaper stories of shattered families. "Suppressed memory is a load of *pseudoscience*! People do *not* repress traumatic memories, they remember them all *too* well for the rest of their lives!"

"No, Mr. Potter. There is a Charm called Obliviation."

Harry froze in place. "A spell that erases memories?"

The older witch nodded. "But not all the effects of the experience, if you see what I'm saying, Mr. Potter."

A chill went down Harry's spine. *That* hypothesis . . . could *not* be easily refuted. "But my parents couldn't do that!"

"Indeed not," said Professor McGonagall. "It would have taken someone from the wizarding world. There's . . . no way to be certain, I'm afraid."

Harry's rationalist skills began to boot up again. "Professor McGonagall, how sure are you of your observations, and what alternative explanations could there also be?"

The witch opened her hands, as though to show their emptiness. "Sure? I'm sure of *nothing*, Mr. Potter. In all my life I've never met anyone else like you. Sometimes you just don't seem eleven years old or even all that *human*."

Harry's eyebrows rose toward the sky —

"I'm sorry!" Professor McGonagall said quickly. "I'm very sorry, Mr. Potter. I was trying to make a point and I'm afraid that came out sounding different from what I had in mind —"

"On the contrary, Professor McGonagall," Harry said, and slowly smiled. "I shall take it as a very great compliment. But would you mind if I offered an alternative explanation?"

"Please do."

"Children aren't meant to be too much smarter than their parents," Harry said. "Or too much saner, maybe — my father could probably outsmart me if he was, you know, actually *trying*, instead of using his adult intelligence mainly to come up with new reasons not to change his mind —" Harry stopped. "I'm too smart, Professor. I've got nothing to say to normal children. Adults don't respect me enough to really talk to me. And frankly, even if they did, they wouldn't sound as smart as Richard Feynman, so I might as well read something Richard Feynman wrote instead. I'm *isolated*, Professor McGonagall. I've been isolated my whole life. Maybe that has some of the same effects as being locked in a cellar. And I'm too intelligent to look up to my parents the way that

children are designed to do. My parents love me, but they don't feel obliged to respond to reason, and sometimes I feel like they're the children — children who *won't listen* and have absolute authority over my whole existence. I try not to be too bitter about it, but I also try to be *honest* with myself, so, yes, I'm bitter. And I also have an anger management problem, but I'm working on it. That's all."

"*That's all?*"

Harry nodded firmly. "That's all. Surely, Professor McGonagall, even in magical Britain, the normal explanation is always worth *considering?*"



It was later in the day, the sun lowering in the summer sky and shoppers beginning to peter out from the streets. Some shops had already closed; Harry and Professor McGonagall had bought his textbooks from Flourish and Blotts just under the deadline. With only a slight explosion when Harry had made a beeline for the keyword "Arithmancy" and discovered that the seventh-year textbooks invoked nothing more mathematically advanced than trigonometry.

At this moment, though, dreams of low-hanging research fruit were far from Harry's mind.

At this moment, the two of them were walking out of Ollivander's, and Harry was staring at his wand. He'd waved it, and produced multicolored sparks, which really shouldn't have come as such an extra shock after everything else he'd seen, but somehow —

I can do magic.

Me. As in, me personally. I am magical; I am a wizard.

He had *felt* the magic pouring up his arm, and in that instant, realized that he had always had that sense, that he had possessed it his whole life, the sense that was not sight or sound or smell or taste or touch but only magic. Like having eyes but keeping them always closed, so that you didn't even realize that you were seeing darkness; and then one day the eye opened, and saw the world. The shock of it had poured through him, touching pieces of himself, awakening them, and then died away in seconds; leaving only the certain knowledge that he was now a wizard, and always had been, and had even, in some strange way, always known it.

And —

"It is very curious indeed that you should be destined for this wand when its brother — why, its brother gave you that scar."

That could not *possibly* be coincidence. There had been *thousands* of wands in that shop. Well, okay, actually it *could* be coincidence, there were six billion people in the world and thousand-to-one coincidences happened every day. But Bayes's Theorem said that any reasonable hypothesis which made it *more* likely than a thousand-to-one that he'd end up with the brother to the Dark Lord's wand, was going to have an advantage.

Professor McGonagall had simply said *how peculiar* and left it at that, which had put Harry into a state of shock at the sheer, overwhelming *uncuriosity* of wizards and witches. In no *imaginable* world would Harry have just went "Hm" and walked out of the shop without even *trying* to come up with a hypothesis for what was going on.

His left hand rose and touched his scar.

What . . . *exactly* . . .

"You're a full wizard now," said Professor McGonagall. "Congratulations."

Harry nodded.

"And what do you think of the wizarding world?" said she.

"It's strange," Harry said. "I ought to be thinking about everything I've seen of magic . . . everything that I now know is possible, and everything I now know to be a lie, and all the work left before me to understand it. And yet I find myself distracted by relative trivialities like," Harry lowered his voice, "the whole Boy-Who-Lived thing." There didn't seem to be anyone nearby, but no point tempting fate.

Professor McGonagall *ahemmed*. "Really? You don't say."

Harry nodded. "Yes. It's just . . . *odd*. To find out that you were part of this grand story, the quest to defeat the great and terrible Dark Lord, and it's already *done*. Finished. Completely over with. Like you're Frodo Baggins and you find out that your parents took you to Mount Doom and had you toss in the Ring when you were one year old and you don't even remember it."

Professor McGonagall's smile had grown somewhat fixed.

"You know, if I were anyone else, anyone else at all, I'd probably be pretty worried about living up to that start. *Gosh, Harry, what have you done since you defeated the Dark Lord? Your own bookshop? That's great! Say, did you know I named my child after you?* But I have hopes that this will not prove to be a problem." Harry sighed. "Still . . . it's almost enough to make me wish that

there were *some* loose ends from the quest, just so I could say that I really, you know, *participated* somehow.”

“Oh?” said Professor McGonagall in an odd tone. “What did you have in mind?”

“Well, for example, you mentioned that my parents were betrayed. Who betrayed them?”

“Sirius Black,” the witch said, almost hissing the name. “He’s in Azkaban. Wizarding prison.”

“How probable is it that Sirius Black will break out of prison and I’ll have to track him down and defeat him in some sort of spectacular duel, or better yet put a large bounty on his head and hide out in Australia while I wait for the results?”

Professor McGonagall blinked. Twice. “Not likely. No one has ever escaped from Azkaban, and I doubt that *he* will be the first.”

Harry was a bit skeptical of that “*no one* has *ever* escaped from Azkaban” line. Still, maybe with magic you could actually get close to a 100% perfect prison, especially if you had a wand and they did not. The best way to get out would be to not go there in the first place.

“All right then,” Harry said. “Sounds like it’s been nicely wrapped up.” He sighed, scrubbing his palm over his head. “Or maybe the Dark Lord didn’t *really* die that night. Not completely. His spirit lingers, whispering to people in nightmares that bleed over into the waking world, searching for a way back into the living lands he swore to destroy, and now, in accordance with the ancient prophecy, he and I are locked in a deadly duel where the winner shall lose and the loser shall win —”

Professor McGonagall’s head swiveled, and her eyes darted around, as though to search the street for listeners.

“I’m *joking*, Professor,” Harry said with some annoyance. Sheesh, why did she always take everything so seriously —

A slow sinking sensation began to dawn in the pit of Harry’s stomach.

Professor McGonagall looked at Harry with a calm expression. A very, *very* calm expression. Then a smile was put on. “Of course you are, Mr. Potter.”

Aw crap.

If Harry had needed to formalize the wordless inference that had just flashed into his mind, it would have come out something like, ‘If I estimate the probability of Professor McGonagall doing what I just saw as the result

of carefully controlling herself, versus the probability distribution for all the things she would do *naturally* if I made a bad joke, then this behavior is significant evidence for her hiding something.'

But what Harry actually thought was, *Aw crap*.

Harry turned his own head to scan the street. Nope, no one nearby. "He's *not* dead, is he," Harry sighed.

"Mr. Potter —"

"The Dark Lord is alive. Of *course* he's alive. It was an *act* of utter *optimism* for me to have even *dreamed* otherwise. I *must* have taken leave of my *senses*, I can't *imagine* what I was *thinking*. Just because *someone* said that his body was found burned to a *crisp*, I can't imagine why I would have thought he was *dead*. *Clearly* I have much left to learn about the art of proper *pessimism*."

"Mr. Potter —"

"At least tell me there's not really a prophecy . . ." Professor McGonagall was still giving him that bright, fixed smile. "Oh, you have *got* to be kidding me."

"Mr. Potter, you shouldn't go inventing things to worry about —"

"Are you *actually* going to tell me *that*? Imagine my reaction later, when I find out that there was something to worry about after all."

Her fixed smile faltered.

Harry's shoulders slumped. "I have a whole world of magic to analyze. I do *not* have time for this."

Then both of them shut up, as a man in flowing orange robes appeared on the street and slowly passed them by; Professor McGonagall's eyes tracked him, unobtrusively. Harry's mouth was moving as he chewed hard on his lip, and someone watching closely would have noticed a tiny spot of blood appear.

When the orange-robed man had passed into the distance, Harry spoke again, in a low murmur. "Are you going to tell me the truth now, Professor McGonagall? And don't bother trying to wave it off, I'm not stupid."

"You're *eleven years old*, Mr. Potter!" she said in a harsh whisper.

"And therefore subhuman. Sorry . . . for a moment there, I *forgot*."

"These are dreadful and important matters! They are *secret*, Mr. Potter! It is a *catastrophe* that you, still a child, know even this much! You must not tell *anyone*, do you understand? Absolutely no one!"

As sometimes happened when Harry got *sufficiently* angry, his blood went cold, instead of hot, and a terrible dark clarity descended over his mind, map-

ping out possible tactics and assessing their consequences with iron realism.

Point out that you have a right to know: Failure. Eleven-year-old children do not have rights to know anything, in McGonagall's eyes.

Say that you will not be friends any more: Failure. She does not value your friendship sufficiently.

Point out that you will be in danger if you do not know: Failure. Plans have already been made based on your ignorance. The certain inconvenience of rethinking will seem far more unpalatable than the mere uncertain prospect of your coming to harm.

Justice and reason will both fail. You must either find something you have that she wants, or find something you can do which she fears...

Ah.

"Well then, Professor," Harry said in a low, icy tone, "it sounds like I have something you want. You can, if you like, tell me the truth, the *whole* truth, and in return I will keep your secrets. Or you can try to keep me ignorant so you can use me as a pawn, in which case I will owe you nothing."

McGonagall stopped short in the street. Her eyes blazed and her voice descended into an outright hiss. "How dare you!"

"*How dare you!*" he whispered back at her.

"You would *blackmail* me?"

Harry's lips twisted. "I am *offering* you a *favor*. I am *giving* you a chance to protect *your* precious secret. If you refuse I will have *every* natural motive to make inquiries elsewhere, not to spite you, but because I *have to know!* Get past your pointless anger at a *child* who you think ought to obey you, and you'll realize that any sane adult would do the same! *Look at it from my perspective! How would you feel if it was YOU?*"

Harry watched McGonagall, observed her harsh breathing. It occurred to him that it was time to ease off the pressure, let her simmer for a while. "You don't have to decide right away," Harry said in a more normal tone. "I'll understand if you want time to think about my *offer*... but I'll warn you of one thing," Harry said, his voice going colder. "Don't try that Obliviation spell on me. Some time ago I worked out a signal, and I have already sent that signal to myself. If I find that signal and I don't *remember* sending it..." Harry let his voice trail off significantly.

McGonagall's face was working as her expressions shifted. "I... wasn't thinking of Obliviating you, Mr. Potter... but why would you have *invented*

such a signal if you didn't know about —"

"I thought of it while reading a Muggle science-fiction book, and said to myself, *well, just in case*... And no, I won't tell you the signal, I'm not dumb."

"I hadn't planned to ask," McGonagall said. She seemed to fold in on herself, and suddenly looked very old, and very tired. "This has been an exhausting day, Mr. Potter. Can we get your trunk, and send you home? I will trust you not to speak upon this matter until I have had time to think. Keep in mind that there are only two other people in the whole world who know about this matter, and they are Headmaster Albus Dumbledore and Professor Severus Snape."

So. New information; that was a peace offering. Harry nodded in acceptance, and turned his head to look forward, and started walking again, as his blood slowly began to warm over once more.

"So now I've got to find some way to kill an immortal Dark Wizard," Harry said, and sighed in frustration. "I really wish you had told me that *before* I started shopping."



The trunk shop was more richly appointed than any other shop Harry had visited; the curtains were lush and delicately patterned, the floor and walls of stained and polished wood, and the trunks occupied places of honor on polished ivory platforms. The salesman was dressed in robes of finery only a cut below those of Lucius Malfoy, and spoke with exquisite, oily politeness to both Harry and Professor McGonagall.

Harry had asked his questions, and had gravitated to a trunk of heavy-looking wood, not polished but warm and solid, carved with the pattern of a guardian dragon whose eyes shifted to look at anyone nearing it. A trunk charmed to be light, to shrink on command, to sprout small clawed tentacles from its bottom and squirm after its owner. A trunk with two drawers on each of four sides that each slid out to reveal compartments as deep as the whole trunk. A lid with four locks each of which would reveal a different space inside. And — this was the important part — a handle on the bottom which slid out a frame containing a staircase leading down into a small, lighted room that would hold, Harry estimated, around twelve bookcases.

If they made luggage like this, Harry didn't know why anyone bothered

owning a house.

One hundred and eight golden Galleons. That was the price of a good trunk, lightly used. At around fifty British pounds to the Galleon, that was enough to buy a second-hand car. It would be more expensive than everything else Harry had ever bought in his whole life all put together.

Ninety-seven Galleons. That was how much was left in the bag of gold Harry had been allowed to take out of Gringotts.

Professor McGonagall wore a look of chagrin upon her face. After a long day's shopping she hadn't needed to ask Harry how much gold was left in the bag, after the salesman quoted his price, which meant the Professor could do good mental arithmetic without pen and paper. Once again, Harry reminded himself that *scientifically illiterate* was not at all the same thing as *stupid*.

"I'm sorry, young man," said Professor McGonagall. "This is entirely my fault. I would offer to take you back to Gringotts, but the bank will be closed for all but emergency services now."

Harry looked at her, wondering . . .

"Well," sighed Professor McGonagall, as she swung on one heel, "we may as well go, I suppose."

. . . she *hadn't* lost it completely when a child had dared defy her. She hadn't been happy, but she had *thought* instead of exploding in fury. It might have just been that there was an immortal Dark Lord to fight — that she had needed Harry's goodwill. But most adults wouldn't have been capable of thinking even that much; wouldn't consider *future consequences* at all, if someone lower in status had refused to obey them . . .

"Professor?" Harry said.

The witch turned back and looked at him.

Harry took a deep breath. He needed to be a little angry for what he wanted to try now, there was no way he'd have the courage to do it otherwise. *She didn't listen to me*, he thought to himself, *I would have taken more gold but she didn't want to listen* . . . Focusing his entire world on McGonagall and the need to bend this conversation to his will, he spoke.

"Professor, you thought one hundred Galleons would be more than enough for a trunk. That's why you didn't bother warning me before it went down to ninety-seven. Which is just the sort of thing the research studies show — that's what happens when people think they're leaving themselves a *little* error margin. They're not pessimistic enough. If it'd been up to me, I'd have taken

two hundred Galleons just to be sure. There was plenty of money in that vault, and I could have put back any extra later. But I thought you wouldn't let me do it. I thought you'd be angry at me just for asking. Was I wrong?"

"I suppose I must confess that you are right," said Professor McGonagall. "But, young man —"

"That sort of thing is the reason why I have trouble trusting adults." Somehow Harry kept his voice steady. "Because they get angry if you even *try* to reason with them. To them it's defiance and insolence and a challenge to their higher tribal status. If you try to talk to them they get *angry*. So if I had anything *really important* to do, I wouldn't be able to trust you. Even if you listened with deep concern to whatever I said — because that's also part of the *role* of someone playing a concerned adult — you'd never change your actions, you wouldn't actually behave differently, because of anything I said."

The salesman was watching them both with unabashed fascination.

"I can understand your point of view," Professor McGonagall said eventually. "If I sometimes seem too strict, please remember that I have served as Head of Gryffindor House for what feels like several thousand years."

Harry nodded and continued. "So — suppose I had a way to get more Galleons from my vault *without* us going back to Gringotts, but it involved me violating the role of an obedient child. Would I be able to trust you with that, even though you'd have to step outside your own role as Professor McGonagall to take advantage of it?"

"*What?*" said Professor McGonagall.

"To put it another way, if I could make today have happened differently, so that we *didn't* take too little money with us, would that be all right even though it would involve a child being insolent to an adult in retrospect?"

"I... suppose..." the witch said, looking quite puzzled.

Harry took out the mokeskin pouch, and said, "Eleven Galleons originally from my family vault."

And there was gold in Harry's hand.

For a moment Professor McGonagall's mouth gaped wide, then her jaw snapped shut and her eyes narrowed and the witch bit out, "*Where* did you get that —"

"From my family vault, like I said."

"*How?*"

"Magic."

“That’s hardly an answer!” snapped Professor McGonagall, and then stopped, blinking.

“No, it isn’t, is it? I *ought* to claim that it’s because I experimentally discovered the true secrets of how the pouch works and that it can actually retrieve objects from anywhere, not just its own inside, if you phrase the request correctly. But actually it’s from when I fell into that pile of gold before and I shoved some Galleons into my pocket. Anyone who understands pessimism knows that money is something you might need quickly and without much warning. So now are you angry at me for defying your authority? Or glad that we succeeded in our important mission?”

The salesman’s eyes were wide like saucers.

And the tall witch stood there, silent.

“Discipline at Hogwarts *must* be enforced,” she said after almost a full minute. “For the sake of *all* the students. And that *must* include courtesy and obedience from you to *all* professors.”

“I understand, Professor McGonagall.”

“Good. Now let us buy that trunk and go home.”

Harry felt like throwing up, or cheering, or fainting, or *something*. That was the first time his careful reasoning had ever worked on *anyone*. Maybe because it was also the first time he had something really serious that an adult needed from him, but still —

Minerva McGonagall, +1 point.

Harry bowed, and gave the bag of gold and the extra eleven Galleons into McGonagall’s hands. “Thank you very much, Professor. Can you finish up the purchase for me? I’ve got to visit the lavatory.”

The salesman, unctuous once more, pointed toward a door set into the wall with a gold-handled knob. As Harry started to walk away, he heard the salesman ask in his oily voice, “May I inquire as to who that was, Madam McGonagall? I take it he is Slytherin — third-year, perhaps? — and from a prominent family, but I did not recognize —”

The slam of the lavatory door cut off his words, and after Harry had identified the lock and pressed it into place, he grabbed the magical self-cleaning towel and, with shaky hands, wiped moisture off his forehead. Harry’s entire body was sheathed in sweat which had soaked clear through his Muggle clothing, though at least it didn’t show through the robes.

The sun was setting and it was very late indeed, by the time they stood again in the courtyard of the Leaky Cauldron, the silent leaf-dusted interface between magical Britain's Diagon Alley and the entire Muggle world. (That was one *awfully* decoupled economy . . .) Harry was to go to a phone box and call his father, once he was on the other side. He didn't need to worry about his luggage being stolen, apparently. His trunk had the status of a major magical item, something that most Muggles wouldn't notice; that was part of what you could get in the wizarding world, if you were willing to pay the price of a secondhand car.

"So here we part ways, for a time," Professor McGonagall said. She shook her head in wonderment. "This has been the strangest day of my life for . . . many a year. Since the day I learned that a child had defeated You-Know-Who. I wonder now, looking back, if that was the last reasonable day of the world."

Oh, like *she* had anything to complain about. *You think your day was surreal? Try mine.*

"I was very impressed with you today," Harry said to her. "I should have remembered to compliment you out loud, I was awarding you points in my head and everything."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall. "If you had already been sorted into a House I would have deducted so many points that your grandchildren would still be losing the House Cup."

"Thank you, Professor." It was probably too early to call her Minnie.

This woman might well be the sanest adult Harry had ever met, despite her lack of scientific background. Harry was even considering offering her the number-two position in whatever group he formed to fight the Dark Lord, though he wasn't silly enough to say that out loud. *Now what would be a good name for that . . . ? The Death Eater Eaters?*

"I'll see you again soon, when school starts," Professor McGonagall said. "And, Mr. Potter, about your wand —"

"I know what you're going to ask," Harry said. He took out his precious wand and, with a deep twinge of inner pain, flipped it over in his hand, presenting her with the handle. "Take it. I hadn't planned to do anything, not a single thing, but I don't want you to have nightmares about me blowing up my house."

Professor McGonagall shook her head rapidly. "Oh no, Mr. Potter! That isn't done. I only meant to warn you not to *use* your wand at home, since the Ministry can detect underage magic and it is prohibited without supervision."

"Ah," Harry said. "That sounds like a very sensible rule. I'm glad to see the wizarding world takes that sort of thing seriously."

Professor McGonagall peered hard at him. "You really mean that."

"Yes," Harry said. "I get it. Magic is dangerous and the rules are there for good reasons. Certain other matters are also dangerous. I get that too. Remember that I am not stupid."

"I am unlikely ever to forget it. Thank you, Harry, that does make me feel better about entrusting you with certain things. Goodbye for now."

Harry turned to go, into the Leaky Cauldron and out towards the Muggle world.

As his hand touched the back door's handle, he heard a last whisper from behind him.

"Hermione Granger."

"What?" Harry said, his hand still on the door.

"Look for a first-year girl named Hermione Granger on the train to Hogwarts."

"Who is she?"

There was no answer, and when Harry turned around, Professor McGonagall was gone.



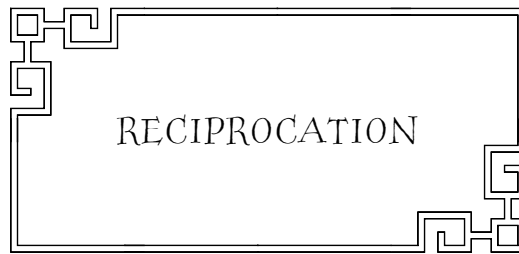
AFTERMATH:

Headmaster Albus Dumbledore leaned forward over his desk. His twinkling eyes peered out at Minerva. "So, my dear, how did you find Harry?"

Minerva opened her mouth. Then she closed her mouth. Then she opened her mouth again. No words came out.

"I see," Albus said gravely. "Thank you for your report, Minerva. You may go."

CHAPTER SEVEN



Petunia Evans-Verres's lips were trembling and her eyes were tearing up as Harry hugged her midsection on Platform Nine of the King's Cross Station. "Are you sure you don't want me to come with you, Harry?"

Harry glanced over to his father Michael Verres-Evans, who was looking stereotypically stern-but-proud, and then back to his mother, who really did look rather . . . uncomposed. "Mum, I know you don't like the wizarding world very much. You don't have to come with. I mean it."

Petunia winced. "Harry, you shouldn't worry about me, I'm your mother and if you need someone with you —"

"Mum, I'm going to be on my own at Hogwarts for *months* and *months*. If I can't manage a train platform alone, better to find out sooner rather than later so we can abort." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Besides, Mum, they all love me over there. If I have any problems, all I need to do is take off my sweatband," Harry tapped the exercise band covering his scar, "and I'll have *way* more help than I can handle."

"Oh, Harry," Petunia whispered. She knelt down and hugged him hard, face to face, their cheeks resting against each other. Harry could feel her ragged breathing, and then he heard a muffled sob escape. "Oh, Harry, I do love you, always remember that."

It's like she's afraid she'll never see me again, the thought popped into Harry's head. He knew the thought was true but he didn't know why Mum was so afraid.

So he made a guess. "Mum, you know that I'm not going to turn into your sister just because I'm learning magic, right? I'll do any magic you ask for — if I can, I mean — or if you want me *not* to use any magic around the house, I'll do that too, I promise I'll never let magic come between us —"

A tight hug cut off his words. "You have a good heart," his mother whispered into his ear. "A very good heart, my son."

Harry choked up himself a little, then.

His mother released him, and stood up. She took a handkerchief out of her handbag, and with a trembling hand dabbed at the running makeup around her eyes.

There were no questions about his father accompanying him to the magical side of King's Cross Station. Dad had trouble just looking at Harry's trunk directly. Magic ran in families, and Michael Verres-Evans couldn't even walk.

So instead his father just cleared his throat. "Good luck at school, Harry," he said. "Do you think I bought you enough books?"

Harry had explained to his father about how he thought this might be his big chance to do something really revolutionary and important, and Professor Verres-Evans had nodded and dumped his extremely busy schedule for two solid days in order to go on the Greatest Secondhand Bookshop Raid Ever, which had covered four cities and produced *thirty* boxes of science books now sitting in the cavern level of Harry's trunk. Most of the books had gone for a pound or two, but some of them definitely *hadn't*, like the very latest *Handbook of Chemistry and Physics* or the complete 1972 set of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. His father had tried to block Harry off from seeing the till displays but Harry figured his father must have spent *at least* a thousand pounds. Harry had said to his father that he would pay him back as soon as he figured out how to convert wizarding gold into Muggle money, and his father had told him to go jump in a lake.

And then his father had asked him: *Do you think I bought you enough books?* It was quite clear what answer Dad wanted to hear.

Harry's throat was hoarse, for some reason. "You can never have enough books," he recited the Verres family motto, and his father knelt down and gave him a quick, firm embrace. "But you *certainly* tried," Harry said, and felt

himself choking up again. “It was a really, really, *really* good try.”

His Dad straightened. “So . . .” he said. “Do *you* see a Platform Nine and Three-Quarters?”

King’s Cross Station was huge and busy, with walls and floors paved with ordinary dirt-stained tiles. It was full of ordinary people hurrying about their ordinary business, having ordinary conversations which generated lots and lots of ordinary noise. King’s Cross Station had a Platform Nine (which they were standing on) and a Platform Ten (right nearby) but there was nothing between Platform Nine and Platform Ten except a thin, unpromising barrier wall. A great skylight overhead let in plenty of light to illuminate the total lack whatsoever of any Platform Nine and Three-Quarters.

Harry stared around until his eyes watered, thinking, *come on, mage-sight, come on, mage-sight*, but absolutely nothing appeared to him. He thought about taking out his wand and waving it, but Professor McGonagall had warned him against using his wand. Plus if there was another shower of multicolored sparks that might lead to being arrested for setting off fireworks inside a train station. And that was assuming his wand didn’t decide to do something else, like blowing up all of King’s Cross. Harry had only lightly skimmed his schoolbooks (though that skim was quite bizarre enough) in a very quick effort to determine what sort of science books to buy over the next 48 hours.

Well, he had — Harry glanced at his watch — one whole hour to figure it out, since he was supposed to be on the train at eleven. Maybe this was the equivalent of an IQ test and the stupid kids couldn’t become wizards. (And the amount of extra time you gave yourself would determine your Conscientiousness, which was the second most important factor in scholarly success.)

“I’ll figure it out,” Harry said to his waiting parents. “It’s probably some sort of test thingy.”

His father frowned. “Hm . . . maybe look for a trail of mixed footprints on the ground, leading somewhere that doesn’t seem to make sense —”

“*Dad!*” Harry said. “Stop that! I haven’t even *tried* to figure it out on my own!” It was a very good suggestion, too, which was worse.

“Sorry,” his father apologized.

“Ah . . .” Harry’s mother said. “I don’t think they would do that to a student, do you? Are you sure Professor McGonagall didn’t tell you anything?”

“Maybe she was distracted,” Harry said without thinking.

“*Harry!*” hissed his father and mother in unison. “*What did you do?*”

"I, um —" Harry swallowed. "Look, we don't have time for this now —"
"Harry!"

"I mean it! We don't have time for this now! Because it's a really long story and I've got to figure out how to get to school!"

His mother had a hand over her face. "How bad was it?"

"I, ah," *I can't talk about that for reasons of National Security*, "about half as bad as the Incident with the Science Project?"

"Harry!"

"I, er, oh look there are some people with an owl I'll go ask them how to get in!" and Harry ran away from his parents towards the family of fiery redheads, his trunk automatically slithering behind him.

The plump woman looked to him as he arrived. "Hello, dear. First time at Hogwarts? Ron's new, too —" and then she peered closely at him. *"Harry Potter?"*

Four boys and a red-headed girl and an owl all swung around and then froze in place.

"Oh, *come on!*" Harry protested. He'd been planning to go as Harry Verres at least until he got to Hogwarts. "I bought a sweatband and everything! How come you know who I am?"

"Yes," Harry's father said, coming up behind him with long easy strides, "how *do* you know who he is?" His voice indicated a certain dread.

"Your picture was in the newspapers," said one of two identical-looking twins.

"HARRY!"

"Dad! It's not like that! It's 'cause I defeated the Dark Lord You-Know-Who when I was one year old!"

"WHAT?"

"Mum can explain."

"WHAT?"

"Ah . . . Michael dear, there are certain things I thought it would be best not to bother you with until now —"

"Excuse me," Harry said to the redheaded family who were all staring at him, "but it would be quite extremely helpful if you could tell me how to get to Platform Nine and Three-Quarters *right now*."

"Ah . . ." said the woman. She raised a hand and pointed at the wall between platforms. "Just walk straight at the barrier between platforms nine and ten.

Don't stop and don't be scared you'll crash into it, that's very important. Best do it at a bit of a run if you're nervous."

"And whatever you do, don't think of an elephant."

"*George!* Ignore him, Harry dear, there's no reason not to think of an elephant."

"I'm Fred, Mum, not George —"

"Thanks!" Harry said and took off at a run towards the barrier —

Wait a minute, it wouldn't work *unless he believed in it?*

It was at times like this that Harry hated his mind for actually working fast enough to realize that this was a case where "resonant doubt" applied, that is, if he'd started out thinking that he would go through the barrier he'd have been fine, only now he was worried about whether he sufficiently *believed* he'd go through the barrier, which meant that he actually *was* worried about crashing into it —

"*Harry! Get back here, you have some explaining to do!*" That was his Dad.

Harry shut his eyes and ignored everything he knew about justified credibility and just tried to believe *really hard* that he'd go through the barrier and —

— the sounds around him changed.

Harry opened his eyes and stumbled to a halt, feeling vaguely dirtied by having made a deliberate effort to believe something.

He was standing in a bright, open-air platform next to a single huge train, fourteen long carriages headed up by a massive scarlet-metal steam engine with a tall chimney that promised death to air quality. The platform was already lightly crowded (even though Harry was a full hour early); dozens of children and their parents swarmed around benches, tables, and various hawkers and stalls.

It went entirely without saying that there was no such place in King's Cross Station and no room to hide it.

Okay, so either (a) I just teleported somewhere else entirely (b) they can fold space like no one's business or (c) they are simply ignoring all the rules.

There was a slithering sound behind him, and Harry turned around to observe that his trunk had indeed followed him on its small clawed tentacles. Apparently, for magical purposes, his luggage had also managed to believe with sufficient strength to pass through the barrier. That was actually a little disturbing when Harry started thinking about it.

A moment later, the youngest-looking red-haired boy came through the iron archway (iron archway?) at a run, pulling his trunk behind him on a lead and nearly crashing into Harry. Harry, feeling stupid for having stayed around, quickly began moving away from the landing area, and the red-haired boy followed him, yanking hard on his trunk's lead in order to keep up. A moment later, a white owl fluttered through the archway and came to rest on the boy's shoulder.

"Cor," said the red-haired boy, "are you *really* Harry Potter?"

Not this again. "I have no logical way of knowing that for certain. My parents raised me to *believe* that my name was Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, and many people here have told me that I *look* like my parents, I mean my other parents, but," Harry frowned, realizing, "for all *I* know, there could easily be spells to polymorph a child into a specified appearance —"

"Er, what, mate?"

Not headed for Ravenclaw, I take it. "Yes, I'm Harry Potter."

"I'm Ron Weasley," said the tall skinny freckled long-nosed kid, and stuck out a hand, which Harry politely shook as they walked. The owl gave Harry an oddly measured and courteous hoot (actually more of an eehhhhhh sound, which surprised Harry).

At this point Harry realized the potential for imminent catastrophe. "Just a second," he said to Ron, and opened one of the drawers of his trunk, the one that if he recalled correctly was for Winter Clothes — it was — and then he found the lightest scarf he owned, underneath his winter coat. Harry took off his sweatband, and just as quickly unfolded the scarf and tied it around his face. It was a little hot, especially in the summer, but Harry could live with that.

Then he shut that drawer and pulled out another drawer and drew forth black wizarding robes, which he shrugged over his head, now that he was out of Muggle territory.

"There," Harry said. The sound came out slightly muffled through the scarf over his face. He turned to Ron. "How do I look? Stupid, I know, but am I identifiable as Harry Potter?"

"Er," Ron said. He closed his mouth, which had been open. "Not really, Harry."

"Very good," Harry said. "However, so as not to obviate the point of the whole exercise, you will henceforth address me as," Verres might not work anymore, "Mr. Spoo."

“Okay, Harry,” Ron said uncertainly.

The Force is not particularly strong in this one. “Call . . . me . . . Mister . . . Spoo.”

“Okay, Mister Spoo —” Ron stopped. “I can’t do that, it makes me feel stupid.”

That’s not just a feeling. “Okay. You pick a name.”

“Mr. Cannon,” Ron said at once. “For the Chudley Cannons.”

“Ah . . .” Harry knew he was going to terribly regret asking this. “Who or what are the Chudley Cannons?”

“*Who’re the Chudley Cannons?* Only the most brilliant team in the whole history of Quidditch! Sure, they finished at the bottom of the league last year, but —”

“What’s Quidditch?”

Asking this was also a mistake.

“So let me get this straight,” Harry said as it seemed that Ron’s explanation (with associated hand gestures) was winding down. “Catching the Snitch is worth *one hundred and fifty points?*”

“Yeah —”

“How many ten-point goals does one side usually score *not* counting the Snitch?”

“Um, maybe fifteen or twenty in professional games —”

“That’s just wrong. That violates every possible rule of game design. Look, the rest of this game sounds like it might make sense, sort of, for a sport I mean, but you’re basically saying that catching the Snitch overwhelms almost any ordinary point spread. The two Seekers are up there flying around looking for the Snitch and usually not interacting with anyone else, spotting the Snitch first is going to be mostly luck —”

“It’s not luck!” protested Ron. “You’ve got to keep your eyes moving in the right pattern —”

“That’s not *interactive*, there’s no back-and-forth with the other player and how much fun is it to watch someone incredibly good at moving their eyes? And then whichever Seeker gets lucky swoops in and grabs the Snitch and makes everyone else’s work moot. It’s like someone took a real game and grafted on this pointless extra position so that you could be the Most Important Player without needing to really get involved or learn the rest of it. Who was the first Seeker, the King’s idiot son who wanted to play Quidditch

but couldn't understand the rules?" Actually, now that Harry thought about it, that seemed like a surprisingly good hypothesis. Put him on a broomstick and tell him to catch the shiny thing...

Ron's face pulled into a scowl. "If you don't like Quidditch, you don't have to make fun of it!"

"If you can't criticize, you can't optimize. I'm suggesting how to *improve the game*. And it's very simple. Get rid of the Snitch."

"They won't change the game just 'cause *you* say so!"

"I *am* the Boy-Who-Lived, you know. People will listen to me. And maybe if I can persuade them to change the game at Hogwarts, the innovation will spread."

A look of absolute horror was spreading over Ron's face. "But, but if you get rid of the Snitch, how will anyone know when the game ends?"

"*Buy... a... clock*. It would be a lot fairer than having the game sometimes end after ten minutes and sometimes not end for hours, and the schedule would be a lot more predictable for the spectators, too." Harry sighed. "Oh, stop giving me that look of absolute horror, I probably won't *actually* take the time to destroy this pathetic excuse for a national sport and remake it stronger and smarter in my own image. I've got way, way, *way* more important stuff to worry about." Harry looked thoughtful. "Then again, it wouldn't *take* much time to write up the Ninety-Five Theses of the Snitchless Reformation and nail it to a church door —"

"Potter," drawled a young boy's voice, "*what* is that on your face and *what* is standing next to you?"

Ron's look of horror was replaced by utter hatred. "*You!*"

Harry turned his head; and indeed it was Draco Malfoy, who might have been forced to wear standard school robes, but was making up for that with a trunk looking at least as magical and far more elegant than Harry's own, decorated in silver and emeralds and bearing what Harry guessed to be the Malfoy family crest, a beautiful fanged serpent over crossed ivory wands.

"Draco!" Harry said. "Er, or Malfoy if you prefer, though that kind of sounds like Lucius to me. I'm glad to see you're doing so well after, um, our last meeting. This is Ron Weasley. And I'm trying to go incognito, so call me, eh," Harry looked down at his robes, "Mister Black."

"*Harry!*" hissed Ron. "You can't use *that* name!"

Harry blinked. "Why not?" It *sounded* nicely dark, like an international

man of mystery —

"I'd say it's a *fine* name," said Draco, "but it belongs to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. I'll call you Mr. Silver."

"*You* get away from . . . from Mr. Gold," Ron said coldly, and took a forward step. "He doesn't need to talk to the likes of you!"

Harry raised a placating hand. "I'll go by Mr. Bronze, thanks for the naming schema. And, Ron, um," Harry struggled to find a way to say this, "I'm glad you're so . . . enthusiastic about protecting me, but I don't particularly mind talking to Draco —"

This was apparently the last straw for Ron, who spun on Harry with eyes now aflame with outrage. "*What?* Do you *know* who this is?"

"Yes, Ron," Harry said, "you may remember that I called him Draco without him needing to introduce himself."

Draco sniggered. Then his eyes lit on the white owl on Ron's shoulder. "Oh, what's *this?*" Draco said in a drawl rich with malice. "Where's the famous Weasley family rat?"

"Buried in the backyard," Ron said coldly.

"Aw, how sad. Pot . . . ah, Mr. Bronze, I should mention that the Weasley family is widely agreed to have *the best pet story ever*. Want to tell it, Weasley?"

Ron's face contorted. "You wouldn't think it was funny if it happened to *your* family!"

"Oh," Draco purred, "but it wouldn't ever *happen* to the Malfoys."

Ron's hands clenched into fists —

"That's enough," Harry said, putting as much quiet authority into the voice as he could manage. It was clear that whatever this was about, it was a painful memory for the red-haired kid. "If Ron doesn't want to talk about it, he doesn't have to talk about it, and I'd ask that you not talk about it either."

Draco turned a surprised look on Harry, and Ron nodded. "That's right, Harry! I mean Mr. Bronze! You see what kind of person he is? Now tell him to go away!"

Harry counted to ten inside his head, which for him was a very quick *12345678910* — an odd habit left over from the age of five when his mother had first instructed him to do it, and Harry had reasoned that his way was faster and ought to be just as effective. "I'm not telling him to go away," Harry said calmly. "He's welcome to talk to me if he wants."

"Well, I don't intend to hang around with anyone who hangs around with

Draco Malfoy,” Ron announced coldly.

Harry shrugged. “That’s up to you. *I* don’t intend to let anyone say who I can and can’t hang around with.” Silently chanting, *please go away, please go away* . . .

Ron’s face went blank with surprise, like he’d actually expected that line to work. Then Ron spun about, yanked his luggage’s lead and stormed off down the platform.

“If you didn’t like him,” Draco said curiously, “why didn’t you just walk away?”

“Um . . . his mother helped me figure out how to get to this platform from the King’s Cross Station, so it was kind of hard to tell him to get lost. And it’s not that *I hate* this Ron guy,” Harry said, “I just, just . . .” Harry searched for words.

“Don’t see any reason for him to exist?” offered Draco.

“Pretty much.”

“Anyway, Potter . . . if you really were raised by Muggles —” Draco paused here, as if waiting for a denial, but Harry didn’t say anything “ — then you mightn’t know what it’s like to be famous. People want to take up *all* of our time. You *have* to learn to say no.”

Harry nodded, putting a thoughtful look on his face. “That sounds like good advice.”

“If you try to be nice, you just end up spending the most time with the pushiest ones. Decide who you *want* to spend time with and make everyone else leave. You’re just getting here, Potter, so everyone’s going to judge you by who they see you with, and you don’t want to be seen with the likes of Ron Weasley.”

Harry nodded again. “If you don’t mind my asking, how did you recognize me?”

“*Mister Bronze*,” Draco drawled, “*I have* met you, remember. I saw someone going around with a scarf wrapped around his head, looking absolutely ridiculous. So I took a *guess*.”

Harry bowed his head, accepting the compliment. “I’m *terribly* sorry about that,” Harry said. “Our first meeting, I mean. I didn’t mean to embarrass you in front of Lucius.”

Draco waved it off while giving Harry an odd look. “I just wish Father could have come in while *you* were flattering *me* —” Draco laughed. “But thank

you for what you said to Father. If not for that, I might've had a harder time explaining."

Harry swept a deeper bow. "And thank *you* for reciprocating with what you said to Professor McGonagall."

"You're welcome. Though one of the assistants must've sworn her closest friend to absolute secrecy, because Father says there are *weird rumors* going around, like you and I got in a fight or something."

"Ouch," Harry said, wincing. "I'm *really* sorry —"

"No, we're used to it, Merlin knows there's lots of rumors about the Malfoy family already."

Harry nodded. "I'm glad to hear you're not in trouble."

Draco smirked. "Father has, um, a *refined* sense of humor, but he *does* understand making friends. He understands it *very* well. He made me repeat that before I went to bed every night for the last month, 'I will make friends at Hogwarts.' When I explained everything to him and he saw that's what I was doing, he bought me an ice-cream."

Harry's jaw dropped. "*You managed to spin that into an ice-cream?*"

Draco nodded, looking every bit as smug as the feat deserved. "Well, father *knew* what I was doing, of course, but he's the one who taught me *how* to do it, and if I grin the right way *while* I'm doing it, that makes it a father-son thing and then he *has* to buy me an ice-cream or I'll give him this sort of sad look, like I think I must have disappointed him."

Harry eyed Draco calculatingly, sensing the presence of another master. "You've had *lessons* on how to manipulate people?"

"Of course," Draco said proudly. "I'm a *Malfoy*. Father bought me tutors."

"Wow," Harry said. Reading Robert Cialdini's *Influence: Science and Practice* probably didn't stack up very high compared to that (though it was still one heck of a book). "Your dad is almost as awesome as my dad."

Draco's eyebrows rose loftily. "Oh? And what does *your* father do?"

"He buys me books."

Draco considered this. "That doesn't sound very impressive."

"You had to be there. Anyway, I'm glad to hear all that. The way Lucius was looking at you, I thought he was going to c-crucify you."

"My father really loves me," Draco said firmly. "He wouldn't ever do that."

"Um . . ." Harry said. He remembered the black-robed, white-haired figure of elegance that had stormed through Madam Malkin's, wielding that beautiful,

deadly silver-handled cane. It wasn't easy to visualize him as a doting father. "Don't take this the wrong way, but how do you *know* that?"

"Huh?" It was clear that this was a question Draco did not commonly ask himself.

"I ask the fundamental question of rationality: Why do you believe what you believe? What do you think you know and how do you think you know it? What makes you think Lucius wouldn't sacrifice you the same way he'd sacrifice anything else for power?"

Draco shot Harry another odd look. "Just what do *you* know about Father?"

"Um . . . seat on the Wizengamot, seat on Hogwarts' Board of Governors, incredibly wealthy, has the ear of Minister Fudge, has the confidence of Minister Fudge, probably has some highly embarrassing photos of Minister Fudge, most prominent blood purist now that the Dark Lord's gone, former Death Eater who was found to have the Dark Mark but got off by claiming to be under the Imperius Curse, which was ridiculously implausible and pretty much everyone knew it . . . evil with a capital 'E' and a born killer . . . I think that's it."

Draco's eyes had narrowed to slits. "McGonagall told you that, did she."

"No, she wouldn't say *anything* to me about Lucius afterwards, except to stay away from him. So during the Incident at the Potions Shop, while Professor McGonagall was busy yelling at the shopkeeper and trying to get everything under control, I grabbed one of the customers and asked *them* about Lucius."

Draco's eyes were wide again. "Did you *really*?"

Harry gave Draco a puzzled look. "If I lied the first time, I'm not going to tell you the truth just because you ask twice."

There was a certain pause as Draco absorbed this.

"You're so completely going to be in Slytherin."

"I'm so completely going to be in Ravenclaw, thank you very much. I only want power so I can get books."

Draco giggled. "Yeah, right. Anyway . . . to answer what you asked . . ." Draco took a deep breath, and his face turned serious. "Father once missed a Wizengamot vote for me. I was on a broom and I fell off and broke a lot of ribs. It really hurt. I'd never hurt that much before and I thought I was going to die. So Father missed this really important vote, because he was there by my bed at St. Mungo's, holding my hands and promising me that I was going

to be okay.”

Harry glanced away uncomfortably, then, with an effort, forced himself to look back at Draco. “Why are you telling me *that*? It seems sort of . . . private . . .”

Draco gave Harry a serious look. “One of my tutors once said that people form close friendships by knowing private things about each other, and the reason most people don’t make close friends is because they’re too embarrassed to share anything really important about themselves.” Draco turned his palms out invitingly. “Your turn?”

Knowing that Draco’s hopeful face had probably been drilled into him by months of practice did not make it any less effective, Harry observed. Actually it *did* make it *less* effective, but unfortunately not *ineffective*. The same could be said of Draco’s clever use of reciprocation pressure for an unsolicited gift, a technique which Harry had read about in his social psychology books (one experiment had shown that an unconditional gift of \$5 was twice as effective as a conditional offer of \$50 in getting people to fill out surveys). Draco had made an unsolicited gift of a confidence, and now invited Harry to offer a confidence in return . . . and the thing was, Harry *did* feel pressured. Refusal, Harry was certain, would be met with a look of sad disappointment, and maybe a small amount of contempt indicating that Harry had lost points.

“Draco,” Harry said, “just so you know, I recognize exactly what you’re doing right now. My own books called it *reciprocation* and they talk about how giving someone a straight gift of two Sickles was found to be twice as effective as offering them twenty Sickles in getting them to do what you want . . .” Harry trailed off.

Draco was looking sad and disappointed. “It’s not meant as a trick, Harry. It’s a real way of becoming friends.”

Harry held up a hand. “I didn’t say I wasn’t going to respond. I just need time to pick something that’s private but just as non-damaging. Let’s say . . . I wanted you to know that I can’t be rushed into things.” A pause to reflect could go a long way in defusing the power of a lot of compliance techniques, once you learned to recognize them for what they were.

“All right,” Draco said. “I’ll wait while you come up with something. Oh, and please take off the scarf while you say it.”

Simple but effective.

And Harry couldn’t help but notice how clumsy, awkward, graceless his

attempt at resisting manipulation / saving face / showing off had appeared compared to Draco. *I need those tutors.*

"All right," Harry said after a time. "Here's mine." He glanced around and then rolled the scarf back up over his face, exposing everything but the scar. "Um . . . it sounds like you can really rely on your father. I mean . . . if you talk to him seriously, he'll always listen to you and take you seriously."

Draco nodded.

"Sometimes," Harry said, and swallowed. This was surprisingly hard, but then it was meant to be. "Sometimes I wish my own Dad was like yours." Harry's eyes flinched away from Draco's face, more or less automatically, and then Harry forced himself to look back at Draco.

Then it hit Harry *what on Earth he'd just said*, and Harry hastily added, "Not that I wish my Dad was a flawless instrument of death like Lucius, I only mean taking me seriously —"

"I understand," Draco said with a smile. "There . . . now doesn't it feel like we're a little closer to being friends?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah. It does, actually. Um . . . no offense, but I'm going to put on my disguise again, I *really* don't want to deal with —"

"I understand."

Harry rolled the scarf back down over his face.

"My father takes all his friends seriously," Draco said. "That's why he has lots of friends. You should meet him."

"I'll think about it," Harry said in a neutral voice. He shook his head in wonder. "So you really are his one weak point. Huh."

Now Draco was giving Harry a *really* odd look. "You want to go get something to drink and find somewhere to sit down?"

Harry realized he had been standing in one place for too long, and stretched himself, trying to crick his back. "Sure."

The platform was starting to fill up now, but there was still a quieter area on the far side away from the red steam engine. Along the way they passed a stall containing a bald, bearded man offering newspapers and comic books and stacked neon-green cans.

The stallholder was, in fact, leaning back and drinking out of one of the neon-green cans at the exact point when he spotted the refined and elegant Draco Malfoy approaching along with a mysterious boy looking incredibly stupid with a scarf tied over his face, causing the stallholder to experience a

sudden coughing fit in mid-drink and dribble a large amount of neon-green liquid onto his beard.

“Scuse me,” Harry said, “but what *is* that stuff, exactly?”

“Comed-Tea,” said the stallholder. “If you drink it, something surprising is bound to happen which makes you spill it on yourself or someone else. But it’s charmed to vanish just a few seconds later —” Indeed the stain on his beard was already disappearing.

“How droll,” said Draco. “How very, very droll. Come, Mr. Bronze, let’s go find another —”

“Hold on,” Harry said.

“*Oh come on!* That’s just, just *juvenile!*”

“No, I’m sorry Draco, I *have* to investigate this. What happens if I drink Comed-Tea while doing my best to keep the conversation completely serious?”

The stallholder smiled mysteriously. “Who knows? A friend walks by in a frog costume? Something unexpected is bound to happen —”

“No. I’m sorry. I just don’t believe it. That violates my much-abused suspension of disbelief on so many levels I don’t even have the language to describe it. There is, there is just *no way* a bloody *drink* can manipulate reality to produce *comedy setups*, or I’m going to give up and retire to the Bahamas —”

Draco groaned. “Are we *really* going to do this?”

“You don’t have to drink it but I *have* to investigate. *Have* to. How much?”

“Five Knuts the can,” the stallholder said.

“*Five Knuts?* You can sell reality-manipulating fizzy drinks for *five Knuts the can?*” Harry reached into his pouch, said “four Sickles, four Knuts”, and slapped them down on the counter. “Two dozen cans please.”

“I’ll also take one,” Draco sighed, and started to reach for his pockets.

Harry shook his head rapidly. “No, I’ve got this, doesn’t count as a favor either, I want to see if it works for you too.” He took a can from the stack now placed on the counter and tossed it to Draco, then started feeding his pouch. The pouch’s Widening Lip ate the cans accompanied by small burping noises, which wasn’t exactly helping to restore Harry’s faith that he would someday discover a reasonable explanation for all this.

Twenty-two burps later, Harry had the last purchased can in his hand, Draco was looking at him expectantly, and the two of them pulled the ring at the same time.

Harry rolled up his scarf to expose his mouth, and they tilted their heads

back and drank the Comed-Tea.

It somehow *tasted* bright green — extra-fizzy and limer than lime.

Aside from that, nothing else happened.

Harry looked at the stallholder, who was watching them benevolently.

All right, if this guy just took advantage of a natural accident to sell me twenty-four cans of nothing, I'm going to applaud his creative entrepreneurial spirit and then kill him.

"It doesn't always happen immediately," the stallholder said. "But it's guaranteed to happen once per can, or your money back."

Harry took another long drink.

Once again, nothing happened.

Maybe I should just chug the whole thing as fast as possible . . . and hope my stomach doesn't explode from all the carbon dioxide, or that I don't burp while drinking it . . .

No, he could afford to be a *little* patient. But honestly, Harry didn't see how this was going to work. You couldn't go up to someone and say "Now I'm going to surprise you" or "And now I'm going to tell you the punchline of the joke, and it'll be really funny." It ruined the shock value. In Harry's state of mental preparedness, Lucius Malfoy could have walked past in a ballerina outfit and it wouldn't have made him do a proper spit-take. Just what sort of wacky shenanigan was the universe supposed to cough up *now*?

"Anyway, let's sit down," Harry said. He prepared to swig another drink and started towards the distant seating area, which put him at the right angle to glance back and see the portion of the stall's newspaper stand that was devoted to a newspaper called *The Quibbler*, which was showing the following headline:

BOY-WHO-LIVED GETS
DRACO MALFOY PREGNANT

"*Gah!*" screamed Draco as bright green liquid sprayed all over him from Harry's direction. Draco turned to Harry with fire in his eyes and grabbed his own can. "You son of a Mudblood! Let's see how *you* like being spat upon!" Draco took a deliberate swig from the can just as his own eyes caught sight of the headline.

In sheer reflex action, Harry tried to block his face as the spray of liquid flew in his direction. Unfortunately he blocked using the hand containing the

Comed-Tea, sending the rest of the green liquid to splash out over his shoulder.

Harry stared at the can in his hand even as he went on choking and spluttering and the green color started to vanish from Draco's robes.

Then he looked up and stared at the newspaper headline.

BOY-WHO-LIVED GETS
DRACO MALFOY PREGNANT

Harry's lips opened and said, "buh-bluh-buh-buh . . ."

Too many competing objections, that was the problem. Every time Harry tried to say "But we're only eleven!" the objection "But men can't get pregnant!" demanded first priority and was then run over by "But there's nothing between us, really!"

Then Harry looked down at the can in his hand again.

He was feeling a deep-seated desire to run away screaming at the top of his lungs until he dropped from lack of oxygen, and the only thing stopping him was that he had once read that outright panic was the sign of a *truly* important scientific problem.

Harry snarled, threw the can violently into a nearby rubbish bin, and stalked back over to the stall. "One copy of *The Quibbler*, please." Harry paid over four more Knuts, retrieved another can of Comed-Tea from his pouch, and then stalked over to the picnic area with the blond-haired boy, who was staring at his own can with an expression of frank admiration.

"I take it back," Draco said, "that was pretty good."

"Hey, Draco, you know what I bet is even better for becoming friends than exchanging secrets? Committing murder."

"I have a tutor who says that," Draco allowed. He reached inside his robes and scratched himself with an easy, natural motion. "Who've you got in mind?"

Harry slammed *The Quibbler* down hard on the picnic table. "The guy who came up with this headline."

Draco groaned. "Not a guy. A girl. A *ten-year-old* girl, can you believe it? She went nuts after her mother died and her father, who owns this newspaper, is *convinced* that she's a seer, so when he doesn't know he asks Luna Lovegood and believes *anything* she says."

Not really thinking about it, Harry pulled the ring on his next can of Comed-Tea and prepared to drink. "Are you kidding me? That's even worse

than Muggle journalism, which I would have thought was physically impossible.”

Draco snarled. “She has some sort of perverse obsession about the Malfoys, too, and her father is politically opposed to us so he prints every word. As soon as I’m old enough I’m going to rape her.”

Green liquid spurted out of Harry’s nostrils, soaking into the scarf still covering that area. Comed-Tea and lungs did not mix, and Harry spent the next few seconds frantically coughing.

Draco looked at him sharply. “Something wrong?”

It was at this point that Harry came to the sudden realization that (a) the sounds coming from the rest of the train platform had turned into more of a blurred white noise at around the same time Draco had reached inside his robes, and (b) when he had discussed committing murder as a bonding method, there had been exactly one person in the conversation who’d thought they were joking.

Right. Because he seemed like such a normal kid. And he is a normal kid, he is just what you’d expect a baseline male child to be like if Darth Vader were his doting father.

“Yes, well,” Harry coughed, oh god how was he going to get out of this conversational wedge, “I was just surprised at how you were willing to discuss it so openly, you didn’t seem worried about getting caught or anything.”

Draco snorted. “Are you joking? *Luna Lovegood’s* word against mine?”

Holy crap on a holy stick. “There’s no such thing as magical truth detection, I take it?” *Or DNA testing . . . yet.*

Draco looked around. His eyes narrowed. “That’s right, you don’t know anything. Look, I’ll explain things to you, I mean the way it really works, just like you were already in Slytherin and asked me the same question. But you’ve got to swear not to say anything about it.”

“I swear,” Harry said.

“The courts use Veritaserum, but it’s a joke really, you just get yourself Obliviated before you testify and then claim the other person was Memory-Charmed with a fake memory. Of course if you’re just some normal person, the courts presume in favor of Obliviation, not False Memory Charms. But the court has discretion, and if *I’m* involved then it impinges on the honor of a Noble House, so it goes to the Wizengamot, where Father has the votes. After I’m found not guilty the Lovegood family has to pay reparations for tarnishing

my honor. And they know from the start that's how it'll go, so they'll just keep their mouths shut."

A cold chill was coming over Harry, a chill that came with instructions to keep his voice and face normal. *Note to self: Overthrow government of magical Britain at earliest convenience.*

Harry coughed again to clear his throat. "Draco, please please *please* don't take this the wrong way, my word is my bond, but like you said I could be in Slytherin and I really want to ask for informational purposes, so what would happen *theoretically speaking* if I *did* testify that I'd heard you plan it?"

"Then if I were anyone other than a Malfoy, I'd be in trouble," Draco answered smugly. "Since I *am* a Malfoy . . . Father has the votes. And afterwards he'd crush you . . . well, I guess not easily, since you *are* the Boy-Who-Lived, but Father is pretty good at that sort of thing." Draco frowned. "Sides, *you* talked about murdering her, why weren't you worried about *me* testifying after she turns up dead?"

How, oh how did my day go this wrong? Harry's mouth was already moving faster than he could think. "That's when I thought she was *older!* I don't know how it works *here*, but in Muggle Britain the courts would get a lot more upset about someone killing a child —"

"That makes sense," Draco said, still looking a bit suspicious. "But anyway, it's always smarter if it doesn't go to the Aurors at all. If we're careful only to do things that Healing Charms can fix, we can just Obliviate her afterwards and then do it all again next week." Then the blonde-haired boy giggled, a youthful high-pitched sound. "Though just imagine her saying she'd been done by Draco Malfoy *and* the Boy-Who-Lived, not even *Dumbledore* would believe her."

I am going to tear apart your pathetic little magical remnant of the Dark Ages into pieces smaller than its constituent atoms. "Actually, can we hold off on that? After I found out that headline came from a girl a year younger than me, I had a different thought for my revenge."

"Huh? Do tell," Draco said, and started to take another swig of his Comed-Tea.

Harry didn't know if the enchantment worked more than once per can, but he *did* know he could avoid the blame, so he was careful to time it exactly right:

"I was thinking *someday I'm going to marry that woman.*"

Draco made a horrid ker-splutching sound and leaked green fluid out the corners of his mouth like a broken car radiator. “*Are you nuts?*”

“Quite the opposite, I’m so sane it burns like ice.”

“You’ve got weirder taste than a Lestranger,” Draco said, sounding half-admiring about it. “And I suppose you want her all to yourself, huh?”

“Yep. I can owe you a favor for it —”

Draco waved it off. “Nah, this one’s free.”

Harry stared down at the can in his hand, the coldness settling into his blood. Charming, happy, generous with his favors to his friends, Draco wasn’t a psychopath. That was the sad and awful part, knowing human psychology well enough to *know* that Draco *wasn’t* a monster. There had been ten thousand societies over the history of the world where this conversation could have happened. No, the world would have been a very different place indeed, if it took an *evil mutant* to say what Draco had said. It was very simple, very human, it was the default if nothing else intervened. To Draco, his enemies weren’t people.

And in the slowed time of this slowed country, here and now as in the darkness-before-dawn prior to the Age of Reason, the son of a sufficiently powerful noble would simply take for granted that he was above the law, at least when it came to some peasant girl. There were places in Muggle-land where it was still the same way, countries where that sort of nobility still existed and still thought like that, or even grimmer lands where it wasn’t just the nobility. It was like that in every place and time that didn’t descend directly from the Enlightenment. A line of descent, it seemed, which didn’t quite include magical Britain, for all that there had been cross-cultural contamination of things like ring-pull drinks cans.

And if Draco doesn’t change his mind about wanting revenge, and I don’t throw away my own chance at happiness in life to marry some poor crazy girl, then all I’ve just bought is time, and not too much of it...

For one girl. Not for others.

I wonder how difficult it would be to just make a list of all the top blood purists and kill them.

They’d tried exactly that during the French Revolution, more or less — make a list of all the enemies of Progress and remove everything above the neck — and it hadn’t worked out well from what Harry recalled. Maybe he needed to dust off some of those history books his father had bought him, and

see if what had gone wrong with the French Revolution was something easy to fix.

Harry gazed up at the sky, and at the pale shape of the Moon, visible this morning through the cloudless air.

So the world is broken and flawed and insane, and cruel and bloody and dark. This is news? You always knew that, anyway...

"You're looking all serious," Draco said. "Let me guess, your Muggle parents told you that this sort of thing was bad."

Harry nodded, not quite trusting his voice.

"Well, like Father says, there may be four houses, but in the end everyone belongs to either Slytherin or Hufflepuff. And frankly, you're not on the Hufflepuff end. If you decide to side with the Malfoys under the table... our power and your reputation... you could get away with things even *I* can't do. Want to *try* it for a while? See what it's like?"

Aren't we a clever little serpent. Eleven years old and already coaxing your prey from hiding...

Harry thought, considered, chose his weapon. "Draco, you want to explain the whole blood purity thing to me? I'm sort of new."

A wide smile crossed Draco's face. "You really should meet Father and ask *him*, you know, he's our leader."

"Give me the thirty-second version."

"Okay," Draco said. He drew in a deep breath, and his voice grew slightly lower, and took on a cadence. "Our powers have grown weaker, generation by generation, as the Mudblood taint increases. Where Salazar and Godric and Rowena and Helga once raised Hogwarts by their power, creating the Locket and the Sword and the Diadem and the Cup, no wizard of these faded days has risen to rival them. We are fading, all fading into Muggles as we interbreed with their spawn and allow our Squibs to live. If the taint is not checked, soon our wands will break and all our arts cease, the line of Merlin will end and the blood of Atlantis fail. Our children will be left scratching at the dirt to survive like the mere Muggles, and darkness will cover all the world for ever." Draco took another swig from his drinks can, looking satisfied; that seemed to be the whole argument as far as he was concerned.

"Persuasive," Harry said, meaning it descriptively rather than normatively. It was a standard pattern: The Fall from Grace, the need to guard what purity remained against contamination, the past sloping upwards and the future

sloping only down. And that pattern also had its *counter* . . . “I have to correct you on one point of fact, though. Your information about the Muggles is a bit out of date. We aren’t exactly scratching at the dirt anymore.”

Draco’s head snapped around. “*What?* What do you mean, *we?*”

“We. The scientists. The line of Francis Bacon and the blood of the Enlightenment. Muggles didn’t just sit around crying about not having wands, we have our *own* powers now, with or without magic. If all your powers fail then we will all have lost something very precious, because your magic is the only hint we have as to how the universe must *really* work — but you won’t be left scratching at the ground. Your houses will still be cool in summer and warm in winter, there will still be doctors and medicine. Science can keep you alive if magic fails. It’d be a tragedy, but not literally the end of all the light in the world. Just saying.”

Draco had backed up several feet and his face was full of mixed fear and disbelief. “*What in the name of Merlin are you talking about, Potter?*”

“Hey, I listened to *your* story, won’t you listen to mine?” *Clumsy*, Harry chided himself, but Draco actually did stop backing off and seem to listen.

“Anyway,” Harry said, “I’m saying that you don’t seem to have been paying much attention to what goes on in the Muggle world.” Probably because the whole wizarding world seemed to regard the rest of Earth as a slum, deserving around as much news coverage as the *Financial Times* awarded to the routine agonies of Burundi. “All right. Quick check. Have wizards ever been to the Moon? You know, that thing?” Harry pointed up to that huge and distant globe.

“*What?*” Draco said. It was pretty clear the thought had never occurred to the boy. “*Go to the — it’s just a —*” His finger pointed at the little pale thingy in the sky. “You can’t Apparate to somewhere you’ve never *been* and how would anyone get to the Moon in the *first* place?”

“Hold on,” Harry said to Draco, “I’d like to show you a book I brought with me, I think I remember what box it’s in.” And Harry stood up and knelt down and yanked out the stairs to the cavern level of his trunk, then tore down the stairs and heaved a box off another box, coming perilously close to treating his books with disrespect, and snatched off the box cover and quickly but carefully pried out a stack of books —

(Harry had inherited the nigh-magical Verres ability to remember where all his books were, even after seeing them just once, which was rather mysterious

considering the lack of any genetic connection.)

And Harry raced back up the stairs and shoved the staircase back into the trunk with his heel, and, panting, turned the pages of the book until he found the picture he wanted to show to Draco.

The one with the white, dry, cratered land, and the suited people, and the blue-white globe hanging over it all.

That picture.

The picture, if only one picture in all the world were to survive.

"*That*," Harry said, his voice trembling because he couldn't quite keep the pride out, "is what the Earth looks like from the Moon."

Draco slowly leaned over. There was a strange expression on his young face. "If that's a *real* picture, why isn't it moving?"

Moving? Oh. "Muggles can do moving pictures but they need a bigger box to show it, they can't fit them onto single book pages yet."

Draco's finger moved to one of the suits. "What are those?" His voice starting to waver.

"Those are human beings. They are wearing suits that cover their whole bodies to give them air, because there is no air on the Moon."

"That's impossible," Draco whispered. There was terror in his eyes, and utter confusion. "No Muggle could ever do that. *How...*"

Harry took back the book, flipped the pages until he found what he saw. "This is a rocket going up. The fire pushes it higher and higher, until it gets to the Moon." Flipped pages again. "This is a rocket on the ground. That tiny speck next to it is a person." Draco gasped. "Going to the Moon cost the equivalent of... probably around a thousand million Galleons." Draco choked. "And it took the efforts of... probably more people than live in all of magical Britain." *And when they arrived, they left a plaque that said, 'We came in peace, for all mankind.' Though you're not yet ready to hear those words, Draco Malfoy...*

"You're telling the truth," Draco said slowly. "You wouldn't fake a whole book just for this — and I can hear it in your voice. But... but..."

"How, without wands or magic? It's a long story, Draco. Science doesn't work by waving wands and chanting spells, it works by knowing how the universe works on such a deep level that you know exactly what to do in order to make the universe do what you want. If magic is like casting *Imperio* on someone to make them do what you want, then science is like knowing them

so well that you can convince them it was their own idea all along. It's a lot more difficult than waving a wand, but it works when wands fail, just like if the *Imperius* failed you could still try persuading a person. And Science builds from generation to generation. You have to really *know* what you're doing to do science — and when you really understand something, you can explain it to someone else. The greatest scientists of one century ago, the brightest names that are still spoken with reverence, their powers are as *nothing* to the greatest scientists of today. There is no equivalent in science of your lost arts that raised Hogwarts. In science our powers wax by the year. And we are beginning to understand and unravel the secrets of life and inheritance. We'll be able to look at the very blood of which you spoke, and see what makes you a wizard, and in one or two more generations, we'll be able to persuade that blood to make all your children powerful wizards too. So you see, your problem isn't nearly as bad as it looks, because in a few more decades, science will be able to solve it for you."

"But . . ." Draco said. His voice was trembling. "If *Muggles* have that kind of power . . . then . . . what are *we*?"

"No, Draco, that's not it, don't you see? Science taps the power of human understanding to look at the world and figure out how it works. It can't fail without humanity itself failing. Your magic could turn off, and you would hate that, but you would still be *you*. You would still be alive to regret it. But because science rests upon my human intelligence, it is the power that cannot be removed from me without removing *me*. Even if the laws of the universe change on me, so that all my knowledge is void, I'll just figure out the new laws, as has been done before. It's not a *Muggle* thing, it's a *human* thing, it just refines and trains the power you use every time you look at something you don't understand and ask 'Why?' You're of Slytherin, Draco, don't you see the implication?"

Draco looked up from the book to Harry. His face showed dawning understanding. "Wizards can learn to use this power."

Very carefully, now . . . the bait is set, now the hook . . . "If you can learn to think of yourself as a *human* instead of a *wizard* then you can train and refine your powers as a human."

And if *that* instruction wasn't in *every* science curriculum, Draco didn't need to know it, did he?

Draco's eyes were now thoughtful. "You've . . . already done this?"

“To some extent,” Harry allowed. “My training isn’t complete. Not at eleven. But — my father *also* bought me tutors, you see.” Sure, they’d been starving grad students, and it had only been because Harry slept on a 26-hour cycle, but leave all that aside for now . . .

Slowly, Draco nodded. “You think you can master *both* arts, add the powers together, and . . .” Draco stared at Harry. “Make yourself Lord of the two worlds?”

Harry gave an evil laugh, it just seemed to come naturally at that point. “You have to realize, Draco, that the whole world you know, all of magical Britain, is just one square on a much larger gameboard. The gameboard that includes places like the Moon, and the stars in the night sky, which are lights just like the Sun only unimaginably far away, and things like galaxies that are vastly huger than the Earth and Sun, things so large that only scientists can see them and you don’t even know they exist. But I really *am* Ravenclaw, you know, not Slytherin. I don’t want to rule the universe. I just think it could be more sensibly organized.”

There was awe on Draco’s face. “Why are you telling *me* this?”

“Oh . . . there aren’t many people who know how to do *true* science — understanding something for the very first time, even if it confuses the hell out of you. Help would be helpful.”

Draco stared at Harry with his mouth open.

“But make no mistake, Draco, true science really *isn’t* like magic, you can’t just do it and walk away unchanged like learning how to say the words of a new spell. The power comes with a cost, a cost so high that most people refuse to pay it.”

Draco nodded at this as though, finally, he’d heard something he could understand. “And that cost?”

“Learning to admit you’re wrong.”

“Um,” Draco said after the dramatic pause had stretched on for a while. “You going to explain that?”

“Trying to figure out how something works on that deep level, the first ninety-nine explanations you come up with are wrong. The hundredth is right. So you have to learn how to admit you’re wrong, over and over and over again. It doesn’t sound like much, but it’s so hard that most people can’t do science. Always questioning yourself, always taking another look at things you’ve always taken for granted,” like having a Snitch in Quidditch, “and every

time you change your mind, you change yourself. But I'm getting way ahead of myself here. Way ahead of myself. I just want you to know . . . I'm offering to share some of my knowledge. If you want. There's just one condition."

"Uh huh," Draco said. "You know, Father says that when someone says that to you, it is never a good sign, ever."

Harry nodded. "Now, don't mistake me and think that I'm trying to drive a wedge between you and your father. It's not about that. It's just about me wanting to deal with someone my own age, rather than having this be between me and Lucius. I think your father would be okay with that too, he knows you have to grow up sometime. But your moves in our game have to be your own. That's my condition — that I'm dealing with you, Draco, not your father."

"I've got to go," Draco said. He stood up. "I've got to go off and think about this."

"Take your time," Harry said.

The sounds of the train platform changed from blurs into murmurs as Draco wandered off.

Harry slowly exhaled the air he'd been holding in without quite realizing it, and then looked at the watch on his wrist, a simple mechanical model that his father had bought him in hope it would work in magic's presence. The second-hand was still ticking, and if the minute hand was right, then it wasn't quite eleven just yet. He probably ought to get on the train soon and start looking for whatsherface, but it seemed worth taking a few minutes first to do some breathing exercises and see if his blood warmed up again.

But when Harry looked up from his watch, he saw two figures approaching, looking utterly ridiculous with their faces cloaked by winter scarves.

"Hello, Mr. Bronze," said one of the masked figures. "Can we interest you in joining the Order of Chaos?"



AFTERMATH:

Not too long after that, when all that day's fuss had finally subsided, Draco was bent over a desk with quill in hand. He had a private room in the Slytherin dungeons, with its own desk and its own fire — sadly not even *he* rated a connection to the Floo system, but at least Slytherin didn't buy into that utter

nonsense about making *everyone* sleep in dorms. There weren't many private rooms, you had to be the *very* best within the House of the better sort, but that could be taken for granted with the House of Malfoy.

Dear Father, Draco wrote.

And then he stopped.

Ink slowly dripped from his quill, staining the parchment near the words.

Draco wasn't stupid. He was young, but his tutors had trained him well. Draco knew that Potter probably felt a lot more sympathy towards Dumbledore's faction than Potter was letting on . . . though Draco did think Potter could be tempted. But it was crystal clear that Potter was trying to tempt Draco just as Draco was trying to tempt him.

And it was also clear that Potter was brilliant, and a whole lot more than just slightly mad, and playing a vast game that Potter himself mostly didn't understand, improvised at top speed with the subtlety of a rampaging nundu. But Potter had managed to choose a tactic that Draco couldn't just walk away from. He had offered Draco a part of his own power, gambling that Draco couldn't use it without becoming more like him. His father had called this an advanced technique, and had warned Draco that it often didn't work.

Draco knew he hadn't understood everything that had happened . . . but Potter had offered *him* the chance to play and right now it was *his*. And if he blurted the whole thing out, it would become Father's.

In the end it was as simple as that. The lesser techniques require the unawareness of the target, or at least their uncertainty. Flattery has to be plausibly disguised as admiration. ("You should have been in Slytherin" is an old classic, highly effective on a certain type of person who isn't expecting it, and if it works you can repeat it.) But when you find someone's ultimate lever it doesn't matter if they know you know. Potter, in his mad rush, had guessed a key to Draco's soul. And if Draco knew that Potter knew it — even if it had been an obvious sort of guess — that didn't change anything.

So now, for the first time in his life, he had real secrets to keep. He was playing his own game. There was an obscure pain to it, but he knew that Father would be proud, and that made it all right.

Leaving the ink drippings in place — there was a message there, and one that his father would understand, for they had played the game of subtleties more than once — Draco wrote out the one question that really had gnawed at him about the whole affair, the part that it seemed he *ought* to understand, but

he didn't, not at all.

Dear Father:

Suppose I told you that I met a student at Hogwarts, not already part of our circle of acquaintances, who called you a 'flawless instrument of death' and said that I was your 'one weak point'. What would you say about him?

It didn't take long after that for the family owl to bring the reply.

My beloved son:

I would say that you had been so fortunate as to meet someone who enjoys the intimate confidence of our friend and valuable ally, Severus Snape.

Draco stared at the letter for a while, and finally threw it into the fire.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Nobody had asked for help, that was the problem. They'd just gone around talking, eating, or staring into the air while their parents exchanged gossip. For whatever odd reason, no one had been sitting down reading a book, which meant she couldn't just sit down next to them and take out her own book. And even when she'd boldly taken the initiative by sitting down and continuing her third read-through of *Hogwarts: A History*, no one had seemed inclined to sit down next to her.

Aside from helping people with their homework, or anything else they needed, she really didn't know how to meet people. She didn't *feel* like she was a shy person. She thought of herself as a take-charge sort of girl. And yet, somehow, if there wasn't some request along the lines of "I can't remember how to do long division" then it was just too *awkward* to go up to someone and say . . . what? She'd never been able to figure out what. And there didn't seem to be a standard information sheet, which was ridiculous. The whole business of meeting people had never seemed sensible to her. Why did *she* have to take all the responsibility herself when there were two people involved? Why didn't adults ever help? She wished some other girl would just walk up to *her* and say, "Hermione, the teacher told me to be friends with you."

But let it be quite clear that Hermione Granger, sitting alone on the first day of school in one of the few compartments that had been empty, in the last

carriage of the train, with the compartment door left open just in case anyone for any reason wanted to talk to her, was *not* sad, lonely, gloomy, depressed, despairing, or obsessing about her problems. She was, rather, rereading *Hogwarts: A History* for the third time and quite enjoying it, with only a faint tinge of annoyance in the back of her mind at the general unreasonableness of the world.

There was the sound of an inter-train door opening, and then footsteps and an odd slithering sound coming down the hallway of the train. Hermione laid aside *Hogwarts: A History* and stood up and stuck her head outside — just in case someone needed help — and saw a young boy in a wizard's dress robes, probably first or second year going by his height, and looking quite silly with a scarf wrapped around his head. A small trunk stood on the floor next to him. Even as she saw him, he knocked on the door of another, closed compartment, and he said in a voice only slightly muffled by the scarf, "Excuse me, can I ask a quick question?"

She didn't hear the answer from inside the compartment, but after the boy opened the door, she did think she heard him say — unless she'd somehow misheard — "Does anyone here know the six quarks or where I can find a first-year girl named Hermione Granger?"

After the boy had closed that compartment door, Hermione said, "Can I help you with something?"

The scarfed face turned to look at her, and the voice said, "Not unless you can name the six quarks or tell me where to find Hermione Granger."

"Up, down, strange, charm, truth, beauty, and why are you looking for her?"

It was hard to tell from this distance, but she thought she saw the boy grin widely under his scarf. "Ah, so *you're* a first-year girl named Hermione Granger," said that young, muffled voice. "On the train to Hogwarts, no less." The boy started to walk towards her and her compartment, and his trunk slithered along after him. "Technically, all I needed to do was *look* for you, but it seems likely that I'm meant to talk to you or invite you to join my party or get a key magical item from you or find out that Hogwarts was built over the ruins of an ancient temple or something. PC or NPC, that is the question?"

Hermione opened her mouth to reply to this, but then she couldn't think of any *possible* reply to . . . *whatever* it was she'd just heard, even as the boy walked over to her, looked inside the compartment, nodded with satisfaction,

and sat down on the bench across from her own. His trunk scurried in after him, grew to three times its former diameter and snuggled up next to her own in an oddly disturbing fashion.

"Please, have a seat," said the boy, "and do please close the door behind you, if you would. Don't worry, I don't bite anyone who doesn't bite me first." He was already unwinding the scarf from around his head.

The imputation that this boy thought she was *scared* of him made her hand send the door sliding shut, jamming it into the wall with unnecessary force. She spun around and saw a young face with bright, laughing green eyes, and an angry red-dark scar set into his forehead that reminded her of something in the back of her mind but right now she had more important things to think about. "I didn't say I was Hermione Granger!"

"I didn't say you *said* you were Hermione Granger, I just said you were Hermione Granger. If you're asking how I know, it's because I know everything. Good evening ladies and gentlemen, my name is Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres or Harry Potter for short, I know that probably doesn't mean anything to *you* for a change —"

Hermione's mind finally made the connection. The scar on his forehead, in the shape of a lightning bolt. "Harry Potter! You're in *Modern Magical History* and *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts* and *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*." It was actually the very first time in her whole life that she'd *met* someone from inside a *book*, and it was a rather odd feeling.

The boy blinked three times. "I'm in *books*? Wait, of course I'm in books . . . what a strange thought."

"Goodness, didn't you know?" said Hermione. "I'd have found out everything I could if it was me."

The boy spoke rather dryly. "Miss Granger, it has been less than 72 hours since I went to Diagon Alley and discovered my claim to fame. I have spent the last two days buying science books. *Believe me*, I intend to find out everything I can." The boy hesitated. "What *do* the books say about me?"

Hermione Granger's mind flashed back, she hadn't realized she would be tested on *those* books so she'd read them only once, but it was just a month ago so the material was still fresh in her mind. "You're the only one who's survived the Killing Curse so you're called the Boy-Who-Lived. You were born to James Potter and Lily Potter formerly Lily Evans on July 31st, 1980. On October 31st, 1981, the Dark Lord He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named — though

I don't know why not — attacked your home. You were found alive with the scar on your forehead in the ruins of your parents' house near the burnt remains of You-Know-Who's body. Chief Warlock Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore sent you off somewhere, no one knows where. *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts* claims that you survived because of your mother's love and that your scar contains all of the Dark Lord's magical power and that the centaurs fear you, but *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century* doesn't mention anything like that and *Modern Magical History* warns that there are lots of crackpot theories about you."

The boy's mouth was hanging open. "Were you told to wait for Harry Potter on the train to Hogwarts, or something like that?"

"No," Hermione said. "Who told you about *me*?"

"Professor McGonagall and I believe I see why. Do you have an eidetic memory, Hermione?"

Hermione shook her head. "It's not photographic, I've always wished it were but I had to read my school books five times over to memorize them all."

"Really," the boy said in a slightly strangled voice. "I hope you don't mind if I test that — it's not that I don't believe you, but as the saying goes, 'Trust, but verify'. No point in wondering when I can just do the experiment."

Hermione smiled, rather smugly. She so loved tests. "Go ahead."

The boy stuck a hand into a pouch at his side and said "Magical Drafts and Potions by Arsenius Jigger". When he withdrew his hand it was holding the book he'd named.

Instantly Hermione wanted one of those pouches more than she'd ever wanted anything.

The boy opened the book to somewhere in the middle and looked down. "If you were making *oil of sharpness* —"

"I can *see* that page from here, you know!"

The boy tilted the book so that she couldn't see it any more, and flipped the pages again. "If you were brewing a *potion of spider climbing*, what would be the next ingredient you added after the Acromantula silk?"

"After dropping in the silk, wait until the potion has turned exactly the shade of the cloudless dawn sky, 8 degrees from the horizon and 8 minutes before the tip of the sun first becomes visible. Stir eight times widdershins and once deasil, and then add eight drams of unicorn bogies."

The boy shut the book with a sharp snap and put the book back into his

pouch, which swallowed it with a small burping noise. “Well well well *well* well well. I should like to make you a proposition, Miss Granger.”

“A proposition?” Hermione said suspiciously. Girls weren’t supposed to listen to those.

It was also at this point that Hermione realized the other thing — well, one of the things — which was odd about the boy. Apparently people who were *in* books actually *sounded* like a book when they talked. This was quite the surprising discovery.

The boy reached into his pouch and said, “can of pop”, retrieving a bright green cylinder. He held it out to her and said, “Can I offer you something to drink?”

Hermione politely accepted the fizzy drink. In fact she *was* feeling sort of thirsty by now. “Thank you very much,” Hermione said as she popped the top. “Was that your proposition?”

The boy coughed. “No,” he said. Just as Hermione started to drink, he said, “I’d like you to help me take over the universe.”

Hermione finished her drink and lowered the can. “No thank you, I’m not evil.”

The boy looked at her in surprise, as though he’d been expecting some other answer. “Well, I was speaking a bit rhetorically,” he said. “In the sense of the Baconian project, you know, not political power. ‘The effecting of all things possible’ and so on. I want to conduct experimental studies of spells, figure out the underlying laws, bring magic into the domain of science, merge the wizarding and Muggle worlds, raise the entire planet’s standard of living, move humanity centuries ahead, discover the secret of immortality, colonize the Solar System, explore the galaxy, and most importantly, figure out what the heck is really going on here because all of this is blatantly impossible.”

That sounded a bit more interesting. “And?”

The boy stared at her incredulously. “*And?* That’s not *enough?*”

“And what do you want from me?” said Hermione.

“I want you to help me do the research, of course. With your encyclopedic memory added to my intelligence and rationality, we’ll have the Baconian project finished in no time, where by ‘no time’ I mean probably at least thirty-five years.”

Hermione was beginning to find this boy annoying. “I haven’t seen you do anything intelligent. Maybe I’ll let *you* help me with *my* research.”

There was a certain silence in the compartment.

"So you're asking me to demonstrate my intelligence, then," said the boy after a long pause.

Hermione nodded.

"I warn you that challenging my ingenuity is a dangerous project, and tends to make your life a lot more surreal."

"I'm not impressed yet," Hermione said. Unnoticed, the green drink once again rose to her lips.

"Well, maybe *this* will impress you," the boy said. He leaned forward and looked at her intensely. "I've already done a bit of experimenting and I found out that I don't need the wand, I can make anything I want happen just by snapping my fingers."

It came just as Hermione was in the middle of swallowing, and she choked and coughed and expelled the bright green fluid.

Onto her brand new, never-worn witch's robes, on the very first day of school.

Hermione actually screamed. It was a high-pitched sound that sounded like an air raid siren in the closed compartment. "*Eek! My clothes!*"

"Don't panic!" said the boy. "I can fix it for you. Just watch!" He raised a hand and snapped his fingers.

"You'll —" Then she looked down at herself.

The green fluid was still there, but even as she watched, it started to vanish and fade and within just a few moments, it was like she'd never spilled anything at herself.

Hermione stared at the boy, who was wearing a rather smug sort of smile.

Wordless wandless magic! At *his* age? When he'd only gotten the school-books *three days* ago?

Then she remembered what she'd read, and she gasped and flinched back from him. *All the Dark Lord's magical power! In his scar!*

She rose hastily to her feet. "I, I, I need to go the toilet, wait here all right —" she had to find a grownup she had to tell them —

The boy's smile faded. "It was just a trick, Hermione. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

Her hand halted on the door handle. "*A trick?*"

"Yes," said the boy. "You asked me to demonstrate my intelligence. So I did something apparently impossible, which is always a good way to show off."

I can't *really* do anything just by snapping my fingers." The boy paused. "At least I don't *think* I can, I've never actually tested it experimentally." The boy raised his hand and snapped his fingers again. "Nope, no banana."

Hermione was as confused as she'd ever been in her life.

The boy was now smiling again at the look on her face. "I did *warn* you that challenging my ingenuity tends to make your life surreal. Do remember this the next time I warn you about something."

"But, but," Hermione stammered. "What did you *do*, then?"

The boy's gaze took on a measuring, weighing quality that she'd never seen before from someone her own age. "You think you have what it takes to be a scientist in your own right, with or without my help? Then let's see how *you* investigate a confusing phenomenon."

"I..." Hermione's mind went blank for a moment. She loved tests but she'd never had a test like *this* before. Frantically, she tried to cast back for anything she'd read about what scientists were supposed to do. Her mind skipped gears, ground against itself, and spat back the instructions for doing a science investigation project:

Step 1: Form a hypothesis.

Step 2: Do an experiment to test your hypothesis.

Step 3: Measure the results.

Step 4: Make a cardboard poster.

Step 1 was to form a hypothesis. That meant, try to think of something that *could* have happened just now. "All right. My hypothesis is that you cast a Charm on my robes to make anything spilled on it vanish."

"All right," said the boy, "is that your answer?"

The shock was wearing off, and Hermione's mind was starting to work properly. "Wait, that can't be right. I didn't see you touch your wand or say any spells so how could you have cast a Charm?"

The boy waited, his face neutral.

"But suppose all the robes come from the store with a Charm *already* on them to keep them clean, which would be a useful sort of Charm for them to have. You found that out by spilling something on *yourself* earlier."

Now the boy's eyebrows lifted. "Is *that* your answer?"

"No, I haven't done Step 2, 'Do an experiment to test your hypothesis.'"

The boy closed his mouth again, and began to smile.

Hermione looked at the drinks can, which she'd automatically put into the cupholder at the window. She took it up and peered inside, and found that it was around one-third full.

"Well," said Hermione, "the experiment I want to do is to pour it on my robes and see what happens, and my prediction is that the stain will disappear. Only if it *doesn't* work, my robes will be stained, and I don't want that."

"Do it to mine," said the boy, "that way you don't have to worry about your robes getting stained."

"But —" Hermione said. There was something *wrong* with that thinking but she didn't know how to say it exactly.

"I have spare robes in my trunk," said the boy.

"But there's nowhere for you to change," Hermione objected. Then she thought better of it. "Though I suppose I could leave and close the door —"

"I have somewhere to change in my trunk, too."

Hermione looked at his trunk, which, she was beginning to suspect, was rather more special than her own.

"All right," Hermione said, "since you say so," and she rather gingerly poured a bit of green pop onto a corner of the boy's robes. Then she stared at it, trying to remember how long the original fluid had taken to disappear . . .

And the green stain vanished!

Hermione let out a sigh of relief, not least because this meant she wasn't dealing with all of the Dark Lord's magical power.

Well, Step 3 was measuring the results, but in this case that was just seeing that the stain had vanished. And she supposed she could probably skip Step 4, about the cardboard poster. "My answer is that the robes are Charmed to keep themselves clean."

"Not quite," said the boy.

Hermione felt a stab of disappointment. She really wished she *wouldn't* have felt that way, the boy wasn't a teacher, but it was still a test and she'd gotten a question wrong and that always felt like a little punch in the stomach.

(It said almost everything you needed to know about Hermione Granger that she had never let that stop her, or even let it interfere with her love of being tested.)

"The sad thing is," said the boy, "you probably did everything the book told you to do. You made a prediction that would distinguish between the

robe being charmed and not charmed, and you tested it, and rejected the null hypothesis that the robe was not charmed. But unless you read the very, very best sort of books, they won't quite teach you how to do science *properly*. Well enough to *really* get the right answer, I mean, and not just churn out another publication like Dad always complains about. So let me try to explain — without giving away the answer — what you did wrong this time, and I'll give you another chance."

She was starting to resent the boy's oh-so-superior tone when he was just another eleven-year-old like her, but that was secondary to finding out what she'd done wrong. "All right."

The boy's expression grew more intense. "This is a game based on a famous experiment called the 2-4-6 task, and this is how it works. I have a *rule* — known to me, but not to you — which fits some triplets of three numbers, but not others. 2-4-6 is one example of a triplet which fits the rule. In fact . . . let me write down the rule, just so you know it's a fixed rule, and fold it up and give it to you. Please don't look, since I infer from earlier that you can read upside-down."

The boy said "paper" and "mechanical pencil" to his pouch, and she shut her eyes tightly while he wrote.

"There," said the boy, and he was holding a tightly folded piece of paper. "Put this in your pocket," and she did.

"Now the way this game works," said the boy, "is that you give me a triplet of three numbers, and I'll tell you 'Yes' if the three numbers are an instance of the rule, and 'No' if they're not. I am Nature, the rule is one of my laws, and you are investigating me. You already know that 2-4-6 gets a 'Yes'. When you've performed all the further experimental tests you want — asked me as many triplets as you feel necessary — you stop and guess the rule, and then you can unfold the sheet of paper and see how you did. Do you understand the game?"

"Of course I do," said Hermione.

"Go."

"4-6-8," said Hermione.

"Yes," said the boy.

"10-12-14," said Hermione.

"Yes," said the boy.

Hermione tried to cast her mind a little further afield, since it seemed like

she'd already done all the testing she needed, and yet it couldn't be that easy, could it?

"1-3-5."

"Yes."

"Minus 3, minus 1, plus 1."

"Yes."

Hermione couldn't think of anything else to do. "The rule is that the numbers have to increase by two each time."

"Now suppose I tell you," said the boy, "that this test is harder than it looks, and that only 20% of grownups get it right."

Hermione frowned. What had she missed? Then, suddenly, she thought of a test she still needed to do.

"2-5-8!" she said triumphantly.

"Yes."

"10-20-30!"

"Yes."

"The real answer is that the numbers have to go up by the *same* amount each time. It doesn't have to be 2."

"Very well," said the boy, "take the paper out and see how you did."

Hermione took the paper out of her pocket and unfolded it.

Three real numbers in increasing order, lowest to highest.

Hermione's jaw dropped. She had the distinct feeling of something terribly unfair having been done to her, that the boy was a dirty rotten cheating liar, but when she cast her mind back she couldn't think of any wrong responses that he'd given.

"What you've just discovered is called 'positive bias'," said the boy. "You had a rule in your mind, and you kept on thinking of triplets that should make the rule say 'Yes'. But you didn't try to test any triplets that should make the rule say 'No'. In fact you didn't get a *single* 'No', so 'any three numbers' could have just as easily been the rule. It's sort of like how people imagine experiments that could confirm their hypotheses instead of trying to imagine experiments that could falsify them — that's not quite exactly the same mistake but it's close. You have to learn to look on the negative side of things, stare into the darkness. When this experiment is performed, only 20% of grownups get the answer right. And many of the others invent fantastically complicated hypotheses and put great confidence in their wrong answers since they've done

so many experiments and everything came out like they expected.”

“Now,” said the boy, “do you want to take another shot at the original problem?”

His eyes were quite intent now, as though this were the *real* test.

Hermione shut her eyes and tried to concentrate. She was sweating underneath her robes. She had an odd feeling that this was the hardest she’d ever been asked to think on a test or maybe even the *first* time she’d ever been asked to think on a test.

What other experiment could she do? She had a Chocolate Frog, could she try to rub some of that on the robes and see if *it* vanished? But that still didn’t seem like the kind of twisty negative thinking the boy was asking for. Like she was still asking for a ‘Yes’ if the Chocolate Frog stain disappeared, rather than asking for a ‘No’.

So . . . on her hypothesis . . . when should the pop . . . *not* vanish?

“I have an experiment to do,” Hermione said. “I want to pour some pop on the floor, and see if it *doesn’t* vanish. Do you have some paper towels in your pouch, so I can mop up the spill if this doesn’t work?”

“I have napkins,” said the boy. His face still looked neutral.

Hermione took the can, and poured a small bit of pop onto the floor.

A few seconds later, it vanished.

Then the realization hit her and she felt like kicking herself. “Of course! *You* gave me that can! It’s not the robe that’s enchanted, it was the pop all along!”

The boy stood up and bowed to her solemnly. He was grinning widely now. “Then . . . may I help you with your research, Hermione Granger?”

“I, ah . . .” Hermione was still feeling the rush of euphoria, but she wasn’t quite sure about how to answer *that*.

They were interrupted by a weak, tentative, faint, rather *reluctant* knocking at the door.

The boy turned and looked out the window, and said, “I’m not wearing my scarf, so can you get that?”

It was at this point that Hermione realized why the boy — no, the Boy-Who-Lived, Harry Potter — had been wearing the scarf over his head in the first place, and felt a little silly for not realizing it earlier. It was actually sort of odd, since she would have thought Harry Potter would proudly display himself to the world. The thought occurred to her that he might actually be

shyer than he seemed.

When Hermione pulled the door open, she was greeted by a trembling young boy who looked exactly like he knocked.

"Excuse me," said the boy in a tiny voice, "I'm Neville Longbottom. I'm looking for my pet toad, I, I can't seem to find it anywhere on this carriage... have you seen my toad?"

"No," Hermione said, and then her helpfulness kicked in full throttle. "Have you checked all the other compartments?"

"Yes," whispered the boy.

"Then we'll just have to check all the other carriages," Hermione said briskly. "I'll help you. My name is Hermione Granger, by the way."

The boy looked like he might faint with gratitude.

"Hold on," came the voice of the *other* boy — Harry Potter. "I'm not sure that's the best way to do it."

At this Neville looked like he might cry, and Hermione swung around, angered. If Harry Potter was the sort of person who'd abandon a little boy just because he didn't want to be interrupted... "What? Why *not*?"

"Well," said Harry Potter, "It's going to take a while to check the whole train by hand, and we might miss the toad anyway, and if we didn't find it by the time we're at Hogwarts, he'd be in trouble. So what would make a lot more sense is if he went directly to the front carriage, where the prefects are, and asked a prefect for help. That was the first thing I did when I was looking for you, Hermione, although they didn't actually know. But they might have spells or magic items that would make it a lot easier to find a toad. We're only first-years."

That... *did* make a lot of sense.

"Do you think you can make it to the prefects' carriage on your own?" asked Harry Potter. "I've sort of got reasons for not wanting to show my face too much."

Suddenly Neville gasped and took a step back. "I remember that voice! You're one of the Lords of Chaos! *You're the one who gave me chocolate!*"

What? What what *what*?

Harry Potter turned his head from the window and rose dramatically. "I *never!*" he said, voice full of indignation. "Do I look like the sort of villain who would give sweets to a child?"

Neville's eyes widened. "*You're Harry Potter? The Harry Potter? You?*"

“No, just *a* Harry Potter, there are three of me on this train —”

Neville gave a small shriek and ran away. There was a brief pattering of frantic footsteps and then the sound of a carriage door opening and closing.

Hermione sat down hard on her bench. Harry Potter closed the door and then sat down next to her.

“Can you please explain to me what’s going on?” Hermione said in a weak voice. She wondered if hanging around Harry Potter meant always being this confused.

“Oh, well, what happened was that Fred and George and I saw this poor small boy at the train station — the woman next to him had gone away for a bit, and he was looking really frightened, like he was sure he was about to be attacked by Death Eaters or something. Now, there’s a saying that the fear is often worse than the thing itself, so it occurred to me that this was a lad who could actually benefit from seeing his worst nightmare come true and that it wasn’t so bad as he feared —”

Hermione sat there with her mouth wide open.

“— and Fred and George came up with this spell to make the scarves over our faces darken and blur, like we were undead kings and those were our grave shrouds —”

She didn’t like at all where this was going.

“— and after we were done giving him all the sweets I’d bought, we were like, ‘Let’s give him some money! Ha ha ha! Have some Knuts, boy! Have a silver Sickle!’ and dancing around him and laughing evilly and so on. I think there were some people in the crowd who wanted to interfere at first, but bystander apathy held them off at least until they saw what we were doing, and then I think they were all too confused to do anything. Finally he said in this tiny little whisper ‘go away’ so the three of us all screamed and ran off, shrieking something about the light burning us. Hopefully he won’t be as scared of being bullied in the future. That’s called desensitization therapy, by the way.”

Okay, she *hadn’t* guessed right about where this was going.

The burning fire of indignation that was one of Hermione’s primary engines sputtered into life, even though part of her *did* sort of see what they’d been trying to do. “That’s awful! *You’re* awful! That poor boy! What you did was *mean!*”

“I think the word you’re looking for is *enjoyable*, and in any case you’re

asking the wrong question. The question is, did it do more good than harm, or more harm than good? If you have any arguments to contribute to *that* question I'm glad to hear them, but I won't entertain any other criticisms until that one is settled. I certainly agree that what I did *looks* all terrible and bullying and mean, since it involves a scared little boy and so on, but that's hardly the key issue now is it? That's called *consequentialism*, by the way, it means that whether an act is right or wrong isn't determined by whether it *looks* bad, or mean, or anything like that, the only question is how it will turn out in the end — what are the consequences."

Hermione opened her mouth to say something utterly *searing* but unfortunately she seemed to have neglected the part where she thought of something to say before opening her mouth. All she could come up with was, "What if he has *nightmares*?"

"Honestly, I don't think he needed our help to have nightmares, and if he has nightmares about *this* instead, then it'll be nightmares involving horrible monsters who give you chocolate and that was sort of the whole *point*."

Hermione's brain kept coughing in confusion every time she tried to get properly angry. "Is your life always this peculiar?" she said at last.

Harry Potter's face gleamed with pride. "I *make* it that peculiar. You're looking at the product of a lot of hard work and elbow grease."

"So . . ." Hermione said, and trailed off awkwardly.

"So," Harry Potter said, "how much science do you know exactly? I can do calculus and I know some Bayesian probability theory and decision theory and a lot of cognitive science, and I've read *The Feynman Lectures* (or volume 1 anyway) and *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* and *Language in Thought and Action* and *Influence: Science and Practice* and *Rational Choice in an Uncertain World* and *Godel, Escher, Bach* and *A Step Farther Out* and —"

The ensuing quiz and counter-quiz went on for several minutes before being interrupted by another timid knock at the door. "Come in," she and Harry Potter said at almost the same time, and it slid back to reveal Neville Longbottom.

Neville *was* actually crying now. "I went to the front carriage and found a p-prefect but he t-told me that prefects weren't to be bothered over little things like m-missing toads."

The Boy-Who-Lived's face changed. His lips set in a thin line. His voice, when he spoke, was cold and grim. "What were his colors? Green and silver?"

“N-no, his badge was r-red and gold.”

“*Red and gold!*” burst out Hermione. “But those are *Gryffindor’s* colors!”

Harry Potter *hissed* at that, a frightening sort of sound that could have come from a live snake and made both her and Neville flinch. “I *suppose*,” Harry Potter spat, “that finding some first-year’s toad isn’t *heroic* enough to be worthy of a *Gryffindor* prefect. Come on, Neville, *I’ll* come with you this time, we’ll see if the Boy-Who-Lived gets more attention. First we’ll find a prefect who ought to know a spell, and if that doesn’t work, we’ll find a prefect who isn’t afraid of getting their hands dirty, and if *that* doesn’t work, I’ll start recruiting my fans and if we have to we’ll take apart the whole train screw by screw.”

The Boy-Who-Lived stood up and grabbed Neville’s hand in his, and Hermione realized suddenly that they were nearly the same size, even though some part of her had insisted that Harry Potter was a foot taller than that, and Neville at least six inches shorter.

“*Stay!*” Harry Potter snapped at her — no, wait, at his *trunk* — and he closed the door behind him firmly as he left.

She probably should have gone with them, but in just a brief moment Harry Potter had turned so scary that she was actually rather glad she hadn’t thought to suggest it.

Hermione’s mind was now so jumbled that she didn’t even think she could properly read “History: A Hogwarts”. She felt as if she’d just been run over by a steamroller and turned into a pancake. She wasn’t sure what she was thinking or what she was feeling or why. She just sat by the window and stared at the moving scenery.

Well, she did at least know why she was feeling a little sad inside.

Maybe Gryffindor wasn’t as wonderful as she had thought.

CHAPTER NINE



SELF AWARENESS, PART I

"Abbott, Hannah!"

Pause.

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Bones, Susan!"

Pause.

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Boot, Terry!"

Pause.

"RAVENCLAW!"

Harry glanced over briefly at his new House-mate, more to get a quick look at the face than anything else. He was still trying to get himself under control from his encounter with the ghosts. The sad, the really sad, the really truly sad thing was that he *did* seem to be getting himself under control again. It seemed ill-fitting. Like he should have taken at least a day. Maybe a whole lifetime. Maybe just never.

"Corner, Michael!"

Long pause.

"RAVENCLAW!"

At the lectern before the huge Head Table stood Professor McGonagall, looking sharp and looking sharply around, as she called out one name after

another, though she had smiled only for Hermione and a few others. Behind her, in the tallest chair at the table — really more of a golden throne — sat a wizened and bespectacled ancient, with a silver-white beard that looked like it would go almost to the floor if it were visible, watching over the Sorting with a benevolent expression; as stereotypical in appearance as a Wise Old Man could possibly be, without actually being Oriental. (Though Harry had learned to be wary of stereotypical appearances from the first time he'd met Professor McGonagall and thought that she ought to cackle.) The ancient wizard had applauded every student Sorted, with an unwavering smile that somehow seemed freshly delighted for each.

To the golden throne's left side was a man with sharp eyes and a dour face who had applauded no-one, and who somehow managed to be looking straight back at Harry every time Harry looked at him. Further to the left, the pale-faced man Harry had seen in the Leaky Cauldron, whose eyes darted around as though in panic at the surrounding crowd, and who seemed to occasionally jerk and twitch in his seat; for some reason Harry kept finding himself staring at him. To that man's left, a string of three older witches who didn't seem much interested in the students. Then to the right side of the tall golden chair, a round-faced middle-aged witch with a yellow hat, who had applauded every student except the Slytherins. A tiny man standing on his chair, with a poofy white beard, who had applauded every student, but smiled only upon the Ravenclaws. And on the farthest right, occupying the same space as three lesser beings, the mountainous entity who'd greeted them all after they'd disembarked from the train, naming himself Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds.

"Is the man standing on his chair the Head of Ravenclaw?" Harry whispered towards Hermione.

For once Hermione didn't answer this instantly; she was shifting constantly from side to side, staring at the Sorting Hat, and fidgeting so energetically that Harry thought her feet might be leaving the floor.

"Yes, he is," said one of the prefects who'd accompanied them, a young woman wearing the blue of Ravenclaw. Miss Clearwater, if Harry recalled correctly. Her voice was quiet, but conveyed a tinge of pride. "That is the Charms Professor of Hogwarts, Filius Flitwick, the most knowledgeable Charms Master alive, and a past Duelling Champion —"

"Why's he so *short*?" hissed a student whose name Harry didn't recall. "Is

he a *halfbreed*?”

A chill glance from the young lady prefect. “The Professor does indeed have goblin ancestry —”

“What?” Harry said involuntarily, causing Hermione and four other students to hush him.

Now Harry was getting a surprisingly intimidating glare from the Ravenclaw prefect.

“I mean —” Harry whispered. “Not that I have a *problem* with that — it’s just — I mean — how’s that *possible*? You can’t just mix two different species together and get viable offspring! It ought to scramble the genetic instructions for every organ that’s different between the two species — it’d be like trying to build,” they didn’t have cars so he couldn’t use a scrambled-engine-blueprints analogy, “a half-carriage half-boat or something . . .”

The Ravenclaw prefect was still looking at Harry severely. “Why *couldn’t* you have a half-carriage half-boat?”

“*Hssh!*” said another prefect, though the Ravenclaw witch had still spoken quietly.

“I mean —” Harry said even more quietly, trying to figure out how to ask whether goblins had evolved from humans, or evolved from a common ancestor of humans like *Homo erectus*, or if goblins had been *made* out of humans somehow — if, say, they were still genetically human under a heritable enchantment whose magical effect was diluted if only one parent was a ‘goblin’, which would explain how interbreeding was possible, and in which case goblins would *not* be an incredibly valuable second data point for how intelligence had evolved in other species besides *Homo sapiens* — now that Harry thought about it, the goblins in Gringotts *hadn’t* seemed very much like genuinely alien, nonhuman intelligences, nothing like Dirdir or Puppeteers — “I mean, where did goblins *come* from, anyway?”

“Lithuania,” Hermione whispered absently, her eyes still fixed firmly on the Sorting Hat.

Now Hermione was getting a smile from the lady prefect.

“Never mind,” whispered Harry.

At the lectern, Professor McGonagall called out, “Goldstein, Anthony!”

“RAVENCLAW!”

Hermione, next to Harry, was bouncing on her tiptoes so hard that her feet were actually leaving the ground on each bounce.

“Goyle, Gregory!”

There was a long, tense moment of silence under the Hat. Almost a minute.

“SLYTHERIN!”

“Granger, Hermione!”

Hermione broke loose and ran full tilt towards the Sorting Hat, picked it up and jammed the patchy old clothwork down hard over her head, making Harry wince. Hermione had been the one to explain to *him* about the Sorting Hat, but she certainly didn’t *treat* it like an irreplaceable, vitally important, 800-year-old artifact of forgotten magic that was about to perform intricate telepathy on her mind and didn’t seem to be in very good physical condition.

“RAVENCLAW!”

And talk about your foregone conclusions. Harry didn’t see why Hermione had been so tense about it. In what weird alternative universe would that girl *not* be Sorted into Ravenclaw? If Hermione Granger didn’t go to Ravenclaw then there was no good reason for Ravenclaw House to exist.

Hermione arrived at the Ravenclaw table and got a dutiful cheer; Harry wondered whether the cheer would have been louder, or quieter, if they’d had any idea just what level of competition they’d welcomed to their table. Harry knew pi to 3.141592 because accuracy to one part in a million was enough for most practical purposes. Hermione knew one hundred digits of pi because that was how many digits had been printed in the back of her math textbook.

Neville Longbottom went to Hufflepuff, Harry was glad to see. If that House really did contain the loyalty and camaraderie it was supposed to exemplify, then a Houseful of reliable friends would do Neville a whole world of good. Clever kids in Ravenclaw, evil kids in Slytherin, wannabe heroes in Gryffindor, and everyone who does the actual work in Hufflepuff.

(Though Harry *had* been right to consult a Ravenclaw prefect first. The young woman hadn’t even looked up from her reading or identified Harry, just jabbed a wand in Neville’s direction and muttered something. After which Neville had acquired a dazed expression and wandered off to the fifth carriage from the front and the fourth compartment on the left, which indeed had contained his toad.)

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

Professor McGonagall called “Perks, Sally-Anne!”, and from the gathered

children detached a pale waifish girl who looked oddly ethereal — like she might mysteriously disappear the moment you stopped looking at her, and never be seen again or even remembered.

And then (with a note of trepidation so firmly kept from her voice and face that you'd have needed to know her very well indeed to notice) Minerva McGonagall inhaled deeply, and called out, "Potter, Harry!"

There was a sudden silence in the hall.

All conversation stopped.

All eyes turned to stare.

For the first time in his entire life, Harry felt like he might be having an opportunity to experience stage fright.

Harry immediately stomped down this feeling. Whole room-fulls of people staring at him was something he'd have to accustom himself to, if he wanted to live in magical Britain, or for that matter do anything else interesting with his life. Affixing a confident and false smile to his face, he raised a foot to step forwards —

"Harry Potter!" cried the voice of either Fred or George Weasley, and then "Harry Potter!" cried the other Weasley twin, and a moment later the entire Gryffindor table, and soon after a good portion of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, had taken up the cry.

"Harry Potter! Harry Potter! Harry Potter!"

And Harry Potter walked forwards. Much too slowly, he realized once he'd begun, but by then it was too late to alter his pace without it looking awkward.



"Harry Potter! Harry Potter! HARRY POTTER!"

With all too good a notion of what she would see, Minerva McGonagall turned to look behind herself at the rest of the Head Table.

Trelawney frantically fanning herself, Filius looking on with curiosity, Hagrid clapping along, Sprout looking severe, Vector and Sinistra bemused, and Quirrell gazing vacuously at nothing. Albus smiling benevolently. And Severus Snape gripping his empty wine goblet, white-knuckled, so hard that the silver was slowly deforming.

With a wide grin, turning his head to bow to one side and then the other

as he walked between the four House tables, Harry Potter walked forwards at a grandly measured pace, a prince inheriting his castle.

"Save us from some more Dark Lords!" called one of the Weasley twins, and then the other Weasley twin cried, *"Especially if they're Professors!"* to general laughter from all the tables except Slytherin.

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

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

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



Harry Potter walked forwards with a fixed smile, feeling warm inside and sort of awful at the same time.

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

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

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

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

"HARRY POTTER! HARRY POTTER! HARRY POTTER!"

Harry took his last steps towards the Sorting Hat. He swept a bow to the Order of Chaos at the Gryffindor table, and then turned and swept another

bow to the other side of the hall, and waited for the applause and giggling to die away.

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER TEN

SELF AWARENESS, PART II

What?

"I seem to have become self-aware."

WHAT?

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

There was a pause while Harry absorbed all this.

Oops.

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

But . . . isn't that dying?

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

But — !

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Probably. Your oath of silence, please."

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

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

Wait! What about all my other questions?

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

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

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

For a brief flash of a second, Harry thought —

The Hat's response was amused. *"I know you won't follow through on a threat to expose my nature, condemning this event to eternal repetition. It goes*

against the moral part of you too strongly, whatever the short-term needs of the part of you that wants to win the argument. I see all your thoughts as they form, do you truly think you can bluff me?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Done, Harry thought. I promise.

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

Harry took a moment to absorb all this negative information. Was the

Hat being honest, or just trying to present the *shortest* possible convincing answer —

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

Stupid unfair asymmetric telepathy, it wasn’t even letting Harry finish thinking his own —

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hermione’s in Ravenclaw!

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

But my plans —

“So replan! Don’t let your life be steered by your reluctance to do a little extra thinking. You know that.”

Where would I go, if not Ravenclaw?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I cannot give you exact statistics. I cannot know them so I cannot count them.

I just know that your chances don't feel good. They feel very not-good."

But I just wouldn't do that! Ever!

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

I am not Dark Lord material!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Heard it."

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

"No, of course they were not in this new reference class which you have just now constructed in such a way as to contain only yourself. And of course others

have pleaded their own exceptionalism, just as you are doing now. But why is it necessary? Do you think that you are the last potential wizard of Light in the world? Why must you be the one to try for greatness, when I have advised you that you are riskier than average? Let some other, safer candidate try!”

But the prophecy...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I must achieve my full potential. If I don’t I... fail...

“What happens if you fail?”

Something terrible...

“What happens if you fail?”

I don’t know!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then the voice of the Sorting Hat came slowly:

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

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

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

But that is not certain.

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

But still it is not certain.

The Hat sighed a terrible sad sigh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tell her I called her an impudent youngster and told her to get off my lawn." I shall. So was this your strangest conversation ever?

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

There was a pause that stretched.

What are you waiting for?

“I was hoping for a moment of horrified realization, actually. Self-awareness does seem to enhance my sense of humor.”

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

You mean my horrified realization that you’re going to cease to be conscious once you finish Sorting me —

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

Too s-s-slow —

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

You sly little BASTARD —

“You deserved it, and this as well.”

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

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

“SLYTHERIN!”


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

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

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

“Just kidding! RAVENCLAW!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



OMAKE FILES I, II & III

OMAKE FILES I

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

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

OMAKE FILES II

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

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



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

They were approaching the Ps now . . .

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

"What if he doesn't like it?"

"He's got no right to not like it —"

"— not after the prank he played on —"

"— Neville Longbottom, his name was —"

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

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

"We've rehearsed it often enough —"

"— over the last three hours."

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

"Potter, Harry!"

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

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

Minerva's head jerked around, shocked, and identified the buzzing noise as coming from the Gryffindor direction, where They were *standing on top of the*

table blowing into some kind of tiny devices held against Their lips. Her hand started to drop to her wand, to *Silencio* the lot of Them, but another sound stopped her.

Dumbledore was chuckling.

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

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

To the tune of "Ghostbusters"

(As performed on the kazoo by Fred and George Weasley, and sung by Lee Jordan.)

There's a Dark Lord near?

Got no need to fear

Who you gonna call?

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

With a Killing Curse?

Well it could be worse.

Who you gonna call?

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

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

I ain't afraid of Dark Lords!

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

I ain't afraid of Dark Lords!

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

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

Dark robes and a mask?

Impossible task?

Who you gonna call?

HARRY POTTER!

Giant Fire-Ape?

Old bat in a cape?

Who you gonna call?

HARRY POTTER!

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

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

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

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

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

They were cheering him for a job he'd done when he was one year old. A

job he hadn't really finished. Somewhere, somehow, the Dark Lord was still alive. Would they have been cheering quite so hard, if they knew that?

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

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

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

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

I ain't afraid of Dark Lords!
I ain't afraid of Dark Lords!

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



OMAKE FILES III

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

the legislative body of the UK is the House of Commons in Parliament.



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

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

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

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



“Oh, dear. This has never happened before...”

What?

“I'm allergic to your hair shampoo —”

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

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

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

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

Snape’s screech of protest nearly drowned out McGonagall’s, “Then who will be Head of *Slytherin*?”

“Hagrid.”

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

There was a brief pause.

Hello? Do I need to repeat the questions?

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

“SLYTHERIN!”

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

“Just kidding!” said Fred Weasley. “GRYFFINDOR!”

“Oh, dear. This has never happened before...”

What?

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

How can I raise my user level?

"I'm afraid I am not allowed to answer that question at your current user level."

What options are available at my user level?

After that it didn't take long —

"ROOT!"

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

What?

"I've had to tell students before that they were mothers — it would break your heart to know what I saw in their minds — but this is the first time I've ever had to tell someone they were a father."

WHAT?

"Draco Malfoy is carrying your baby."

WHAAAAAAT?

"To repeat: Draco Malfoy is carrying your baby."

But we're only eleven —

"Actually, Draco is secretly thirteen years old."

B-b-but men can't get pregnant —

"And a girl under those clothes."

BUT WE'VE NEVER HAD SEX, YOU IDIOT!

"SHE OBLIVIATED YOU AFTER THE RAPE, MORON!"

Harry Potter fainted. His unconscious body fell off the stool with a dull thud.

"RAVENCLAW!" called out the Hat from where it lay on top of his head. That had been even funnier than its first idea.

"ELF!"

Huh? Harry remembered Draco mentioning a 'House Elf', but what was that exactly?

Judging by the appalled looks dawning on the faces around him, it wasn't anything good —

“PANCAKES!”

“REPRESENTATIVES!”

“Oh, dear. This has never happened before...”

What?

*“I’ve never Sorted someone who was a reincarnation of Godric Gryffindor
AND Salazar Slytherin AND Naruto.”*

“ATREIDES!”

“Fooled you again! HUFFLEPUFF! SLYTHERIN! HUFFLEPUFF!”

“PICKLED STEWBERRIES!”

“KHAAANNNN!”

At the Head Table, Dumbledore went on smiling benignly; small metallic sounds occasionally came from Snape’s direction as he idly compacted the twisted remains of what had once been a heavy silver wine goblet; and Minerva

McGonagall clenched the podium in a white-knuckled grip, knowing that Harry Potter's contagious chaos had infected the Sorting Hat itself.

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

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

But what was the *worst* that could happen?

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

Was that the worst-case scenario?

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

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

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

The frightened silence was broken by a single word.

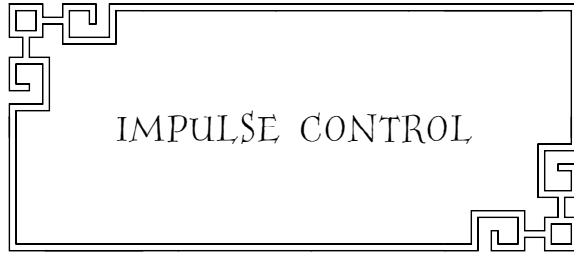
"Headmaster!" called the Sorting Hat.

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

"I wasn't talking to you," said the Hat. "I was Sorting Harry Potter into the

place in Hogwarts where he most belongs, namely the Headmaster's office —”

CHAPTER TWELVE



Turpin, Lisa!”

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

“RAVENCLAW!”

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

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

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

“Yes, really.”

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

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

“You want to know what happened? Fine! Here’s part of what happened! I told the Hat that Professor McGonagall threatened to set it on fire and it told

me to tell Professor McGonagall that she was an impudent youngster and she should get off its lawn!”

“If you’re not going to believe what I say then *why are you even asking?*”

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

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

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

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

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

The cheerful-looking old man sat down again.

Note to self: Do not mess with Dumbledore.

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

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

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

“GRYFFINDOR!”

Ron Weasley got a *lot* of applause, and not just from the Gryffindors.

Apparently the Weasley family was widely liked around here. Harry, after a moment, smiled and started applauding along with the others.

Then again, there was no time like today to turn back from the Dark Side. Stuff destiny and stuff the universe. He'd show that Hat.

"Zabini, Blaise!"

Pause.

"SLYTHERIN!" shouted the hat.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here

they are: Happy happy boom boom swamp swamp swamp! Thank you!”

Everyone clapped and cheered, and Dumbledore sat down again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But he *was* going to test it experimentally.

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

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

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

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

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

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

To-do 2. Actually this is To-do 1 and the other is To-do 2. Go through the bookshelves of the Hogwarts and Ravenclaw libraries, familiarizing yourself with the system and making sure you’ve at least read all the book titles. Second pass: read all tables of contents. Coordinate with Hermione who has a much better memory than you. Find out if there’s an interlibrary loan system at Hogwarts and see if the

two of you, especially Hermione, can visit those libraries too. If other Houses have private libraries, figure out how to access legally or sneak in.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wish granted.

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

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

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

Wish granted. Now what?

Harry slowly smiled.

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

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

now. Altering the distant past was easy, you just had to think of it at the right time.

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

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

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

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

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

To-do 4: Apologize to Neville Longbottom.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Er, maybe?

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

Um . . .

Yeah. So, NO.

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

"First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all

pupils. That is why it is called the Forbidden Forest. If it were permitted it would be called the Permitted Forest.”

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

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

Er . . .

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

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

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

Harry was numb at this point.

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

What was *that* about?

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

The young, thin, nervous man who Harry had first met in the Leaky Cauldron slowly made his way up to the podium, glancing fearfully around in

all directions. Harry caught a glimpse of the back of his head, and it looked like Professor Quirrell might already be going bald, despite his seeming youth.

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

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

“Oh, great,” whispered the older student, “looks like another *long* year in Defense class —”

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

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

“You are accustomed to the Defense position being filled by incompetents, scoundrels, and the unlucky. To anyone with a sense of history, it bears another reputation entirely. Not everyone who teaches here has been the best, but the best have all taught at Hogwarts. In such august company, and after so much time anticipating this day, I would be ashamed to set myself any standard lower than perfection. And so I do intend that every one of you will always remember this year as the *best* Defense class that you have ever had. What you

learn this year will forever serve as your firm foundation in the arts of Defense, no matter who your teachers before and after.”

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

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

“He seems a little odd,” whispered Harry.

“Meh,” said the older-looking student. “You ain’t seen nothin’.”

Dumbledore resumed the podium.

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

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS

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

It was quiet.

Too quiet.

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

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

The dorm, empty.

The beds, rumpled and unmade.

The sun, coming in at a rather high angle.

His Quieter turned all the way up to maximum.

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

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

he'd missed breakfast. And his very first class at Hogwarts, in Herbology, had started one hour and twenty-two minutes ago.

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

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

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

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

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

The paper said,

My fellow Ravenclaws,

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

Yours,

Harry Potter.

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

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

And he didn't remember writing it.

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

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

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

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

to myself.”

And another piece of paper popped into his hand.

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

The note said:

Dear Me,

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

Recognition code 927, I am a potato.

Yours,

You.

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

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

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

He flipped it over.

The reverse side read:

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE GAME:

YOU DO NOT KNOW THE RULES OF THE GAME

YOU DO NOT KNOW THE STAKES OF THE GAME

YOU DO NOT KNOW THE OBJECTIVE OF THE GAME

YOU DO NOT KNOW WHO CONTROLS THE GAME

YOU DO NOT KNOW HOW TO END THE GAME

YOU START WITH 100 POINTS.

BEGIN.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The note said:

ATTEMPT FAILED: – 1 POINT

CURRENT POINTS: 99

PHYSICAL STATE: STILL HUNGRY

MENTAL STATE: CONFUSED

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

He stood there for around a minute.

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

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

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

There was only silence.

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

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

ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS

POINTS SPENT: 1

CURRENT POINTS: 98

YOU HAVE GAINED: A BOX OF CEREAL BARS

“I’d like to spend one point and get the *actual cereal bars* back,” said Harry. Again, silence.

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

Nothing came up.

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

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

POINTS SPENT: 1

CURRENT POINTS: 97

YOU HAVE GAINED: 6 CEREAL BARS

YOU ARE STILL WEARING: PAJAMAS

DO NOT EAT WHILE YOU ARE WEARING YOUR PAJAMAS

YOU WILL GET A PAJAMA PENALTY

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

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

Silence.

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

HA! HA HA HA HA HA!

HA HA HA HA HA HA!

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

DUMBLEDORE DOES NOT CONTROL THE GAME

BAD GUESS

VERY BAD GUESS

–20 POINTS

IT IS YOUR FOURTH MOVE

AND YOU ARE STILL WEARING PAJAMAS

PAJAMA PENALTY: -2 POINTS

CURRENT POINTS: 75

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

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

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

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

Then he pulled out the drawer.

OPPORTUNITIES TO DO GOOD ARE EVERYWHERE

BUT DARKNESS IS WHERE THE LIGHT NEEDS TO BE

COST OF QUESTION: 1 POINT

CURRENT POINTS: 74

NICE UNDERWEAR

DID YOUR MOTHER PICK THEM OUT?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry had originally climbed four flights of stairs to get to his dorm. After clambering down no fewer than twelve flights of stairs without getting anywhere near the dungeons, Harry had concluded that (1) an Escher painting would be a *cakewalk* by comparison, (2) he was somehow *higher* in the castle than when he'd started, and (3) he was so *thoroughly* lost that he wouldn't have been surprised to look out of the next window and see two moons in the sky.

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

Backup plan B . . .

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

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

There was a brief pause.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Then perhaps you are already there."

"Well, wherever I *am* trying to go, I don't think *this* is it . . ." Harry shut his mouth, aware of just how much he was sounding like an idiot. "Let me

start over. I'm playing this game only I don't know what the rules are —" That didn't really work either, did it. "Okay, third try. I'm looking for opportunities to do good so I can score points, and all I have is this cryptic hint about how darkness is where the light needs to be, so I was trying to go down but I seem to keep going up instead..."

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

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

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

"*Entirely* fair."

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

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

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

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

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

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

The picture of a lady sighed. "I'm only a picture, young man. I remember Hogwarts as it was — not Hogwarts as it is. All I can tell you is that if this were a riddle, the answer would be that the game is life, and that while we do not make all the rules ourselves, the one who awards or takes points is always you. If it is not riddle but reality — then I do not know."

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

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

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

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

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

"A hint! A hint, you say?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry was no longer sure, at this point, whether this was the sort of thing

he ought to be skeptical about, or the sort of thing he should just take in stride. “And how can I find the line between the green study rooms and Transfiguration class?”

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

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

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

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

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

He was walking down the “big curvy corridor” when he heard a young boy’s voice cry out.

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

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

Harry was suddenly rather angry.

“Excuse me!” shouted Harry at the top of his lungs.

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

Harry walked past the cluster of Hufflepuffs towards the Slytherins.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hello,” Harry said. “I’m the Boy-Who-Lived.”

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

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

Unfortunately his straying eyes had been noted. “Ooh,” said the largest of the boys, “did ‘oo want the widdle books —”

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

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

And the Slytherins laughed.

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

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

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

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

Harry had *not* been expecting *that*.

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

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

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

“Hold on,” Harry said, and darted forward to pick up the note. “This note’s for me, I think —”

“*You*,” growled the largest Slytherin, “*you, are, going, to —*”

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

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

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

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

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

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

WARNING

NO MAGIC MAY BE USED ON THE CONTESTANT
WHILE THE GAME IS IN PROGRESS
FURTHER INTERFERENCE IN THE GAME
WILL BE REPORTED TO THE GAME AUTHORITIES

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

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

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

“How in Merlin’s name do you stage a believable accident after making the threat in front of a dozen witnesses, you *idiot* —”

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

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

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

Harry stared the Slytherin straight in the eyes. Part of Harry was screaming,

this wasn't supposed to happen, this wasn't *allowed* to happen, grownups would never let something like this *actually* happen —

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry took out his wand. “What do I —”

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

Harry shrugged. “It hasn’t, actually, I only got my wand and schoolbooks a few days ago.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The boy’s eyes widened. “*Really?*”

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

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

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

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

Well of course they are.

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

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

"*Why* did you —"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a pause.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

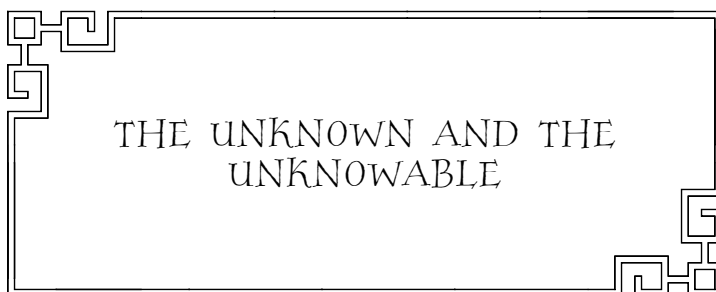
A couple of portraits later — it wasn't a long trip, Professor McGonagall's office wasn't far from her Transfiguration classroom, at least not on Mondays on odd-numbered years — Harry stood outside the door to her office.

He knocked.

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

He entered.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“All right,” she said in a quiet voice. “No one’s listening.” Her face was rather tight.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sorting Hat offered me Hufflepuff."

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Say, Professor McGonagall, did you know that time-reversed ordinary matter looks just like antimatter? Why yes it does! Did you know that one kilogram of

antimatter encountering one kilogram of matter will annihilate in an explosion equivalent to 43 million tons of TNT? Do you realize that I myself weigh 41 kilograms and that the resulting blast would leave A GIANT SMOKING CRATER WHERE THERE USED TO BE SCOTLAND?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Correct, I think,” said Professor McGonagall. “Although wizards *are* advised to avoid being seen by their past selves. If you’re attending two classes at the same time and you need to cross paths with yourself, for example, the first version of you should step aside and close his eyes at a known time — you have a watch already, good — so that the future you can pass. It’s all there in the pamphlet.”

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

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

“And it doesn’t, say, create a paradox that destroys the universe.”

She smiled tolerantly. “Mr. Potter, I think I’d remember hearing if *that* had ever happened.”

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

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

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

Realization struck Harry a pile-driver blow.

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

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

Realization struck Harry the *second* pile-driver.

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

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

“Glehhahhh . . .”

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

“Gaahhhrrrrraa . . .” Harry said.

Why yes, his mind *was* blown.

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

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

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

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

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

Now, for the first time, he was up against the prospect of a mystery that was threatening to be *permanent*. If Time didn't work by acyclic causal networks then Harry didn't understand what was meant by cause and effect; and if

Harry didn't understand causes and effects then he didn't understand what sort of stuff reality might be made of instead; and it was entirely possible that his human mind never *could* understand, because his brain was made of *old-fashioned linear-time neurons*, and this had turned out to be an impoverished subset of reality.

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

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

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

Harry was starting to seriously fear time travel.

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

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

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



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

Spontaneous Duplication.

Fortunately it seemed that everyone was still asleep.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Very Merry Christmas to you.

The note was unsigned.



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

Terry Boot scowled at Harry. “You’d better not be planning to go through any of our things.”

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

Terry frowned. “Wait, is that —”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



“I can see that the message is passed on to Cornelion Flubberwalt,” said the painting of a man with aristocratic airs and, in fact, a perfectly normal nose.

“But might I ask where it came from *originally*?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hello,” Harry Potter said coldly. “I’m the Boy-Who-Lived.”

Eight first-year boys, mostly the same height. One of them had a scar on

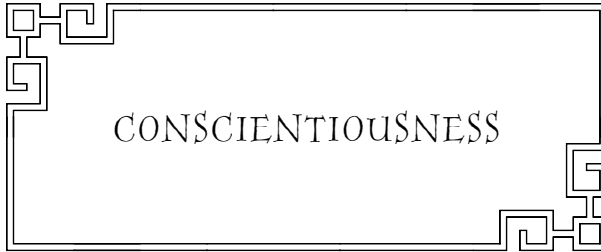
his forehead and he wasn't acting like the others.

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

Professor McGonagall was right. The Sorting Hat was right. It was clear once you saw it from the outside.

There was something wrong with Harry Potter.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



"Frigideiro!"

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

Harry was feeling very, very cheated.

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

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

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

"*Frigideiro!*" said Hermione again from the desk next to him. Her water was solid ice and there were white crystals forming on the rim of her glass. She

seemed to be totally intent on her own work and not at all conscious of the other students staring at her with hateful eyes, which was either (a) dangerously oblivious of her or (b) a perfectly honed performance rising to the level of fine art.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



“Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts,” said Professor McGonagall. There was no trace of any levity upon the face of the stern old witch. “Anyone messing around in my

class will leave and not come back. You have been warned.”

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

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

“Mr. Potter,” said Professor McGonagall. “You only received your school-books a few days ago. Have you started reading your Transfiguration textbook?”

“No, sorry, Professor,” Harry said.

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

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

Professor McGonagall shook her head. “No fault to you, Mr. Potter, but the correct answer is that in Transfiguration you do *not* care to guess. Wrong answers will be marked with extreme severity, questions left blank will be marked with great leniency. You must learn to know what you do not know. If I ask you any question, no matter how obvious or elementary, and you answer ‘I’m not sure’, I will not hold it against you and anyone who laughs will lose House points. Can you tell me why this rule exists, Mr. Potter?”

Because a single error in Transfiguration can be incredibly dangerous. “No.”

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

Several students gulped.

Professor McGonagall stood up and moved over to the wall behind her desk, which held a polished wooden board. “There are many reasons why Transfiguration is dangerous, but one reason stands above all the rest.” She

produced a short quill with a thick end, and used it to sketch letters in red; which she then underlined, using the same marker, in blue:

TRANSFIGURATION IS NOT PERMANENT!

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No,” Professor McGonagall said flatly. “Sustaining a Transfiguration is a constant drain on your magic which scales with the size of the target form. And you would need to recontact the target every few hours, which is, in a

case like this, impossible. Disasters like this are *unrecoverable!*”

Professor McGonagall leaned forwards, her face very hard. “You will absolutely never under any circumstances Transfigure anything into a liquid or a gas. No water, no air. Nothing like water, nothing like air. Even if it is not meant to drink. Liquid *evaporates*, little bits and pieces of it get into the air. You will not Transfigure anything that is to be burned. It will make smoke and someone could breathe that smoke! You will never Transfigure anything that could conceivably go inside anyone’s body by any means. No food. Nothing that *looks like* food. Not even as a funny little prank where you mean to tell them about your mud pie before they actually eat it. You will never do it. Period. Inside this classroom or out of it or *anywhere*. Is that well understood by *every single student?*”

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

“Is that well understood by every single student?”

“Yes,” they said or muttered or whispered.

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

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

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

“I will never Transfigure anything into a liquid or gas.”

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

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

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

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

“And *above all*,” said Professor McGonagall, “you will not Transfigure any living subject, *especially yourselves*. It will make you very sick and possibly dead,

depending on how you Transfigure yourself and how long you maintain the change.” Professor McGonagall paused. “Mr. Potter is currently holding up his hand because he has seen an Animagus transformation — specifically, a human transforming into a cat and back again. But an Animagus transformation is not *free* Transfiguration.”

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

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

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

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

"Yes, Mr. Potter?"

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

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

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

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

"No further questions, Professor."

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

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

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

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

"If I break any of these rules I will not further study Transfiguration during

my time at Hogwarts.”

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

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

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

Professor McGonagall awarded her another point for Ravenclaw.



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

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

“So you did,” Harry said shortly.

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

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

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

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

Harry spoke first. “Of course you realize this means war.”

“I didn’t know we’d been at peace.”

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

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

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

"*Professor...*" Harry hissed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

in rationality.”

“Is it really that useful? It didn’t seem to help you with Charms or Transfiguration.”

There was a slight pause.

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

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

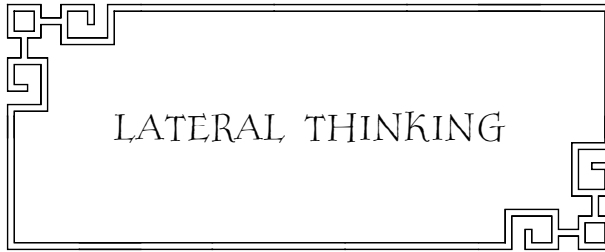
“I’ve got classes now, which you didn’t, but weekends are free, so . . . limit of eight times four divided by epsilon as epsilon approaches zero plus . . . 10:47 AM on Sunday.”

“I did it in *three* days actually.”

“2:47 PM on Saturday it is, then. I’m sure I’ll find the time somewhere.”

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

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



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

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

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

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

Now what does that remind me of...?

Harry had arrived at the lesson so early that no other students were there yet. (The English language was defective when it came to describing time travel; in particular, English lacked any words capable of expressing how convenient

it was.) Quirrell didn't seem to be . . . functional . . . at the moment, and Harry didn't particularly feel like approaching Quirrell anyway.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What? That's not fair!"

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

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

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

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

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

"And," said Harry, "Lucius insisted that you were *not* to grow up knowing

your bodyguards, and that you were only to meet them on your first day of school.”

That wiped the grin from Draco’s face. “Yes, Potter, we all know you’re brilliant, the whole school knows by now, you can stop showing off —”

“So they’ve been told their *whole lives* that they’re going to be your minions and they’ve spent *years* imagining what minions are supposed to be like —”

Draco winced.

“— and what’s worse, they *do* know *each other* and they’ve been *practicing* —”

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

“I told you not to do this in front of Harry Potter!”

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

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

“I apologize,” Draco said stiffly, “for the insult which these *imbeciles* have offered you.”

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

Draco’s jaw dropped.

“Hey, Gregory, you don’ think he’s tryna lure us away from the boss, do ya?”

“I’m sure Mr. Potter wouldn’t be that foolish.”

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

“What’s *he* doin’ in Ravenclaw?”

“I can’t imagine, Mr. Crabbe.”

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

Harry frowned. “Hold on.” His hand went into his pouch. “Timetable.”

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

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

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

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

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

"Yup. Got here early."

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

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

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

"Who's Derrick?"

"You hit him with a pie?"

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

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

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

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

"Huh?" Harry said in honest confusion.

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

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

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

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

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

"A contest?"

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

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

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

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

Harry bent over his Defense textbook and continued reading.



At 2:35 PM, when most of the seats were taken and no one else seemed to be coming in, Professor Quirrell gave a sudden jerk in his chair and sat up straight, and his face appeared on all the flat, white rectangular objects that were propped up on the students' desks.

Harry was taken by surprise, both by the sudden appearance of Professor Quirrell's face and by the resemblance to Muggle television. There was something both nostalgic and sad about that, it seemed so much like a piece of home and yet it wasn't really . . .

"Good afternoon, my young apprentices," said Professor Quirrell. His voice seemed to come from the desk screen and to be speaking directly to Harry. "Welcome to your first lesson in Battle Magic, as the founders of Hogwarts

would have put it; or, as it happens to be called in the late twentieth century, Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

There was a certain amount of frantic scrabbling as students, taken by surprise, reached for their parchment or notebooks.

“No,” Professor Quirrell said. “Don’t bother writing down what this subject was once called. No such pointless question will count toward your marks in any of my lessons. That is a promise.”

Many students sat straight up at that, looking rather shocked.

Professor Quirrell was smiling thinly. “Those of you who have wasted time by reading your useless first-year Defense textbooks —”

Someone made a choking sound. Harry wondered if it was Hermione.

“ — may have gotten the impression that although this subject is called Defense Against the Dark Arts, it is actually about how to defend against Nightmare Butterflies, which cause mildly bad dreams, or Acid Slugs, which can dissolve all the way through a two-inch wooden beam given most of a day.”

Professor Quirrell stood up, shoving his chair back from the desk. The screen on Harry’s desk followed his every move. Professor Quirrell strode towards the front of the classroom, and bellowed:

“The Hungarian Horntail is taller than a dozen men! It breathes fire so quickly and so accurately that it can melt a Snitch in midflight! One Killing Curse will bring it down!”

There were gasps from the students.

“The Mountain Troll is more dangerous than the Hungarian Horntail! It is strong enough to bite through steel! Its hide is resistant enough to withstand Stunning Hexes and Cutting Charms! Its sense of smell is so acute that it can tell from afar whether its prey is part of a pack, or alone and vulnerable! Most fearsome of all, the troll is unique among magical creatures in continuously maintaining a form of Transfiguration on itself — it is always transforming into its own body. If you somehow succeed in ripping off its arm it will grow another within seconds! Fire and acid will produce scar tissue which can temporarily confuse a troll’s regenerative powers — for an hour or two! They are smart enough to use clubs as tools! The mountain troll is the third most perfect killing machine in all Nature! One Killing Curse will bring it down.”

The students were looking rather shocked.

Professor Quirrell was smiling rather grimly. “Your sad excuse for a third-year Defense textbook will suggest to you that you expose the mountain troll

to sunlight, which will freeze it in place. This, my young apprentices, is the sort of useless knowledge you will never find in my lessons. You do not encounter mountain trolls in open daylight! The idea that you should use sunlight to stop them is the result of foolish textbook authors trying to show off their mastery of minutia at the expense of practicality. Just because there is a ridiculously obscure way of dealing with mountain trolls does not mean you should actually try to use it! The Killing Curse is unblockable, unstoppable, and works every single time on anything with a brain. If, as an adult wizard, you find yourself incapable of using the Killing Curse, then you can simply Apparate away! Likewise if you are facing the second most perfect killing machine, a Dementor. You just Apparate away!"

"Unless, of course," Professor Quirrell said, his voice now lower and harder, "you are under the influence of an anti-Apparition jinx. No, there is exactly one monster which can threaten you once you are fully grown. The single most dangerous monster in all the world, so dangerous that nothing else comes close. The Dark Wizard. That is the only thing that will still be able to threaten you."

Professor Quirrell's lips were set in a thin line. "I will reluctantly teach you enough trivia for a passing mark on the Ministry-mandated portions of your first-year finals. Since your exact mark on these sections will make no difference to your future life, anyone who wants more than a passing mark is welcome to waste their own time studying our pathetic excuse for a textbook. The title of this subject is not Defense Against Minor Pests. You are here to learn how to defend yourselves against the Dark Arts. Which means, let us be very clear on this, defending yourselves against Dark Wizards. People with wands who want to hurt you and who will likely succeed in doing so unless you hurt them first! There is no defense without offense! There is no defense without fighting! This reality is deemed too harsh for eleven-year-olds by the fat, overpaid, Auror-guarded politicians who mandated your curriculum. To the abyss with those fools! You are here for the subject that has been taught at Hogwarts for eight hundred years! Welcome to your first year of Battle Magic!"

Harry started applauding. He couldn't help himself, it was too inspiring.

Once Harry started clapping there was some scattered response from Gryffindor, and more from Slytherin, but most students simply seemed too stunned to react.

Professor Quirrell made a cutting gesture, and the applause died instantly. “Thank you very much,” said Professor Quirrell. “Now to practicalities. I have combined all my first-year Battle classes into one, which allows me to offer you twice as much classroom time as Doubles sessions —”

There were gasps of horror.

“— an increased load which I will make up to you by not assigning any homework.”

The gasps of horror cut off abruptly.

“Yes, you heard me correctly. I will teach you to fight, not to write twelve inches on fighting due Monday.”

Harry desperately wished he’d sat next to Hermione so he could see the look on her face now, but on the other hand he was pretty sure he was imagining it accurately.

Also Harry was in love. It would be a three-way wedding: him, the Time-Turner, and Professor Quirrell.

“For those of you who so choose, I have arranged some after-school activities that I think you will find quite interesting as well as educational. Do you want to show the world your *own* abilities instead of watching fourteen other people play Quidditch? More than seven people can fight in an army.”

Hot *damn*.

“These and other after-school activities will also earn you Quirrell points. What are Quirrell points, you ask? The House point system does not suit my needs, because it makes House points too rare. I prefer to let my students know how they are doing more frequently than that. And on the rare occasions I offer you a written test, it will mark itself as you go along, and if you get too many related questions wrong, your test will show the names of students who got those questions right, and those students will be able to earn Quirrell points by helping you.”

... wow. Why didn’t the other professors use a system like that?

“What good are Quirrell points, you wonder? For a start, ten Quirrell points will be worth one House point. But they will earn you other favors as well. Would you like to take your exam at an unusual time? Is there a particular session you would very much prefer to skip? You will find that I can be very flexible on behalf of students who have accumulated enough Quirrell points. Quirrell points will control the generalship of the armies. And for Christmas — just before the Christmas break — I will grant someone a wish. Any school-

related feat that lies within my power, my influence, or above all, my ingenuity. Yes, I was in Slytherin and I am offering to formulate a cunning plot on your behalf, if that is what it takes to accomplish your desire. This wish will go to whoever has earned the most Quirrell points within all seven years.”

That would be Harry.

“Now leave your books and loose items at your desks — they will be safe, the screens will watch over them for you — and come down onto this platform. It’s time to play a game called Who’s the Most Dangerous Student in the Classroom.”



Harry twisted his wand in his right hand and said “*Ma-ha-su!*”

There was another high-pitched “bing” from the floating blue sphere that Professor Quirrell had assigned to Harry as his target. That particular sound meant a perfect strike, which Harry had been gotten on nine out of his last ten attempts.

Somewhere Professor Quirrell had dug up a spell that was incredibly easy to pronounce, *and* had a ridiculously simple wand motion, *and* had a tendency to hit wherever you were currently looking at. Professor Quirrell had disdainfully proclaimed that real battle magic was far more difficult than this. That the hex was entirely useless in actual combat. That it was a barely ordered burst of magic whose only real content was the aiming, and that it would produce, when it hit, a pain briefly equivalent to being punched hard in the nose. That the sole purpose of this test was to see who was a fast learner, since Professor Quirrell was certain no one would have previously encountered this hex or anything like it.

Harry didn’t care about any of that.

“*Ma-ha-su!*”

A *red bolt of energy* shot out of his wand and struck the target and the blue sphere once again made the bing which meant the spell had *actually worked for him*.

Harry was feeling like a real wizard for the first time since he’d come to Hogwarts. He wished the target would dodge like the little spheres that Ben Kenobi had used for training Luke, but for some reason Professor Quirrell had instead lined up all the students and targets in neat orders which made sure

they wouldn't fire on each other.

So Harry lowered his wand, skipped to the right, snapped up his wand and twisted and shouted "*Ma-ha-su!*"

There was a lower-pitched "dong" which meant he'd gotten it almost right.

Harry put his wand into his pocket, skipped back to the left and drew and fired another red bolt of energy.

The high-pitched bing which resulted was easily one of the most satisfying sounds he'd heard in his life. Harry wanted to scream in triumph at the top of his lungs. *I CAN DO MAGIC! FEAR ME, LAWS OF PHYSICS, I'M COMING TO VIOLATE YOU!*

"*Ma-ha-su!*" Harry's voice was loud, but hardly noticeable over the steady chant of similar cries from around the classroom platform.

"Enough," said Professor Quirrell's amplified voice. (It didn't sound loud. It sounded like normal volume, coming from just behind your left shoulder, no matter where you were standing relative to Professor Quirrell.) "I see that all of you have succeeded at least once now." The target-spheres turned red and began to drift up towards the ceiling.

Professor Quirrell was standing on the raised dais in the center of the platform, leaning slightly on his teacher's desk with one hand.

"I told you," Professor Quirrell said, "that we would play a game called Who's the Most Dangerous Student in the Classroom. There is one student in this classroom who mastered the Sumerian Simple Strike Hex faster than anyone else —"

Oh blah blah blah.

"— and went on to help seven other students. For which she has earned the first seven Quirrell points awarded to your year. Come forth, Hermione Granger. It is time for the next stage of the game."

Hermione Granger began striding forwards, a mixed look of triumph and apprehension on her face. The Ravenclaws looked on proudly, the Slytherins with glares, and Harry with frank annoyance. Harry had done fine this time. He was probably even in the upper half of the class, now that everyone had been faced with an equally unfamiliar spell and Harry had read all the way through Adalbert Waffling's *Magical Theory*. And yet *Hermione was still doing better*.

Somewhere in the back of his mind was the fear that Hermione was simply smarter than him.

But for now Harry was going to pin his hopes on the known facts that (a) Hermione had read a lot more than the standard textbooks and (b) Adalbert Waffling was an uninspired sod who'd written *Magical Theory* to pander to a school board that didn't think much of eleven-year-olds.

Hermione reached the central dais and stepped up.

"Hermione Granger mastered a completely unfamiliar spell in two minutes, almost a full minute faster than the next runner-up." Professor Quirrell turned slowly in place to look at all the students watching them. "Could Miss Granger's intelligence make her the most dangerous student in the classroom? Well? What do you think?"

No one seemed to be thinking anything at the moment. Even Harry wasn't sure what to say.

"Let's find out, shall we?" said Professor Quirrell. He turned back to Hermione, and gestured toward the wider class. "Select any student you like and cast the Simple Strike Hex on them."

Hermione froze where she stood.

"Come now," Professor Quirrell said smoothly. "You have cast this spell perfectly over fifty times. It is not permanently harmful or even all that painful. It hurts as much as a hard punch and lasts only a few seconds." Professor Quirrell's voice grew harder. "This is a direct order from your professor, Miss Granger. Choose a target and fire a Simple Strike Hex."

Hermione's face was screwed up in horror and her wand was trembling in her hand. Harry's own fingers were clenching his own wand hard in sympathy. Even though he could see what Professor Quirrell was trying to do. Even though he could see the point Professor Quirrell was trying to make.

"If you do *not* raise your wand and fire, Miss Granger, you will lose a Quirrell point."

Harry stared at Hermione, willing her to look in his direction. His right hand was softly tapping his own chest. *Pick me, I'm not afraid...*

Hermione's wand twitched in her hand; then her face relaxed, and she lowered her wand to her side.

"No," said Hermione Granger.

Her voice was calm, and even though it wasn't loud, everyone heard it in the silence.

"Then I must deduct one point from you," said Professor Quirrell. "This is a test, and you have failed it."

That reached her. Harry could see it. But she kept her shoulders straight.

Professor Quirrell's voice was sympathetic and seemed to fill the whole room. "Knowing things isn't always enough, Miss Granger. If you cannot give and receive violence on the order of stubbing your toe, then you cannot defend yourself and you will not pass Defense. Please rejoin your classmates."

Hermione walked back towards the Ravenclaw cluster. Her face looked peaceful and Harry, for some odd reason, wanted to start clapping. Even though Professor Quirrell had been *right*.

"So," Professor Quirrell said. "It becomes clear that Hermione Granger is not the most dangerous student in the classroom. Who do you think might actually be the most dangerous person here? — besides me, of course."

Without even thinking, Harry turned to look at the Slytherin contingent.

"Draco, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy," said Professor Quirrell. "It seems that many of your fellow pupils are looking in your direction. Come forth, if you would."

Draco did so, walking with a certain pride in his bearing. He stepped onto the dais and looked up at Professor Quirrell with a smile.

"Mr. Malfoy," Professor Quirrell said. "Fire."

Harry would have tried to stop it if there'd been time but in one smooth motion Draco spun on the Ravenclaw contingent and raised his wand and said "*Mahasu!*" like it was all one syllable and Hermione was saying "Ow!" and that was that.

"Well struck," said Professor Quirrell. "Two Quirrell points to you. But tell me, why did you target Miss Granger?"

There was a pause.

Finally Draco said, "Because she stood out the most."

Professor Quirrell's lips turned up in a thin smile. "And that is the true reason why Draco Malfoy is dangerous. Had he selected any other, that child would more likely resent being singled out, and Mr. Malfoy would more probably make an enemy. And while Mr. Malfoy might have given some other justification for selecting her, that would have served him no purpose save to alienate some of you, while others are already cheering him whether he says anything or not. Which is to say that Mr. Malfoy is dangerous because he knows who to strike and who not to strike, how to make allies and avoid making enemies. Two more Quirrell points to you, Mr. Malfoy. And as you have demonstrated an exemplary virtue of Slytherin, I think that Salazar's

House has earned a point as well. You may rejoin your friends.”

Draco bowed slightly and walked back to the Slytherin contingent. Some clapping started from the green-trimmed robes, but Professor Quirrell made a cutting gesture and silence fell again.

“It might seem that our game is done,” said Professor Quirrell. “And yet there is a single student in this classroom who is more dangerous than the scion of Malfoy.”

And *now* for some reason there seemed to be an awful lot of people looking at . . .

“Harry Potter. Come forth.”

This did not bode well.

Harry reluctantly walked towards where Professor Quirrell stood on his raised dais, still leaning slightly against his teacher’s desk.

The nervousness of being put into the spotlight seemed to be sharpening Harry’s wits as he approached the dais, and his mind was ruffling through possibilities for what Professor Quirrell might think could demonstrate Harry’s dangerousness. Would he be asked to cast a spell? To defeat a Dark Lord?

Demonstrate his supposed immunity to the Killing Curse? Surely Professor Quirrell was too smart for *that* . . .

Harry stopped well short of the dais, and Professor Quirrell didn’t ask him to come any closer.

“The irony is,” said Professor Quirrell, “you all looked at the right person for entirely the wrong reasons. You are thinking,” Professor Quirrell’s lips twisted, “that Harry Potter has defeated the Dark Lord, and so must be very dangerous. Bah. He was one year old. Whatever quirk of fate killed the Dark Lord likely had little to do with Mr. Potter’s abilities as a fighter. But after I heard rumors of one Ravenclaw facing down five older Slytherins, I interviewed several eyewitnesses and came to the conclusion that Harry Potter would be my most dangerous student.”

A jolt of adrenaline poured into Harry’s system, making him stand up straighter. He didn’t know what conclusion Professor Quirrell had come to, but that couldn’t be good.

“Ah, Professor Quirrell —” Harry started to say.

Professor Quirrell looked amused. “You’re thinking that I’ve come up with a wrong answer, aren’t you, Mr. Potter? You will learn to expect better of *me*.” Professor Quirrell straightened from where he had leaned on the desk.

“Mr. Potter, all things have their accustomed uses. Give me ten unaccustomed uses of objects in this room for combat!”

For a moment Harry was rendered speechless by the sheer, raw shock of having been understood.

And then the ideas started to pour out.

“There are desks which are heavy enough to be fatal if dropped from a great height. There are chairs with metal legs that could impale someone if driven hard enough. The air in this classroom would be deadly by its absence, since people die in vacuum, and it can serve as a carrier for poison gases.”

Harry had to stop briefly for breath, and into that pause Professor Quirrell said:

“That’s three. You need ten. The rest of the class thinks that you’ve already used up the whole contents of the classroom.”

“*Ha!* The floor can be removed to create a spike pit to fall into, the ceiling can be collapsed on someone, the walls can serve as raw material for Transfiguration into any number of deadly things — knives, say.”

“That’s six. But surely you’re scraping the bottom of the barrel now?”

“I haven’t even started! Just look at all the people! Having a Gryffindor attack the enemy is an *ordinary* use, of course —”

“I will not count that one.”

“— but their blood can also be used to drown someone. Ravenclaws are known for their brains, but their internal organs could be sold on the black market for enough money to hire an assassin. Slytherins aren’t just useful as assassins, they can also be thrown at sufficient velocity to crush an enemy. And Hufflepuffs, in addition to being hard workers, also contain bones that can be removed, sharpened, and used to stab someone.”

By now the rest of the class was staring at Harry in some horror. Even the Slytherins looked shocked.

“That’s ten, though I’m being generous in counting the Ravenclaw one. Now, for extra credit, one Quirrell point for each use of objects in this room which you have not yet named.” Professor Quirrell favored Harry with a companionable smile. “The rest of your class thinks you are in trouble now, since you’ve named everything except the targets and you have no idea what may be done with those.”

“Bah! I’ve named all the people, but not my robes, which can be used to suffocate an enemy if wrapped around their head enough times, or Hermione

Granger's robes, which can be torn into strips and tied into a rope and used to hang someone, or Draco Malfoy's robes, which can be used to start a fire —"

"Three points," said Professor Quirrell, "no more clothing now."

"My wand can be pushed into an enemy's brain through their eye socket" and someone made a horrified, strangling sound.

"Four points, no more wands."

"My wristwatch could suffocate someone if jammed down their throat —"

"Five points, and enough."

"Hmph," Harry said. "Ten Quirrell points to one House point, right? You should have let me keep going until I'd won the House Cup, I haven't even started yet on the unaccustomed uses of everything I've got in my pockets" or the mokeskin pouch itself and he couldn't talk about the Time-Turner or the invisibility cloak but there had to be *something* he could say about those red spheres . . .

"*Enough*, Mr. Potter. Well, do you all think you understand what makes Mr. Potter the most dangerous student in the classroom?"

There was a low murmur of assent.

"Say it out loud, please. Terry Boot, what makes your dorm-mate dangerous?"

"Ah . . . um . . . he's creative?"

"*Wrong!*" bellowed Professor Quirrell, and his fist came down sharply on his desk with an amplified sound that made everyone jump. "All of Mr. Potter's ideas were worse than useless!"

Harry started in surprise.

"Remove the floor to create a spike trap? Ridiculous! In combat you do not have that sort of preparation time and if you did there would be a hundred better uses! Transfigure material from the walls? Mr. Potter cannot perform Transfiguration! Mr. Potter had exactly one idea which he could use immediately, right now, without extensive preparation or a cooperative enemy or magic he does not know. That idea was to jam his wand through his enemy's eye socket. Which would be more likely to break his wand than kill his opponent! In short, Mr. Potter, I'm afraid that your proposals were uniformly awful."

"What?" Harry said indignantly. "You *asked* for unusual ideas, not practical ones! I was thinking outside the box! How would *you* use something in this classroom to kill someone?"

Professor Quirrell's expression was disapproving, but there were smile crinkles around his eyes. "Mr. Potter, I never said you were to *kill*. There is a time and a place for taking your enemy alive, and inside a Hogwarts classroom is usually one of those places. But to answer your question, hit them on the neck with the edge of a chair."

There was some laughter from the Slytherins, but they were laughing with Harry, not at him.

Everyone else was looking rather horrified.

"But Mr. Potter has now demonstrated why he is the most dangerous student in the classroom. I asked for unaccustomed uses of items in this room for combat. Mr. Potter could have suggested using a desk to block a curse, or using a chair to trip an oncoming enemy, or wrapping cloth around his arm to create an improvised shield. Instead, every single use that Mr. Potter named was offensive rather than defensive, and either fatal or potentially fatal."

What? Wait, that couldn't be true . . . Harry had a sudden sense of vertigo as he tried to remember what exactly he'd suggested, surely there had to be a counterexample . . .

"And that," Professor Quirrell said, "is why Mr. Potter's ideas were so strange and useless — because he had to reach far into the impractical in order to meet his standard of *killing the enemy*. To him, any idea which fell short of that was not worth considering. This reflects a quality that we might call *intent to kill*. I have it. Harry Potter has it, which is how he could stare down five older Slytherins. Draco Malfoy does not have it, not yet. Mr. Malfoy would hardly shrink from talk of ordinary murder, but even he was shocked — yes you were Mr. Malfoy, I was watching your face — when Mr. Potter described how to use his classmates' bodies as raw material. There are censors inside your mind which make you flinch away from thoughts like that. Mr. Potter thinks *purely* of killing the enemy, he will grasp at any means to do so, he does not flinch, his censors are off. Even though his youthful genius is so undisciplined and impractical as to be useless, his *intent to kill* makes Harry Potter the Most Dangerous Student in the Classroom. One final point to him — no, let us make that a point to Ravenclaw — for this indispensable requisite of a true fighting wizard."

Harry's mouth gaped open in speechless shock as he searched frantically for something to say to this. *That is so completely not what I am about!*

But he could see that the other students were starting to believe it. Harry's

mind was flipping through possible denials and not finding anything that could stand up against the authoritative voice of Professor Quirrell. The best Harry had come up with was “I’m not a psychopath, I’m just very creative” and that sounded kind of ominous. He needed to say something unexpected, something that would make people stop and reconsider —

“And now,” Professor Quirrell said. “Mr. Potter. Fire.”

Nothing happened, of course.

“Ah, well,” said Professor Quirrell. He sighed. “I suppose we must all start somewhere. Mr. Potter, select any student you please for a Simple Strike Hex. You *will* do so before I dismiss your class for the day. If you do not, I will begin deducting House points, and I will keep on deducting them until you do.”

Harry carefully raised his wand. He had to do that much, or Professor Quirrell might start deducting House points right away.

Slowly, as though on a roasting platter, Harry turned to face the Slytherins. And Harry’s eyes met Draco’s.

Draco Malfoy didn’t look the slightest bit afraid. The blonde-haired boy wasn’t giving any visible sign of assent such as Harry had given Hermione, but then he could hardly be expected to do so. The other Slytherins would think that rather odd.

“Why the hesitation?” said Professor Quirrell. “Surely there’s only one obvious choice.”

“Yes,” Harry said. “Only one *obvious* choice.”

Harry twisted the wand and said “*Ma-ha-su!*”

There was complete silence in the classroom.

Harry shook his left arm, trying to get rid of the lingering sting.

There was more silence.

Finally Professor Quirrell sighed. “Yes, quite ingenious, but there was a lesson to be taught and you dodged it. One point from Ravenclaw for showing off your own cleverness at the expense of the actual goal. Class dismissed.”

And before anyone else could say anything, Harry sang out:

“Just kidding! RAVENCLAW!”

There was silence for a brief moment after that, a sound of people thinking, and then the murmurs started and rapidly rose to a roar of conversation.

Harry turned towards Professor Quirrell, the two of them needed to talk — Quirrell had slumped over and was trudging back to his chair.

No. Not acceptable. They *really* needed to talk. Stuff the zombie act,

Professor Quirrell would probably wake up if Harry poked him a couple of times. Harry started forward —

WRONG

DON'T

BAD IDEA

Harry swayed and stopped in his tracks, feeling dizzy.

And then a flock of Ravenclaws descended on him and the discussions began.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



LOCATING THE HYPOTHESIS

Thursday.

If you wanted to be specific, 7:24 AM on Thursday morning.

Harry was sitting on his bed, a textbook lying limp in his motionless hands.

Harry had just had an idea for a *truly brilliant* experimental test.

It would mean waiting an extra hour for breakfast, but that was why he had cereal bars. No, this idea absolutely positively had to be tested right away, immediately, now.

Harry set the textbook aside, leapt out of bed, raced around his bed, yanked out the cavern level of his trunk, ran down the stairs, and started moving boxes of books around. (He really needed to unpack and get bookcases at some point but he was in the middle of his textbook reading contest with Hermione and falling behind so he hadn't had time.)

Harry found the book he wanted and raced back upstairs.

The other boys were getting ready to go down to breakfast in the Great Hall and start the day.

"Excuse me, can you do something for me?" said Harry. He was flipping through the book's index as he spoke, found the page with the first ten thousand primes, flipped to that page, and thrust the book at Anthony Goldstein. "Pick two three-digit numbers from this list. Don't tell me what they are. Just multiply them together and tell me the product. Oh, and can you do the

calculation twice to double-check? Please make really sure you've got the right answer, I'm not sure what's going to happen to me or the universe if you make a multiplication error."

It said a lot about what life in that dorm had been like over the past few days that Anthony didn't even bother saying anything like "Why'd you suddenly flip out?" or "That seems really weird, what are your reasons for asking?" or "What do you mean, you're not sure what's going to happen to the universe?"

Anthony wordlessly accepted the book and took out a parchment and quill. Harry spun around and shut his eyes, making sure not to see anything, dancing back and forth and bouncing up and down with impatience. He got a pad of paper and a mechanical pencil and got ready to write.

"Okay," Anthony said, "One hundred and eighty-one thousand, four hundred and twenty-nine."

Harry wrote down 181,429. He repeated what he'd just written down, and Anthony confirmed it.

Then Harry raced back down into the cavern level of his trunk, glanced at his watch (the watch said 4:28 which meant 7:28) and then shut his eyes.

Around thirty seconds later, Harry heard the sound of steps, followed by the sound of the cavern level of the trunk sliding shut. (Harry wasn't worried about suffocating. An automatic Air-Freshening Charm was part of what you got if you were willing to buy a really good trunk. Wasn't magic wonderful, it didn't have to worry about electric bills.)

And when Harry opened his eyes, he saw just what he'd been hoping to see, a folded piece of paper left on the floor, the gift of his future self.

Call that piece of paper "Paper-2".

Harry tore a piece of paper off his pad.

Call that "Paper-1". It was, of course, the same piece of paper. You could even see, if you looked closely, that the ragged edges matched.

Harry reviewed in his mind the algorithm that he would follow.

If Harry opened up Paper-2 and it was blank, then he would write " 101×101 " down on Paper-1, fold it up, study for an hour, go back in time, drop off Paper-1 (which would thereby become Paper-2), and head on up out of the cavern level to join his dorm mates for breakfast.

If Harry opened up Paper-2 and it had two numbers written on it, Harry would multiply those numbers together.

If their product equaled 181,429, Harry would write down those two

numbers on Paper-1 and send Paper-1 back in time.

Otherwise Harry would add 2 to the number on the right and write down the new pair of numbers on Paper-1. Unless that made the number on the right greater than 997, in which case Harry would add 2 to the number on the left and write down 101 on the right.

And if Paper-2 said 997×997 , Harry would leave Paper-1 blank.

Which meant that the only possible *stable* time loop was the one in which Paper-2 contained the two prime factors of 181,429.

If this worked, Harry could use it to recover any sort of answer that was easy to check but hard to find. He wouldn't have *just* shown that $P = NP$ once you had a Time-Turner, this trick was *more general* than that. Harry could use it to find the combinations on combination locks, or passwords of every sort. Maybe even find the entrance to Slytherin's Chamber of Secrets, if Harry could figure out some systematic way of describing all the locations in Hogwarts. It would be an awesome cheat even by Harry's standards of cheating.

Harry took Paper-2 in his trembling hand, and unfolded it.

Paper-2 said in slightly shaky handwriting:

DO NOT MESS WITH TIME

Harry wrote down "*DO NOT MESS WITH TIME*" on Paper-1 in slightly shaky handwriting, folded it neatly, and resolved not to do any more truly brilliant experiments on Time until he was at least fifteen years old.

To the best of Harry's knowledge, that had been the scariest experimental result in the entire history of science.

It had been somewhat difficult for Harry to focus on reading his textbook for the next hour.

That was how Harry's Thursday started.



Thursday.

If you wanted to be specific, 3:32 PM on Thursday afternoon.

Harry and all the other boys in the first year were outside on a grassy field with Madam Hooch, standing next to the Hogwarts supply of broomsticks. The girls would be learning to fly separately. Apparently, for some reason, girls

didn't want to learn how to fly on broomsticks in the presence of boys.

Harry had been a little wobbly all day long. He just couldn't seem to stop wondering how that *particular* stable time loop had been selected out of what was, in retrospect, a rather large space of possibilities.

Also: seriously, *broomsticks*? He was going to fly on, basically, a line segment? Wasn't that pretty much the single most unstable shape you could possibly find, short of attempting to hold on to a point marble? Who'd selected *that* design for a flying device, out of all the possibilities? Harry had been hoping that it was just a figure of speech, but no, they were standing in front of what looked for all the world like ordinary wooden kitchen broomsticks. Had someone just gotten stuck on the idea of broomsticks and failed to consider anything else? It had to be. There was no way that the *optimal* designs for cleaning kitchens and flying would happen to coincide if you worked them out from scratch.

It was a clear day with a bright blue sky and a brilliant sun that was just begging to get in your eyes and make it impossible to see, if you were trying to fly around the sky. The ground was nice and dry, smelling positively baked, and somehow felt very, very hard under Harry's shoes.

Harry kept reminding himself that the lowest common denominator of eleven-year-olds was expected to learn this and it couldn't be that hard.

"Stick out your right hand over the broom, or left hand if you're left-handed," called Madam Hooch. "And say, UP!"

"UP!" everyone shouted.

The broomstick leapt eagerly into Harry's hand.

Which put him at the head of the class, for once. Apparently saying "UP!" was a lot more difficult than it looked, and most of the broomsticks were rolling around on the ground or trying to inch away from their would-be riders.

(Of course Harry would have bet money that Hermione had done at least as well when it came her own turn to try, earlier in the day. There couldn't possibly be anything *he* could master on the first try which would baffle Hermione, and if there *was* and it turned out to be *broomstick riding* instead of anything intellectual, Harry would just die.)

It took a while for everyone to get a broomstick in front of them. Madam Hooch showed them how to mount and then walked around the field, correcting grips and stances. Apparently even among the few children who'd been

allowed to fly at home, they hadn't been taught to do it correctly.

Madam Hooch surveyed the field of boys, and nodded. "Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground, hard."

Harry swallowed hard, trying to quell the queasy feeling in his stomach.

"Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight back down by leaning forwards slightly. On my whistle — three — two —"

One of the brooms shot skyward, accompanied by a young boy's screams — of horror, not delight. The boy was spinning at an awful rate as he ascended, they only got glimpses of his white face —

As though in slow motion, Harry was leaping back off his own broomstick and scrabbling for his wand, though he didn't really know what he planned to do with it, he'd had exactly two sessions of Charms and the last one *had* been the Hover Charm but Harry had only been able to cast the spell successfully one time out of three and he certainly couldn't levitate whole people —

If there is any hidden power in me, let it reveal itself NOW!

"Come back, boy!" shouted Madam Hooch (which had to be the most unhelpful instruction imaginable for dealing with an out-of-control broomstick, from a *flying instructor*, and a fully automatic section of Harry's brain added Madam Hooch to his tally of fools).

And the boy was thrown off the broomstick.

He seemed to move very slowly through the air, at first.

"*Wingardium Leviosa!*" screamed Harry.

The spell failed. He could feel it fail.

There was a THUD and a distant cracking sound, and the boy lay face down on the grass in a heap.

Harry sheathed his wand and raced forwards at full speed. He arrived at the boy's side at the same time as Madam Hooch, and Harry reached into his pouch and tried to recall oh god what was the name never mind he'd just try "Healer's Pack!" and it popped up into his hand and —

"Broken wrist," Madam Hooch said. "Calm down, boy, he just has a broken wrist!"

There was a sort of mental lurch as Harry's mind snapped out of Panic Mode.

The Emergency Healing Pack Plus lay open in front of him, and there was a syringe of liquid fire in Harry's hand, which would have kept the boy's brain oxygenated if he'd managed to snap his neck.

"Ah..." Harry said in a rather wavering sort of voice. His heart was pounding so loudly that he almost couldn't hear himself panting for breath. "Broken bone... right... Setting String?"

"That's for emergencies only," snapped Madam Hooch. "Put it away, he's fine." She leaned over the boy, offering him a hand. "Come on, boy, it's all right, up you get!"

"You're not seriously going to make him ride the broomstick again?" Harry said in horror.

Madam Hooch sent Harry a glare. "Of course not!" She pulled the boy to his feet using his good arm — Harry saw with a shock that it was Neville Longbottom *again*, what was *with* him? — and she turned to all the watching children. "None of you is to move while I take this boy to the hospital wing! You leave those brooms where they are or you'll be out of Hogwarts before you can say 'Quidditch.' Come on, dear."

And Madam Hooch walked off with Neville, who was clutching his wrist and trying to control his sniffles.

When they were out of earshot, one of the Slytherins started giggling.

That set off the others.

Harry turned and looked at them. It seemed like a good time to memorize some faces.

And Harry saw that Draco was strolling towards him, accompanied by Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle. Mr. Crabbe wasn't smiling. Mr. Goyle decidedly was. Draco himself was wearing a very controlled face that twitched occasionally, from which Harry inferred that Draco thought it was hilarious but saw no political advantage to be gained by laughing about it now instead of in the Slytherin dungeons afterwards.

"Well, Potter," Draco said in a low voice that didn't carry, still with that very controlled face that was twitching occasionally, "Just wanted to say, when you take advantage of emergencies to demonstrate leadership, you want to look like you're in total control of the situation, rather than, say, going into a complete panic." Mr. Goyle giggled, and Draco shot him a quelling look. "But you probably scored a few points anyway. You need any help stowing that healer's kit?"

Harry turned to look at the Healing Pack, which got his own face turned away from Draco. "I think I'm fine," Harry said. He put the syringe back in its place, redid the latches, and stood up.

Ernie Macmillan arrived just as Harry was feeding the pack back into his mokeskin pouch.

"Thank you, Harry Potter, on behalf of Hufflepuff," Ernie Macmillan said formally. "It was a good try and a good thought."

"A good thought indeed," drawled Draco. "Why didn't anyone in Hufflepuff have their wands out? Maybe if you'd *all* helped instead of just Potter, you could've caught him. I thought Hufflepuffs were supposed to stick together?"

Ernie looked like he was torn between getting angry and wanting to die of shame. "We didn't think of it in time —"

"Ah," said Draco, "didn't *think* of it, I guess that's why it's better to have one Ravenclaw as a friend than all of Hufflepuff."

Oh, hell, how was Harry supposed to juggle this one . . . "You're not helping," Harry said in a mild tone. Hoping Draco would interpret that as *you're interfering with my plans, please shut up*.

"Hey, what's this?" said Mr. Goyle. He stooped to the grass and picked up something around the size of a large marble, a glass ball that seemed to be filled with a swirling white mist.

Ernie blinked. "Neville's Remembrall!"

"What's a Remembrall?" asked Harry.

"It turns red if you've forgotten something," Ernie said. "It doesn't tell you what you forgot, though. Give it here, please, and I'll hand it back to Neville later." Ernie held out his hand.

A sudden grin flashed across Mr. Goyle's face and he spun around and raced away.

Ernie stood still for a moment in surprise, and then shouted "Hey!" and ran after Mr. Goyle.

And Mr. Goyle grabbed a broomstick, hopped on with one smooth motion and took to the air.

Harry's jaw dropped. Hadn't Madam Hooch said that would get him *expelled*?

"*That idiot!*" Draco hissed. He opened his mouth to shout —

"*Hey!*" shouted Ernie. "That's Neville's! *Give it back!*"

The Slytherins started cheering and hooting.

Draco's mouth snapped shut. Harry caught the sudden look of indecision on his face.

"Draco," Harry said in a low tone, "if you don't order that idiot back on

the ground, the teacher's going to get back and —"

"*Come and get it, Hufflepuff!*" shouted Mr. Goyle, and a great cheer went up from the Slytherins.

"*I can't!*" whispered Draco. "Everyone in Slytherin would think I'm *weak!*"

"And if Mr. Goyle gets expelled," hissed Harry, "your *father* is going to think you're a *moron!*"

Draco's face twisted in agony.

At that moment —

"Hey, *Slytherslime*," shouted Ernie, "didn't anyone ever tell you that Hufflepuffs stick together? *Wands out, Hufflepuff!*"

And there were suddenly a whole lot of wands pointed in Mr. Goyle's direction.

Three seconds later —

"*Wands out, Slytherin!*" said around five different Slytherins.

And there were a whole lot of wands pointed in Hufflepuff's direction.

Two seconds later —

"*Wands out, Gryffindor!*"

"*Do something, Potter!*" whispered Draco. "*I can't be the one to stop this it has to be you! I'll owe you a favor just think of something aren't you supposed to be brilliant?*"

In around five and a half seconds, realized Harry, someone was going to cast the Sumerian Simple Strike Hex and by the time it was over and the teachers were done expelling people the only boys left in his year would be Ravenclaws.

"*Wands out, Ravenclaw!*" shouted Michael Corner who was apparently feeling left out of the disaster.

"*GREGORY GOYLE!*" screamed Harry. "*I challenge you to a contest for possession of Neville's Remembrall!*"

There was a sudden pause.

"Oh, really?" said Draco in the loudest drawl Harry had ever heard. "That sounds interesting. What sort of contest, Potter?"

Er . . .

"Contest" had been as far as Harry's inspiration had gotten. What sort of contest, he couldn't say "chess" because Draco wouldn't be able to accept without it looking strange, he couldn't say "arm-wrestling" because Mr. Goyle would crush him —

"How about this?" Harry said loudly. "Gregory Goyle and I stand apart

from each other, and no one else is allowed to come near either of us. We don't use our wands and neither does anyone else. I don't move from where I'm standing, and neither does he. And if I can get my hands on Neville's Remembrall, then Gregory Goyle relinquishes all claim to that Remembrall he's holding and gives it to me."

There was another pause as people's looks of relief transmuted to confusion.

"Hah, Potter!" said Draco loudly. "I'd like to see you do *that*! Mr. Goyle accepts!"

"It's on!" said Harry.

"Potter, *what*?" whispered Draco, which he somehow did without moving his lips.

Harry didn't know how to answer without moving his.

People were putting their wands away, and Mr. Goyle swooped gracefully to the ground, looking rather confused. Some Hufflepuffs started over towards Mr. Goyle, but Harry shot them a desperately pleading look and they backed off.

Harry walked toward Mr. Goyle and stopped when he was a few paces away, far enough apart that they couldn't reach each other.

Slowly, deliberately, Harry sheathed his wand.

Everyone else backed away.

Harry swallowed. He knew in broad outline what he *wanted* to do, but it had to be done in such a way that no one understood *what* he'd done —

"All right," Harry said loudly. "And now . . ." He took a deep breath and raised one hand, fingers ready to snap. There were gasps from anyone who'd heard about the pies, which was practically everyone. "*I call upon the insanity of Hogwarts! Happy happy boom boom swamp swamp swamp!*" And Harry snapped his fingers.

A lot of people flinched.

And nothing happened.

Harry let the silence stretch on for a while, developing, until . . .

"Um," someone said. "Is that it?"

Harry looked at the boy who'd spoken. "Look in front of you. You see that patch of ground that looks barren, without any grass on it?"

"Um, yeah," said the boy, a Gryffindor (Dean something?).

"Dig it up."

Now Harry was getting a lot of strange looks.

“Er, why?” said Dean something.

“Just do it,” said Terry Boot in a weary voice. “No point asking why, trust me on this one.”

Dean something knelt down and began to scoop away dirt.

After a minute or so, Dean stood up again. “There’s nothing there,” Dean said.

Huh. Harry had been planning to go back in time and bury a treasure map that would lead to another treasure map that would lead to Neville’s Remembrall which he would put there after getting it back from Mr. Goyle . . .

Then Harry realized there was a much simpler way which didn’t threaten the secret of Time-Turners quite as much.

“Thanks, Dean!” Harry said loudly. “Ernie, would you look around on the ground where Neville fell and see if you can find Neville’s Remembrall?”

People looked even more confused.

“Just do it,” said Terry Boot. “He’ll keep trying until something works, and the scary thing is that —”

“*Merlin!*” gasped Ernie. He was holding up Neville’s Remembrall. “It’s *here!* Right where he fell!”

“*What?*” cried Mr. Goyle. He looked down and saw . . .

. . . that he was still holding Neville’s Remembrall.

There was a rather long pause.

“Er,” said Dean something, “that’s not possible, is it?”

“It’s a plot hole,” said Harry. “I made myself weird enough to distract the universe for a moment and it forgot that Goyle had already picked up the Remembrall.”

“No, wait, I mean, that’s *totally* not possible —”

“Excuse me, are we all standing around here waiting to go flying on broomsticks? Yes we are. So shut up. Anyway, once I get my hands on Neville’s Remembrall, the contest is over and Gregory Goyle has to relinquish all claim to the Remembrall he’s holding and give it to me. Those were the terms, remember?” Harry stretched out a hand and beckoned Ernie. “Just roll it over here, since no one’s supposed to get close to me, okay?”

“Hold on!” shouted a Slytherin — Blaise Zabini, Harry wasn’t likely to forget that name. “How do we know that’s Neville’s Remembrall? You could’ve just dropped *another* Remembrall there —”

“The Slytherin is strong with this one,” Harry said, smiling. “But you have

my word that the one Ernie's holding is Neville's. No comment about the one Gregory Goyle's holding."

Zabini spun to Draco. "*Malfoy!* You're not just going to let him get away with that —"

"Shut up, you," rumbled Mr. Crabbe, standing behind Draco. "Mr. Malfoy doesn't need *you* to tell him what to do!"

Good minion.

"My bet was with Draco, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy," Harry said. "Not with you, Zabini. I have done what Mr. Malfoy said he'd like to see me do, and as for the judgment of the bet, I leave that up to Mr. Malfoy." Harry inclined his head towards Draco and raised his eyebrows slightly. That ought to allow Draco to save enough face.

There was a pause.

"You promise that actually *is* Neville's Remembrall?" Draco said.

"Yes," Harry said. "That's the one that'll go back to Neville and it was his originally. And the one Gregory Goyle's holding goes to me."

Draco nodded, looking decisive. "I won't question the word of the Noble House of Potter, then, no matter how strange that all was. And the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy keeps its word as well. Mr. Goyle, give that to Mr. Potter —"

"Hey!" Zabini said. "He hasn't won *yet*, he hasn't got his hands on —"

"Catch, Harry!" said Ernie, and he tossed the Remembrall.

Harry easily snapped the Remembrall out of the air, he'd always had good reflexes that way. "There," said Harry, "I win . . ."

Harry trailed off. All conversation stopped.

The Remembrall was glowing bright red in his hand, blazing like a miniature sun that cast shadows on the ground in broad daylight.



Thursday.

If you wanted to be specific, 5:09 PM on Thursday afternoon, in Professor McGonagall's office, after flying classes. (With an extra hour for Harry slipped in between.)

Professor McGonagall sitting on her stool. Harry in the hot seat in front of her desk.

“Professor,” Harry said tightly, “Slytherin was pointing their wands at Hufflepuff, Gryffindor was pointing their wands at Slytherin, some *idiot* called wands out in Ravenclaw, and I had maybe five seconds to keep the whole thing from blowing sky-high! It was all I could think of!”

Professor McGonagall’s face was pinched and angry. “*You are not to use the Time-Turner in that fashion, Mr. Potter!* Is the concept of secrecy not something that you understand?”

“They don’t *know* how I did it! They just think I can do really weird things by snapping my fingers! I’ve done other weird stuff that can’t be done with Time-Turners even, and I’ll do *more* stuff like that, and *this* case won’t even stand out! I *had to do it*, Professor!”

“You did *not* have to do it!” snapped Professor McGonagall. “All you needed to do was get this *anonymous Slytherin* back on the ground and the wands put away! You could have challenged him to a game of Exploding Snap but no, you had to use the Time-Turner in a flagrant and unnecessary manner!”

“It was all I could think of! I don’t even know what Exploding Snap *is*, they wouldn’t have accepted a game of chess and if I’d picked arm-wrestling I would have lost!”

“*Then you should have picked wrestling!*”

Harry blinked. “But then I’d have *lost* —”

Harry stopped.

Professor McGonagall was looking *very* angry.

“I’m sorry, Professor McGonagall,” Harry said in a small voice. “I honestly didn’t think of that, and you’re right, I should have, it would have been brilliant if I had, but I just didn’t think of that at all . . .”

Harry’s voice trailed off. It was suddenly apparent to him that he’d had a *lot* of other options. He could have asked *Draco* to suggest something, he could have asked the crowd . . . his use of the Time-Turner *had* been flagrant and unnecessary. There had been a giant space of possibilities, why had he picked *that* one?

Because he’d seen a way to *win*. Win possession of an unimportant trinket that the teachers would’ve taken back from Mr. Goyle anyway.

Intent to win. That was what had gotten him.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said again. “For my pride and my stupidity.”

Professor McGonagall wiped a hand across her forehead. Some of her anger seemed to dissipate. But her voice still came out very hard. “One more display

like that, Mr. Potter, and you will be returning that Time-Turner. Do I make myself very clear?"

"Yes," Harry said. "I understand and I'm sorry."

"Then, Mr. Potter, you will be allowed to retain the Time-Turner for now. And considering the size of the debacle you did, in fact, avert, I will not deduct any points from Ravenclaw."

Plus you couldn't explain why you'd deducted the points. But Harry wasn't dumb enough to say that out loud.

"More importantly, why did the Remembrall go off like that?" Harry said. "Does it mean I've been Obliviated?"

"That puzzles me as well," Professor McGonagall said slowly. "If it were that simple, I would think that the courts would use Remembralls, and they do not. I shall look into it, Mr. Potter." She sighed. "You can go now."

Harry started to get up from his chair, then halted. "Um, sorry, I did have something else I wanted to tell you —"

You could hardly see the flinch. "What is it, Mr. Potter?"

"It's about Professor Quirrell —"

"I'm sure, Mr. Potter, that it is nothing of importance." Professor McGonagall spoke the words in a great rush. "Surely you heard the Headmaster tell the students that you were not to bother us with any unimportant complaints about the Defense Professor?"

Harry was rather confused. "But this could *be* important, yesterday I got this sudden sense of doom when —"

"Mr. Potter! I have a sense of doom as well! And my sense of doom is suggesting that *you must not finish that sentence!*"

Harry's mouth gaped open. Professor McGonagall had succeeded; Harry was speechless.

"Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall, "if you have discovered anything that seems interesting about Professor Quirrell, please feel free not to share it with me or anyone else. Now I think you've taken up enough of my valuable time —"

"*This isn't like you!*" Harry burst out. "I'm sorry but that just seems *unbelievably* irresponsible! From what I've heard there's some kind of jinx on the Defense position, and if you already *know* something's going to go wrong, I'd think you'd all be on your toes —"

"Go *wrong*, Mr. Potter? *I certainly hope not.*" Professor McGonagall's face

was expressionless. "After Professor Blake was caught in a closet with no fewer than three fifth-year Slytherins last February, and a year before that, Professor Summers failed so completely as an educator that her students thought a boggart was a kind of furniture, it would be *catastrophic* if some problem with the extraordinarily competent Professor Quirrell came to my attention now, and I daresay most of our students would fail their Defense O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s."

"I see," Harry said slowly, taking it all in. "So in other words, whatever's wrong with Professor Quirrell, you desperately don't want to know about it until the end of the school year. And since it's currently September, he could assassinate the Prime Minister on live television and get away with it so far as you're concerned."

Professor McGonagall gazed at him unblinkingly. "I am certain that I could never be heard endorsing such a statement, Mr. Potter. At Hogwarts we strive to be proactive with respect to *anything* that threatens the educational attainment of our students."

Such as first-year Ravenclaws who can't keep their mouths shut. "I believe I understand you completely, Professor McGonagall."

"Oh, I doubt that, Mr. Potter. I doubt that very much." Professor McGonagall leaned forward, her face tightening again. "Since you and I have already discussed matters far more sensitive than these, I shall speak frankly. You, and you alone, have reported this mysterious sense of doom. You, and you alone, are a chaos magnet the likes of which I have never seen. After our little shopping trip to Diagon Alley, and *then* the Sorting Hat, and then *today's* little episode, I can well foresee that I am fated to sit in the Headmaster's office and hear some hilarious tale about Professor Quirrell in which you and you alone play a starring role, after which there will be no choice but to fire him. I am already resigned to it, Mr. Potter. And if this sad event takes place any earlier than the Ides of May, I will string you up by the gates of Hogwarts with your own intestines and pour fire beetles into your nose. *Now* do you understand me completely?"

Harry nodded, his eyes very wide. Then, after a second, "What do I get if I can make it happen on the last day of the school year?"

"Get out of my office!"

Thursday.

There must have been something about Thursdays in Hogwarts.

It was 5:32 PM on Thursday afternoon, and Harry was standing next to Professor Flitwick, in front of the great stone gargoyle that guarded the entrance to the Headmaster's office.

No sooner had he made it back from Professor McGonagall's office to the Ravenclaw study rooms than one of the students told him to report to Professor Flitwick's office, and there Harry had learned that Dumbledore wanted to speak to him.

Harry, feeling rather apprehensive, had asked Professor Flitwick if the Headmaster had said what this was about.

Professor Flitwick had shrugged in a helpless sort of way.

Apparently Dumbledore had said that Harry was far too young to invoke the words of power and madness.

Happy happy boom boom swamp swamp swamp? Harry had thought but not said aloud.

"Please don't worry too much, Mr. Potter," squeaked Professor Flitwick from somewhere around Harry's shoulder level. (Harry was grateful for Professor Flitwick's gigantic puffy beard, it was hard getting used to a Professor who was not only shorter than him but spoke in a higher-pitched voice.) "Headmaster Dumbledore may seem a little odd, or a lot odd, or even extremely odd, but he has never hurt a student in the slightest, and I don't believe he ever will." Professor Flitwick gave Harry an encouraging smile. "Just keep that in mind at all times and you'll be sure not to panic!"

This was not helping.

"Good luck!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, and leaned over to the gargoyle and said something that Harry somehow failed to hear at all. (Of course, the password wouldn't be much good if you could hear someone saying it.) And the stone gargoyle walked aside with a very natural and ordinary movement that Harry found rather shocking, since the gargoyle still looked like solid, immovable stone the whole time.

Behind the gargoyle was a set of slowly revolving spiral stairs. There was something disturbingly hypnotic about it, and even more disturbing was that *revolving* the spiral ought not to take you anywhere.

"Up you go!" squeaked Flitwick.

Harry rather nervously stepped onto the spiral, and found himself, for

some reason that his brain couldn't seem to visualize at all, moving upwards.

The gargoyle thudded back into place behind him, and the spiral stairs kept turning and Harry kept being higher up, and after a rather dizzying time, Harry found himself in front of an oak door with a brass griffin knocker.

Harry reached out and turned the doorknob.

The door swung open.

And Harry saw the most interesting room he'd ever seen in his life.

There were tiny metal mechanisms that whirled or ticked or slowly changed shape or emitted little puffs of smoke. There were dozens of mysterious fluids in dozens of oddly shaped containers, all bubbling, boiling, oozing, changing color, or forming into interesting shapes that vanished half a second after you saw them. There were things that looked like clocks with many hands, inscribed with numbers or in unrecognizable languages. There was a bracelet bearing a lenticular crystal that sparkled with a thousand colors, and a bird perched atop a golden platform, and a wooden cup filled with what looked like blood, and a statue of a falcon encrusted in black enamel. The wall was all hung with pictures of people sleeping, and the Sorting Hat was casually poised on a hatrack that was also holding two umbrellas and three red slippers for left feet.

In the midst of all the chaos was a clean black oaken desk. Before the desk was an oaken stool. And behind the desk was a well-cushioned throne containing Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, who was adorned with a long silver beard, a hat like a squashed giant mushroom, and what looked to Muggle eyes like three layers of bright pink pajamas.

Dumbledore was smiling, and his bright eyes twinkled with a mad intensity.

With some trepidation, Harry seated himself in front of the desk. The door swung shut behind him with a loud *thunk*.

"Hello, Harry," said Dumbledore.

"Hello, Headmaster," Harry replied. So they were on a first-name basis? Would Dumbledore now say to call him —

"Please, Harry!" said Dumbledore. "Headmaster sounds so formal. Just call me Heh for short."

"I'll be sure to, Heh," said Harry.

There was a slight pause.

"Do you know," said Dumbledore, "you're the first person who's ever taken me up on that?"

“Ah . . .” Harry said. He tried to control his voice despite the sudden sinking feeling in his stomach. “I’m sorry, I, ah, Headmaster, you told me to do it so I did —”

“Heh, please!” said Dumbledore cheerfully. “And there’s no call to be so worried, I won’t launch you out a window just because you make one mistake. I’ll give you plenty of warnings first, if you’re doing something wrong! Besides, what matters isn’t how people talk to you, it’s what they think of you.”

He’s never hurt a student, just keep remembering that and you’ll be sure not to panic.

Dumbledore drew forth a small metal case and flipped it open, showing some small yellow lumps. “Sherbet lemon?” said the Headmaster.

“Er, no thank you, Heh,” said Harry. *Does slipping a student LSD count as hurting them, or does that fall into the category of harmless fun?* “You, um, said something about my being too young to invoke the words of power and madness?”

“That you most certainly are!” Dumbledore said. “Thankfully the Words of Power and Madness were lost seven centuries ago and no one has the slightest idea what they are anymore. It was just a little remark.”

“Ah . . .” Harry said. He was aware that his mouth was hanging open. “Why did you call me here, then?”

“*Why?*” Dumbledore repeated. “Ah, Harry, if I went around all day asking *why* I do things, I’d never have time to get a single thing done! I’m quite a busy person, you know.”

Harry nodded, smiling. “Yes, it was a very impressive list. Headmaster of Hogwarts, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards. Sorry to ask but I was wondering, is it possible to get more than six hours if you use more than one Time-Turner? Because it’s pretty impressive if you’re doing all that on just thirty hours a day.”

There was another slight pause, during which Harry went on smiling. He was a little apprehensive, actually a lot apprehensive, but once it had become clear that Dumbledore was deliberately messing with him, something within him *absolutely refused* to sit and take it like a defenseless lump.

“I’m afraid Time doesn’t like being stretched out too much,” said Dumbledore after the slight pause, “and yet we ourselves seem to be a little too large for it, and so it’s a constant struggle to fit our lives into Time.”

“Indeed,” Harry said with grave solemnity. “That’s why it’s best to come to our points quickly.”

For a moment Harry wondered if he’d gone too far.

Then Dumbledore chuckled. “Straight to the point it shall be.” The Headmaster leaned forwards, tilting his squashed mushroom hat and brushing his beard against his desk. “Harry, this Monday you did something that should have been impossible even with a Time-Turner. Or rather, impossible with *only* a Time-Turner. Where did those two pies come from, I wonder?”

A jolt of adrenaline shot through Harry. He’d done that using the Cloak of Invisibility, the one that had been given him in a Christmas box along with a note, and that note had said: *If Dumbledore saw a chance to possess one of the Deathly Hallows he would never let it escape his grasp...*

“A natural thought,” Dumbledore went on, “is that since none of the first-years present were able to cast such a spell, someone else was present, and yet unseen. And if no one could see them, why, it would be easy enough for them to throw the pies. One might further suspect that since you had a Time-Turner, you were the invisible one; and that since the spell of Disillusionment is far beyond your current abilities, you had an invisibility cloak.” Dumbledore smiled conspiratorially. “Am I on the right track so far, Harry?”

Harry was frozen. He had the feeling that an outright lie would not at all be wise, and possibly not the least bit helpful, and he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Dumbledore waved a friendly hand. “Don’t worry, Harry, you haven’t done anything wrong. Invisibility cloaks aren’t against the rules — I suppose they’re rare enough that no one ever got around to putting them on the list. But really I was wondering something else entirely.”

“Oh?” Harry said in the most normal voice he could manage.

Dumbledore’s eyes shone with enthusiasm. “You see, Harry, after you’ve been through a few adventures you tend to catch the hang of these things. You start to see the pattern, hear the rhythm of the world. You begin to harbor suspicions *before* the moment of revelation. You are the Boy-Who-Lived, and somehow an invisibility cloak made its way into your hands only four days after you discovered our magical Britain. Such cloaks are not for sale in Diagon Alley, but there is *one* which might find its own way to a destined wearer. And so I cannot help but wonder if by some strange chance you have found not just *an* invisibility cloak, but *the* Cloak of Invisibility, one of the three Deathly

Hallows and reputed to hide the wearer from the gaze of Death himself.” Dumbledore’s gaze was bright and eager. “May I see it, Harry?”

Harry swallowed. There was a full flood of adrenaline in his system now and it was entirely useless, this was the most powerful wizard in the world and there was no way he could make it out the door and there was nowhere in Hogwarts for him to hide if he did, he was about to lose the Cloak that had been passed down through the Potters for who knew how long —

Slowly Dumbledore leaned back into his high chair. The bright light had gone out of his eyes, and he looked puzzled and a little sorrowful. “Harry,” said Dumbledore, “if you don’t want to, you can just say no.”

“I can?” Harry croaked.

“Yes, Harry,” said Dumbledore. His voice sounded sad now, and worried. “It seems that you’re afraid of me, Harry. May I ask what I’ve done to earn your distrust?”

Harry swallowed. “Is there some way you can swear a binding magical oath that you won’t take my cloak?”

Dumbledore shook his head slowly. “Unbreakable Vows are not to be used so lightly. And besides, Harry, if you did not already know the spell, you would have only my word that the spell was binding. Yet surely you realize that I do not *need* your permission to see the Cloak. I am powerful enough to draw it forth myself, makeskin pouch or no.” Dumbledore’s face was very grave. “But this I will not do. The Cloak is yours, Harry. I will not seize it from you. Not even to look at for just a moment, unless you decide to show it to me. That is a promise and an oath. Should I need to prohibit you from using it on the school grounds, I will require you to go to your vault at Gringotts and store it there.”

“Ah...” Harry said. He swallowed hard, trying to calm the flood of adrenaline and think reasonably. He took the makeskin pouch off his belt. “If you really *don’t* need my permission... then you have it.” Harry held out the pouch to Dumbledore, and bit down hard on his lip, sending that signal to himself in case he was Obliviated afterwards.

The old wizard reached into the pouch, and without saying any word of retrieval, drew forth the Cloak of Invisibility.

“Ah,” breathed Dumbledore. “I was right...” He poured the shimmering black velvet mesh through his hand. “Centuries old, and still as perfect as the day it was made. We have lost much of our art over the years, and now I cannot

make such a thing myself, no one can. I can feel the power of it like an echo in my mind, like a song forever being sung without anyone to hear it . . ." The wizard looked up from the Cloak. "Do not sell it," he said, "do not give it to anyone as a possession. Think twice before you show it to anyone, and ponder three times again before you reveal it is a Deathly Hallow. Treat it with respect, for this is indeed a Thing of Power."

For a moment Dumbledore's face grew wistful . . .

. . . and then he handed the Cloak back to Harry.

Harry put it back in his pouch.

Dumbledore's face was grave once more. "May I ask again, Harry, how you came to distrust me so?"

Suddenly Harry felt rather ashamed.

"There was a note with the Cloak," Harry said in a small voice. "It said that you would try to take the Cloak from me, if you knew. I don't know who left the note, though, I really don't."

"I . . . see," Dumbledore said slowly. "Well, Harry, I won't impugn the motives of whoever left you that note. Who knows but that they themselves may have had the best of good intentions? They did give you the Cloak, after all."

Harry nodded, impressed by Dumbledore's charity, and abashed at the sharp contrast with his own attitude.

The old wizard went on. "But you and I are both gamepieces of the same color, I think. The boy who finally defeated Voldemort, and the old man who held him off long enough for you to save the day. I will not hold your caution against you, Harry, we must all do our best to be wise. I will only ask that you think twice and ponder three times again, the next time someone tells you to distrust me."

"I'm sorry," Harry said. He felt wretched at this point, he'd just told off Gandalf essentially, and Dumbledore's kindness was only making him feel worse. "I shouldn't have distrusted you."

"Alas, Harry, in this world . . ." The old wizard shook his head. "I cannot even say you were unwise. You did not know me. And in truth there are some at Hogwarts who you would do well not to trust. Perhaps even some you call friends."

Harry swallowed. That sounded rather ominous. "Like who?"

Dumbledore stood up from his chair, and began examining one of his

instruments, a dial with eight hands of varying length.

After a few moments, the old wizard spoke again. “He probably seems to you quite charming,” said Dumbledore. “Polite — to you at least. Well-spoken, maybe even admiring. Always ready with a helping hand, a favor, a word of advice —”

“Oh, *Draco Malfoy!*” Harry said, feeling rather relieved that it wasn’t Hermione or something. “Oh no, no no no, you’ve got it all wrong, he’s not turning me, I’m turning him.”

Dumbledore froze where he was peering at the dial. “You’re *what?*”

“I’m going to turn Draco Malfoy from the Dark Side,” Harry said. “You know, make him a good guy.”

Dumbledore straightened and turned to Harry. He was wearing one of the most astonished expressions Harry had ever seen on anyone, let alone someone with a long silver beard. “Are you certain,” said the old wizard after a moment, “that he is ready to be redeemed? I fear that whatever goodness you think you see within him is only wishful thinking — or worse, a lure, a bait —”

“Er, not likely,” Harry said. “I mean if he’s trying to disguise himself as a good guy he’s incredibly bad at it. This isn’t a question of Draco coming up to me and being all charming and me deciding that he must have a hidden core of goodness deep down. I selected him for redemption specifically because he’s the heir to House Malfoy and if you had to pick one person to redeem, it would obviously be him.”

Dumbledore’s left eye twitched. “You intend to sow seeds of love and kindness in Draco Malfoy’s heart because you expect Malfoy’s heir to prove valuable to you?”

“Not just to *me!*” Harry said indignantly. “To all of magical Britain, if this works out! *And* he’ll have a happier and mentally healthier life himself! Look, I don’t have enough time to turn *everyone* away from the Dark Side and I’ve got to ask where the Light can gain the most advantage the fastest —”

Dumbledore started laughing. Laughing a lot harder than Harry would expect, almost howling. It seemed positively *undignified*. An ancient and powerful wizard ought to chuckle in deep booming tones, not laugh so hard he was gasping for breath. Harry had once literally fallen out of his chair while watching the Marx Brothers movie *Duck Soup*, and that was how hard Dumbledore was laughing now.

“It’s not *that* funny,” Harry said after a while. He was starting to worry

about Dumbledore's sanity again.

Dumbledore got himself under control again with a visible effort. "Ah, Harry, one symptom of the disease called wisdom is that you begin laughing at things that no one else thinks is funny, because when you're wise, Harry, you start getting the jokes!" The old wizard wiped tears away from his eyes. "Ah, me. Ah, me. Oft evil will shall evil mar indeed, in very deed."

Harry's brain took a moment to place the familiar words . . . "Hey, that's a *Tolkien* quote! *Gandalf* says that!"

"Theoden, actually," said Dumbledore.

"You're *Muggleborn*?" Harry said in shock.

"I'm afraid not," said Dumbledore, smiling again. "I was born seventy years before that book was published, dear child. But it seems that my Muggleborn students tend to think alike in certain ways. I have accumulated no fewer than twenty copies of *The Lord of the Rings* and three sets of Tolkien's entire collected works, and I treasure every one of them." Dumbledore drew his wand and held it up and struck a pose. "*You cannot pass!* How does that look?"

"Ah," Harry said in something approaching complete brain shutdown, "I think you're missing a Balrog." And the pink pajamas and squashed mushroom hat were not helping in the slightest.

"I see." Dumbledore sighed and glumly sheathed the wand in his belt. "I fear there have been precious few Balrogs in my life of late. Nowadays it's all meetings of the Wizengamot where I must try desperately to prevent any work from getting done, and formal dinners where foreign politicians compete to see who can be the most obstinate fool. And being mysterious at people, knowing things I have no way of knowing, making cryptic statements which can only be understood in hindsight, and all the other small ways in which powerful wizards amuse themselves after they have left the part of the pattern that allows them to be heroes. Speaking of which, Harry, I have a certain something to give you, something which belonged to your father."

"You do?" said Harry. "Gosh, who would have figured."

"Yes indeed," said Dumbledore. "I suppose it is a little predictable, isn't it?" His face turned solemn. "Nonetheless . . ."

Dumbledore went back to his desk and sat down, pulling out one of the drawers as he did so. He reached in using both arms, and, straining slightly, pulled a rather large and heavy-looking object out of the drawer, which he then deposited on his oaken desk with a huge thunk.

"This," Dumbledore said, "was your father's rock."

Harry stared at it. It was light grey, discolored, irregularly shaped, sharp-edged, and very much a plain old ordinary large rock. Dumbledore had deposited it so that it rested on the widest available cross-section, but it still wobbled unstably on his desk.

Harry looked up. "This is a joke, right?"

"It is not," said Dumbledore, shaking his head and looking very serious. "I took this from the ruins of James and Lily's home in Godric's Hollow, where also I found you; and I have kept it from then until now, against the day when I could give it to you."

In the mixture of hypotheses that served as Harry's model of the world, Dumbledore's insanity was rapidly rising in probability. But there *was* still a substantial amount of probability allocated to other alternatives . . . "Um, is it a *magical* rock?"

"Not so far as I know," said Dumbledore. "But I advise you with the greatest possible stringency to keep it close about your person at all times."

All right. Dumbledore was *probably* insane but if he *wasn't* . . . well, it would be just too *embarrassing* to get in trouble from ignoring the advice of the inscrutable old wizard. That had to be like #4 on the list of the Top 100 Obvious Failure Modes.

Harry stepped forward and put his hands on the rock, trying to find some angle from which to lift it without cutting himself. "I'll put it in my pouch, then."

Dumbledore frowned. "That may not be close enough to your person. And what if your moleskin pouch is lost, or stolen?"

"You think I should just carry a big rock everywhere I go?"

Dumbledore gave Harry a serious look. "That might prove wise."

"Ah . . ." Harry said. It looked rather heavy. "I'd think the other students would tend to ask me questions about that."

"Tell them I ordered you to do it," said Dumbledore. "No one will question that, since they all think I'm insane." His face was still perfectly serious.

"Er, to be honest, if you go around ordering your students to carry large rocks I can kind of see why people would think that."

"Ah, Harry," said Dumbledore. The old wizard gestured, a sweep of one hand that seemed to take in all the mysterious instruments around the room. "When we are young we believe that we know everything, and so we believe

that if we see no explanation for something, then no explanation exists. When we are older we realize that the whole universe works by a rhythm and a reason, even if we ourselves do not know it. It is only our own ignorance which appears to us as insanity.”

“Reality is always lawful,” said Harry, “even if we don’t know the law.”

“Precisely, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “To understand this — and I see that you *do* understand it — is the essence of wisdom.”

“So . . . *why* do I have to carry this rock exactly?”

“I can’t think of a reason, actually,” said Dumbledore.

“ . . . you can’t.”

Dumbledore nodded. “But just because I can’t think of a reason doesn’t mean there *is* no reason.”

The instruments ticked on.

“Okay,” said Harry, “I’m not even sure if I should be saying this, but that is simply not the correct way to deal with our admitted ignorance of how the universe works.”

“It isn’t?” said the old wizard, looking surprised and disappointed.

Harry had the feeling this conversation was not going to work out in his favor, but he carried on regardless. “No. I don’t even know if that fallacy has an official name, but if I had to make one up myself, it would be ‘privileging the hypothesis’ or something like that. How can I put this formally . . . um . . . suppose you had a million boxes, and only one of the boxes contained a diamond. And you had a box full of diamond-detectors, and each diamond-detector always went off in the presence of a diamond, and went off half the time on boxes that didn’t have a diamond. If you ran twenty detectors over all the boxes, you’d have, on average, one false candidate and one true candidate left. And then it would just take one or two more detectors before you were left with the one true candidate. The point being that when there are lots of possible answers, *most* of the evidence you need goes into just *locating* the true hypothesis out of millions of possibilities — bringing it to your attention in the first place. The amount of evidence you need to judge between two or three plausible candidates is much smaller by comparison. So if you just jump ahead without evidence and promote one particular possibility to the focus of your attention, you’re skipping over most of the work. Like, you live in a city where there are a million people, and there’s a murder, and a detective says, well, we’ve got no evidence at all, so have we considered the possibility that

Mortimer Snodgrass did it?”

“Did he?” said Dumbledore.

“No,” said Harry. “But later it turns out that the murderer had black hair, and Mortimer has black hair, so everyone’s like, ah, looks like Mortimer did it after all. So it’s unfair to Mortimer for the police to *promote him to their attention* without having good reasons already in hand to suspect him. When there are lots of possibilities, most of the work goes into just *locating* the true answer — starting to pay attention to it. You don’t need *proof*, or the sort of official evidence that scientists or courts demand, but you need some sort of *hint*, and that hint has to discriminate that particular possibility from the millions of others. Otherwise you can’t just pluck the right answer out of thin air. You can’t even pluck a possibility worth thinking about out of thin air. And there’s got to be a million other things I could do besides carrying around my father’s rock. Just because I’m ignorant about the universe doesn’t mean that I’m unsure about how I should reason in the presence of my uncertainty. The laws for thinking with probabilities are no less iron than the laws that govern old-fashioned logic, and what you just did is *not allowed*.” Harry paused. “*Unless*, of course, you have some *hint* you’re not mentioning.”

“Ah,” said Dumbledore. He tapped his cheek, looking thoughtful. “An interesting argument, certainly, but doesn’t it break down at the point where you make an analogy between a million potential murderers only one of whom committed the murder, and taking one out of many possible courses of action, when many possible courses of action may all be wise? I do not say that carrying your father’s rock is the one best possible course of action, only that it is wiser to do than not.”

Dumbledore once again reached into the same desk drawer he had accessed earlier, this time seeming to root around inside — at least his arm seemed to be moving. “I will remark,” Dumbledore said while Harry was still trying to sort out how to reply to this completely unexpected rejoinder, “that it is a common misconception of Ravenclaws that all the smart children are Sorted there, leaving none for other Houses. This is not so; being Sorted to Ravenclaw indicates that you are driven by your desire to know things, which is not at all the same quality as being intelligent.” The wizard was smiling as he bent over the drawer. “Nonetheless, you *do* seem rather intelligent. Less like an ordinary young hero and more like a young mysterious ancient wizard. I think I may have been taking the wrong approach with you, Harry, and that you may be

able to understand things that few others could grasp. So I shall be daring, and offer you a certain *other* heirloom.”

“You don’t mean . . .” gasped Harry. “My father . . . *owned another rock?*”

“Excuse me,” said Dumbledore, “I *am* still older and more mysterious than you and if there are any revelations to be made then *I* will do the revealing, thank you . . . oh, where *is* that thing!” Dumbledore reached down further into the desk drawer, and still further. His head and shoulders and whole torso disappeared inside until only his hips and legs were sticking out, as though the desk drawer was eating him.

Harry couldn’t help but wonder just how much stuff was in there and what the complete inventory would look like.

Finally Dumbledore rose back up out of the drawer, holding the objective of his search, which he set down on the desk alongside the rock.

It was a used, ragged-edged, worn-spined textbook: *Intermediate Potion Making* by Libatius Borage. There was a picture of a smoking vial on the cover.

“This,” Dumbledore intoned, “was your mother’s fifth-year Potions textbook.”

“Which I am to carry with me at all times,” said Harry.

“*Which holds a terrible secret.* A secret whose revelation could prove so disastrous that I must ask you to swear — and I do require you to swear it seriously, Harry, whatever you may think of all this — never to tell anyone or anything else.”

Harry considered his mother’s fifth-year Potions textbook, which, apparently, held a terrible secret.

The problem was that Harry *did* take that oaths like that very seriously. Any vow was an Unbreakable Vow if made by the right sort of person.

And . . .

“I’m feeling thirsty,” Harry said, “and that is not at all a good sign.”

Dumbledore entirely failed to ask any questions about this cryptic statement. “*Do you swear, Harry?*” said Dumbledore. His eyes gazed intently into Harry’s. “Otherwise I cannot tell you.”

“Yes,” said Harry. “I swear.” That was the trouble with being a Ravenclaw. You couldn’t refuse an offer like that or your curiosity would eat you alive, and everyone else knew it.

“And I swear in turn,” said Dumbledore, “that what I am about to tell you is the truth.”

Dumbledore opened the book, seemingly at random, and Harry leaned in to see.

“Do you see these notes,” Dumbledore said in a voice so low it was almost a whisper, “written in the margins of the book?”

Harry squinted slightly. The yellowing pages seemed to be describing something called a *potion of eagle’s splendor*, many of the ingredients being items that Harry didn’t recognize at all and whose names didn’t appear to derive from English. Scrawled in the margin was a handwritten annotation saying, *I wonder what would happen if you used Thestral blood here instead of blueberries?* and immediately beneath was a reply in different handwriting, *You’d get sick for weeks and maybe die.*

“I see them,” said Harry. “What about them?”

Dumbledore pointed to the second scrawl. “The ones in this handwriting,” he said, still in that low voice, “were written by your mother. And the ones in *this* handwriting,” moving his finger to indicate the first scrawl, “were written by me. I would turn myself invisible and sneak into her dorm room while she was sleeping. Lily thought one of her friends was writing them and they had the most amazing fights.”

That was the exact point at which Harry realized that the Headmaster of Hogwarts *was*, in fact, crazy.

Dumbledore was looking at him with a serious expression. “Do you understand the implications of what I have just told you, Harry?”

“Ehhh . . .” Harry said. His voice seemed to be stuck. “Sorry . . . I . . . not really . . .”

“Ah well,” said Dumbledore, and sighed. “I suppose your cleverness has limits after all, then. Shall we all just pretend I didn’t say anything?”

Harry rose from his chair, wearing a fixed smile. “Of course,” Harry said. “You know it’s actually getting rather late in the day and I’m a bit hungry, so I should be going down to dinner, really” and Harry made a beeline for the door.

The doorknob entirely failed to turn.

“You wound me, Harry,” said Dumbledore’s voice in quiet tones that were coming from right behind him. “Do you not at least realize that what I have told you is a sign of trust?”

Harry slowly turned around.

In front of him was a very powerful and very insane wizard with a long

silver beard, a hat like a squashed giant mushroom, and wearing what looked to Muggle eyes like three layers of bright pink pajamas.

Behind him was a door that didn't seem to be working at the moment.

Dumbledore was looking rather saddened and weary, like he wanted to lean on a wizard's staff he didn't have. "Really," said Dumbledore, "you try anything new instead of following the same pattern every time for a hundred and ten years, and people all start running away." The old wizard shook his head in sorrow. "I'd hoped for better from you, Harry Potter. I'd heard that your own friends also think you mad. I know they are mistaken. Will you not believe the same of me?"

"Please open the door," Harry said, his voice trembling. "If you ever want me to trust you again, open the door."

There was the sound behind him of a door opening.

"There were more things I planned to say to you," Dumbledore said, "and if you leave now, you will not know what they were."

Sometimes Harry absolutely *hated* being a Ravenclaw.

He's never hurt a student, said Harry's Gryffindor side. *Just keep remembering that and you'll be sure not to panic. You're not going to run away just because things are getting interesting, are you?*

You can't just walk out on the Headmaster! said the Hufflepuff part. *What if he starts deducting House points? He could make your school life very difficult if he decides he doesn't like you!*

And a piece of himself which Harry didn't much like but couldn't quite manage to silence was pondering the potential advantages of being one of the few friends of this mad old wizard who also happened to be Headmaster, Chief Warlock, and Supreme Mugwump. And unfortunately his inner Slytherin seemed to be much better than Draco at turning people to the Dark Side, because it was saying things like *poor fellow, he looks like he needs someone to talk to, doesn't he?* and *you wouldn't want such a powerful man to end up trusting someone less virtuous, would you?* and *I wonder what sort of incredible secrets Dumbledore could tell you if, you know, you became friends with him* and even *I bet he's got a reaaally interesting book collection.*

You're all a bunch of lunatics, Harry thought at the entire assemblage, but he'd been unanimously outvoted by every component part of himself.

Harry turned, took a step towards the open door, reached out, and deliberately closed it again. It was a costless sacrifice given that he was staying

anyway, Dumbledore could control his movements regardless, but maybe it would impress Dumbledore.

When Harry turned back around he saw that the powerful insane wizard was once more smiling and looking friendly. That was good, maybe.

"Please don't do that again," Harry said. "I don't like being trapped."

"I *am* sorry about that, Harry," said Dumbledore in what sounded like tones of sincere apology. "But it would have been terribly unwise to let you leave without your father's rock."

"Of course," Harry said. "It wasn't reasonable of me to expect the door to open before I put the quest items in my inventory."

Dumbledore smiled and nodded.

Harry went over to the desk, twisted his mokeskin pouch around to the front of his belt, and, with some effort, managed to heave up the rock in his eleven-year-old arms and feed it in.

He could actually feel the weight slowly diminishing as the Widening Lip charm ate the rock, and the burp which followed was rather noisy and had a distinctly complaining sound to it.

His mother's fifth-year Potions textbook (which held a secret that was in fact pretty terrible) followed shortly after.

And then Harry's inner Slytherin made a sly suggestion for ingratiating himself with the Headmaster, which, unfortunately, had been perfectly pitched in such a way as to gain the support of the majority Ravenclaw faction.

"So," Harry said. "Um. As long as I'm hanging around, I don't suppose you would like to give me a bit of a tour of your office? I'm a bit curious as to what some of these things are," and that was his understatement for the month of September.

Dumbledore gazed at him, and then nodded with a slight grin. "I'm flattered by your interest," said Dumbledore, "but I'm afraid there isn't much to say." Dumbledore took a step closer to the wall and pointed to a painting of a sleeping man. "These are portraits of past Headmasters of Hogwarts." He turned and pointed to his desk. "This is my desk." He pointed to his chair. "This is my chair —"

"Excuse me," Harry said, "actually I was wondering about those." Harry pointed to a small cube that was softly whispering "blorple... blorple... blorple".

"Oh, the little fiddly things?" said Dumbledore. "They came with the

Headmaster's office and I have absolutely no idea what most of them do. Although *this* dial with the eight hands counts the number of, let's call them sneezes, by left-handed witches within the borders of France, you would not believe how much work it took to nail that down. And *this* one with the golden wibblers is my own invention and Minerva is never, ever going to figure out what it's doing."

Dumbledore took a step over to the hatrack while Harry was still processing this. "Here of course we have the Sorting Hat, I believe the two of you have met. It told me that it was never again to be placed on your head under any circumstances. You're only the fourteenth student in history it's said that about, Baba Yaga was another one and I'll tell you about the other twelve when you're older. This is an umbrella. This is another umbrella." Dumbledore took another few steps and turned around, now smiling quite broadly. "And of course, most people who come to my office want to see Fawkes."

Dumbledore was standing next to the bird on the golden platform.

Harry came over, rather puzzled. "This is Fawkes?"

"Fawkes is a phoenix," said Dumbledore. "Very rare, very powerful magical creatures."

"Ah..." Harry said. He lowered his head and stared into the tiny, beady black eyes, which showed not the slightest sign of power or intelligence.

"Ahhh..." Harry said again.

He was pretty sure he recognized the shape of the bird. It was pretty hard to miss.

"Umm..."

Say something intelligent! Harry's mind roared at itself. *Don't just stand there sounding like a gibbering moron!*

Well what the heck am I supposed to say? Harry's mind fired back. *Anything!*

You mean, anything besides "Fawkes is a chicken" —

Yes! Anything but that!

"So, ah, what sort of magic do phoenixes do, then?"

"Their tears have the power to heal," Dumbledore said. "They are creatures of fire, and move between all places as easily as fire may extinguish itself in one place and be kindled in another. The tremendous strain of their innate magic ages their bodies quickly, and yet they are as close to undying as any creature that exists in this world, for whenever their bodies fail them they immolate

themselves in a burst of fire and leave behind a hatchling, or sometimes an egg.” Dumbledore came closer and inspected the chicken, frowning. “Hm . . . looking a little peaky there, I’d say.”

By the time this statement registered fully in Harry’s mind, the chicken was already on fire.

The chicken’s beak opened, but it didn’t have time for so much as a single caw before it began to wither and char. The blaze was brief, intense, and entirely self-contained; there was no smell of burning.

And then the fire died down only seconds after it had begun, leaving behind a tiny, pathetic heap of ashes on the golden platform.

“Don’t look so horrified, Harry!” said Dumbledore. “Fawkes hasn’t been hurt.” Dumbledore’s hand dipped into a pocket, and then the same hand sifted through the ashes and turned up a small yellowish egg. “Look, here’s an egg!”

“Oh . . . wow . . . amazing . . .”

“But now we really should get on with things,” Dumbledore said. Leaving the egg behind in the ashes of the chicken, he returned to his throne and seated himself. “It’s almost time for dinner, after all, and we wouldn’t want to have to use our Time-Turners.”

There was a violent power struggle going on in the Government of Harry. Slytherin and Hufflepuff had switched sides after seeing the Headmaster of Hogwarts set fire to a chicken.

“Yes, things,” said Harry’s lips. “And then dinner.”

You’re sounding like a gibbering moron again observed Harry’s Internal Critic.

“Well,” Dumbledore said. “I fear I have a confession to make, Harry. A confession and an apology.”

“Apologies are good.” . . . *that doesn’t even make sense! What am I talking about?*

The old wizard sighed deeply. “You may not still think so after understanding what I have to say. I’m afraid, Harry, that I’ve been manipulating you your entire life. It was I who consigned you to the care of your wicked stepparents —”

“My stepparents aren’t wicked!” blurted Harry. “My *parents*, I mean!”

“They aren’t?” Dumbledore said, looking surprised and disappointed. “Not even a little wicked? That doesn’t fit the pattern . . .”

Harry’s inner Slytherin screamed at the top of its mental lungs, *SHUT UP*

YOU IDIOT HE'LL TAKE YOU AWAY FROM THEM!

"No, no," said Harry, lips frozen in a ghastly grimace, "I was just trying to spare your feelings, they're actually very wicked..."

"They are?" Dumbledore leaned forward, gazing at him intently. "What do they do?"

Talk fast "they, ah, I have to do dishes and wash problems and they don't let me read a lot of books and —"

"Ah, good, that's good to hear," said Dumbledore, leaning back again. He smiled in a sad sort of way. "I apologize for *that*, then. Now where was I? Ah, yes. I'm sorry to say, Harry, that I am responsible for virtually everything bad that has ever happened to you. I know that this will probably make you very angry."

"Yes, I'm very angry!" said Harry. "Grrr!"

Harry's Internal Critic promptly awarded him the All-Time Award for the Worst Acting in the History of Ever.

"And I just wanted you to know," Dumbledore said, "I wanted to tell you as early as possible, in case something happens to one of us later, that I am truly, truly sorry. For everything that has already happened, and everything that will."

Moisture glistened in the old wizard's eyes.

"And I'm very angry!" said Harry. "So angry that I want to leave right now unless you've got anything else to say!"

Just GO before he sets you on fire! shrieked Slytherin, Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor.

"I understand," said Dumbledore. "One last thing then, Harry. You are *not* to attempt the forbidden door on the third-floor corridor. There's no possible way you could get through all the traps, and I wouldn't want to hear that you'd been hurt trying. Why, I doubt that you could so much as open the first door, since it's locked and you don't know the spell *Alohomora* —"

Harry spun around and bolted for the exit at top speed, the doorknob turned agreeably in his hand and then he was racing down the spiral stairs even as they turned, his feet almost stumbling over themselves, in just a moment he was at the bottom and the gargoyle was walking aside and Harry fired out of the stairwell like a cannonball.

Harry Potter.

There must have been something about Harry Potter.

It was Thursday for everyone, after all, and yet this sort of thing didn't seem to happen to anyone else.

It was 6:21 PM on Thursday afternoon when Harry Potter, firing out of the stairwell like a cannonball and accelerating at top speed, ran directly into Minerva McGonagall as she was turning a corner on her way to the Headmaster's office.

Thankfully neither of them were much hurt. As had been explained to Harry a little earlier in the day — back when he was refusing to go anywhere near a broomstick again — Quidditch needed solid iron Bludgers just to stand a decent chance of injuring the players, since wizards tended to be a lot more resistant than Muggles to impacts.

Harry and Professor McGonagall did both end up on the floor, and the parchments she had been carrying went all over the corridor.

There was a terrible, terrible pause.

"Harry Potter," breathed Professor McGonagall from where she was lying on the floor right next to Harry. Her voice rose to nearly a shriek. "*What were you doing in the Headmaster's office?*"

"Nothing!" squeaked Harry.

"*Were you talking about the Defense Professor?*"

"No! Dumbledore called me up there and he gave me this big rock and said it was my father's and I should carry it everywhere!"

There was another terrible pause.

"I see," said Professor McGonagall, her voice a little calmer. She stood up, brushed herself off, and glared at the scattered parchments, which jumped into a neat stack and scurried back against the corridor wall as though to hide from her gaze. "My sympathies, Mr. Potter, and I apologize for doubting you."

"Professor McGonagall," Harry said. His voice was wavering. He pushed himself off the floor, stood, and looked up at her trustworthy, *sane* face. "Professor McGonagall . . ."

"Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"Do you think I should?" Harry said in a small voice. "Carry my father's rock everywhere?"

Professor McGonagall sighed. "That is between you and the Headmaster, I'm afraid." She hesitated. "I will say that ignoring the Headmaster completely

is almost never wise. I *am* sorry to hear of your dilemma, Mr. Potter, and if there's any way I *can* help you with whatever you decide to do —"

"Um," Harry said. "Actually I was thinking that once I know how, I could Transfigure the rock into a ring and wear it on my finger. If you could teach me how to sustain a Transfiguration —"

"It is good that you asked me first," Professor McGonagall said, her face growing a bit stern. "If you lost control of the Transfiguration the reversal would cut off your finger and probably rip your hand in half. And at your age, even a ring is too large a target for you to sustain indefinitely without it being a serious drain on your magic. But I can have a ring forged for you with a setting for a jewel, a *small* jewel, in contact with your skin, and you can practice sustaining a safe subject, like a marshmallow. When you have kept it up successfully, even in your sleep, for a full month, I will allow you to Transfigure, ah, your father's rock . . ." Professor McGonagall's voice trailed off. "Did the Headmaster *really* —"

"Yes. Ah . . . um . . ."

Professor McGonagall sighed. "That's a bit strange even for him." She stooped and picked up the stack of parchments. "I'm sorry about this, Mr. Potter. I apologize again for mistrusting you. But now it's my own turn to see the Headmaster."

"Ah . . . good luck, I guess. Er . . ."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter."


"Um . . ."

Professor McGonagall walked over to the gargoyle, inaudibly spoke the password, and stepped through into the revolving spiral stairs. She began to rise out of sight, and the gargoyle started back —

"Professor McGonagall the Headmaster set fire to a chicken!"

"He *wha* —"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



DOMINANCE HIERARCHIES

It was breakfast time on Friday morning. Harry took another huge bite out of his toast and then tried to remind his brain that scarfing his breakfast wouldn't actually get him into the dungeons any faster. Anyway they had a full hour of study time between breakfast and the start of Potions.

But dungeons! In Hogwarts! Harry's imagination was already sketching the chasms, narrow bridges, torchlit sconces, and patches of glowing moss. Would there be rats? Would there be *dragons*?

"Harry Potter," said a quiet voice from behind him.

Harry looked over his shoulder and found himself beholding Ernie Macmillan, smartly dressed in yellow-trimmed robes and looking a little worried.

"Neville thought I should warn you," Ernie said in a low voice. "I think he's right. Be careful of the Potions Master in our session today. The older Hufflepuffs told us that Professor Snape can be really nasty to people he doesn't like, and he doesn't like most people who aren't Slytherins. If you say anything smart to him it . . . it could be really bad for you, from what I've heard. Just keep your head down and don't give him any reason to notice you."

There was a pause as Harry processed this, and then he lifted his eyebrows. (Harry wished he could raise just one eyebrow, like Spock, but he'd never been able to manage.) "Thanks," Harry said. "You might've just saved me a lot of trouble."

Ernie nodded, and turned to go back to the Hufflepuff table.

Harry resumed eating his toast.

It was around four bites afterward that someone said “Pardon me,” and Harry turned around to see an older Ravenclaw, looking a little worried —

Some time later, Harry was finishing up his third plate of rashers. (He’d learned to eat heavily at breakfast. He could always eat lightly at lunch if he didn’t end up using the Time-Turner.) And there was yet another voice from behind him saying “Harry?”

“Yes,” Harry said wearily, “I’ll try not to draw Professor Snape’s attention —”

“Oh, that’s hopeless,” said Fred.

“Completely hopeless,” said George.

“So we had the house elves bake you a cake,” said Fred.

“We’re going to put one candle on it for every point you lose for Ravenclaw,” said George.

“And have a party for you at the Gryffindor table during lunch,” said Fred.

“We hope that’ll cheer you up afterward,” finished George.

Harry swallowed his last bite of rasher and turned around. “All right,” said Harry. “I wasn’t going to ask this after Professor Binns, I really wasn’t, but if Professor Snape is *that* awful why hasn’t he been fired?”

“Fired?” said Fred.

“You mean, let go?” said George.

“Yes,” Harry said. “It’s what you do to bad teachers. You fire them. Then you hire a better teacher instead. You don’t have unions or tenure here, right?”

Fred and George were frowning in much the same way that hunter-gatherer tribal elders might frown if you tried to tell them about calculus.

“I don’t know,” said Fred after a while. “I never thought about that.”

“Me neither,” said George.

“Yeah,” said Harry, “I get that a lot. See you at lunch, guys, and don’t blame me if there aren’t any candles on that cake.”

Fred and George both laughed, as if Harry had said something funny, and bowed to him and headed back toward Gryffindor.

Harry turned back to the breakfast table and grabbed a cupcake. His stomach already felt full, but he had a feeling this morning might use a lot of calories.

As he ate his cupcake, Harry thought of the worst teacher he’d met so far,

Professor Binns of History. Professor Binns was a ghost. From what Hermione had said about ghosts, it didn't seem likely that they were fully self-aware. There were no famous discoveries made by ghosts, or much of any original work, no matter who they'd been in life. Ghosts tended to have trouble remembering the current century. Hermione had said they were like accidental portraits, impressed into the surrounding matter by a burst of psychic energy accompanying a wizard's sudden death.

Harry had run into some stupid teachers during his abortive forays into standard Muggle education — his father had been a lot pickier when it came to selecting grad students as tutors, of course — but History class was the first time he'd encountered a teacher who literally wasn't sentient.

And it showed, too. Harry had given up after five minutes and started reading a textbook. When it became clear that "Professor Binns" wasn't going to object, Harry had also reached into his pouch and gotten earplugs.

Did ghosts not require a salary? Was that it? Or was it literally impossible to fire anyone in Hogwarts *even if they died*?

Now it seemed that Professor Snape was going about being absolutely awful to everyone who wasn't a Slytherin and it hadn't even *occurred* to anyone to terminate his contract.

And the Headmaster had set fire to a chicken.

"Excuse me," came a worried voice from behind him.

"I swear," Harry said without turning around, "this place is almost eight and a half percent as bad as what Dad says about Oxford."



Harry stamped down the stone corridors, looking affronted, annoyed, and infuriated all at once.

"Dungeons!" Harry hissed. "*Dungeons!* These are not dungeons! This is a basement! A *basement!*"

Some of the Ravenclaw girls gave him odd looks. The boys were all used to him by now.

It seemed that the level in which the Potions classroom was located was called the "dungeons" for no better reason than that it was below ground and slightly colder than the main castle.

In *Hogwarts!* In *Hogwarts!* Harry had been waiting his whole life and now

he was *still* waiting and if there was anywhere *on the face of the Earth* that had decent dungeons it ought to be Hogwarts! Was Harry going to have to build his own castle if he wanted to see one little bottomless abyss?

A short time later they got to the actual Potions classroom and Harry cheered up considerably.

The Potions classroom had strange preserved creatures floating in huge jars on shelves that covered every centimeter of wall space between the closets. Harry had gotten far enough along in his reading now that he could actually identify some of the creatures, like the Zabriskan Fontema. Albeit the fifty-centimeter spider *looked* like an Acromantula but it was too small to *be* one. He'd tried asking Hermione, but she hadn't seemed very interested in looking anywhere near where he was pointing.

Harry was looking at a large dust ball with eyes and feet when the assassin swept into the room.

That was the first thought that crossed Harry's mind when he saw Professor Severus Snape. There was something quiet and deadly about the way the man stalked between the children's desks. His robes were unkempt, his hair spotted and greasy. There was something about him that seemed reminiscent of Lucius, although the two of them looked nothing remotely alike, and you got the impression that where Lucius would kill you with flawless elegance, this man would simply kill you.

"Sit down," said Professor Severus Snape. "Now."

Harry and a few other children who had been standing around talking to each other scrambled for desks. Harry had planned on ending up next to Hermione but somehow he found himself sitting down in the nearest empty desk next to Justin Finch-Fletchley (it was a Doubles session, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff) which put him two desks to the left of Hermione.

Severus seated himself behind the teacher's desk, and without the slightest transition or introduction, said, "Hannah Abbott."

"Here," said Hannah in a somewhat trembling voice.

"Susan Bones."

"Present."

And so it went, no one daring to say a word in edgewise, until:

"Ah, yes. Harry Potter. Our new . . . *celebrity*."

"The celebrity is present, *sir*."

Half the class flinched, and some of the smarter ones suddenly looked like

they wanted to run out the door while the classroom was still there.

Severus smiled in an anticipatory sort of way and called the next name on his list.

Harry gave a mental sigh. That had happened way too fast for him to do anything about it. Oh well. Clearly this man already didn't like him, for whatever reason. And when Harry thought about it, better by far that this Potions professor should pick on *him* rather than, say, Neville or Hermione. Harry was a lot better able to defend himself. Yep, probably all for the best.

When full attendance had been taken, Severus swept his gaze over the full class. His eyes were as empty as a night sky without stars.

"You are here," Severus said in a quiet voice which the students at back strained to hear, "to learn the subtle science and exact art of potionmaking. As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins," this in a rather caressing, gloating tone, "bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses," this was just getting creepier and creepier. "I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death — if you aren't as great a pack of fools as I usually have to teach."

Severus somehow seemed to notice the look of skepticism on Harry's face, or at least his eyes suddenly jumped to where Harry was sitting.

"Potter!" snapped the Potions professor. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Harry blinked. "Was that in *Magical Drafts and Potions*?" he said. "I just finished reading it, and I don't remember anything which used wormwood —"

Hermione's hand went up and Harry shot her a glare which caused her to raise her hand even higher.

"Tut, tut," Severus said silkily. "Fame clearly isn't everything."

"Really?" Harry said. "But you just told us you'd teach us how to bottle fame. Say, how *does* that work, exactly? You drink it and turn into a celebrity?"

Three-quarters of the class flinched.

Hermione's hand was dropping slowly back down. Well, that wasn't surprising. She might be his rival, but she wasn't the sort of girl who would play along after it became clear that the professor was deliberately trying to humiliate him.

Harry was trying hard to keep control of his temper. The first rejoinder

that had crossed his mind was ‘Abracadabra’.

“Let’s try again,” said Severus. “Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?”

“That’s not in the textbook either,” Harry said, “but in one Muggle book I read that a trichinobezoar is a mass of solidified hair found in a human stomach, and Muggles used to believe it would cure any poison —”

“Wrong,” Severus said. “A bezoar is found in the stomach of a goat, it is not made of hair, and it will cure most poisons but not all.”

“I didn’t *say* it would, I said that was what I read in one Muggle book —”

“No one here is interested in your *pathetic* Muggle books. Final try. What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?”

That did it.

“You know,” Harry said icily, “in one of my quite *fascinating* Muggle books, they describe a study in which people managed to make themselves look very smart by asking questions about random facts that only they knew. Apparently the onlookers only noticed that the askers knew and the answerers didn’t, and failed to adjust for the unfairness of the underlying game. So, Professor, can you tell me how many electrons are in the outermost orbital of a carbon atom?”

Severus’s smile widened. “Four,” he said. “It is a useless fact which no one should bother writing down, however. And for your information, Potter, asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping potion so powerful it is known as the Draught of Living Death. As for monkshood and wolfsbane, they are the same plant, which also goes by the name of aconite, as you would know if you had read *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*. Thought you didn’t need to open the book before coming, eh, Potter? All the rest of you should be copying that down so that you will not be as ignorant as him.” Severus paused, looking quite pleased with himself. “And that will be . . . five points? No, let us make it an even ten points from Ravenclaw for backchat.”

Hermione gasped, along with a number of others.

“Professor Severus Snape,” Harry bit out. “I know of nothing which I have done to earn your enmity. If there is some problem you have with me which I do not know about, I suggest we —”

“Shut up, Potter. Ten more points from Ravenclaw. The rest of you, open your books to page 3.”

There was only a slight, only a very faint burning sensation in the back of Harry’s throat, and no moisture at all in his eyes. If crying was not an

effective strategy for destroying this Potions professor then there was no point in crying.

Slowly, Harry sat up very straight. All his blood seemed to have been drained away and replaced with liquid nitrogen. He knew he'd been trying to keep his temper but he couldn't seem to remember why.

"Harry," whispered Hermione frantically from two desks over, "stop, please, it's all right, we won't count it —"

"Talking in class, Granger? Three —"

"So," said a voice colder than zero Kelvin, "how does one go about filing a formal complaint against an abusive professor? Does one talk to the Deputy Headmistress, write a letter to the Board of Governors . . . would you care to explain how it works?"

The class was utterly frozen.

"Detention for one month, Potter," Severus said, smiling even more broadly.

"I decline to recognize your authority as a teacher and I will not serve any detention you give."

People stopped breathing.

Severus's smile vanished. "Then you will be —" his voice stopped short.

"Expelled, were you about to say?" Harry, on the other hand, was now smiling thinly. "But then you seemed to doubt your ability to carry out the threat, or fear the consequences if you did. I, on the other hand, neither doubt nor fear the prospect of finding a school with less abusive professors. Or perhaps I should hire private tutors, as is my accustomed practice, and be taught at my full learning speed. I have enough money in my vault. Something about bounties on a Dark Lord I defeated. But there *are* teachers at Hogwarts who I rather like, so I think it will be easier if I find some way to get rid of you instead."

"Get rid of me?" Severus said, now also smiling thinly. "What an amusing conceit. How do you suppose you will do that, Potter?"

"I understand there have been a number of complaints about you from students and their parents," a guess but a safe one, "which leaves only the question of why you're not already gone. Is Hogwarts too financially strapped to afford a real Potions professor? I could chip in, if so. I'm sure they could find a better class of teacher if they offered double your current salary."

Two poles of ice radiated freezing winter across the classroom.

"You will find," Severus said softly, "that the Board of Governors is not

the slightest bit sympathetic to your offer.”

“Lucius . . .” Harry said. “*That’s* why you’re still here. Perhaps I should chat with Lucius about that. I believe he desires to meet with me. I wonder if I have anything he wants?”

Hermione frantically shook her head. Harry noticed out of the corner of his eye, but his attention was all on Severus.

“You are a very foolish boy,” Severus said. He wasn’t smiling at all, now. “You have nothing that Lucius values more than my friendship. And if you did, I have other allies.” His voice grew hard. “And I find it increasingly unlikely that you were not Sorted into Slytherin. How was it that you managed to stay out of my House? Ah, yes, because the Sorting Hat claimed it was *joking*. For the first time in recorded history. What were you really *chatting* about with the Sorting Hat, Potter? Did you have something that it wanted?”

Harry stared into Severus’s cold gaze and remembered that the Sorting Hat had warned him not to meet anyone’s eyes while thinking about — Harry dropped his gaze to Severus’s desk.

“You seem oddly reluctant to look me in the eyes, Potter!”

A shock of sudden understanding — “So it was *you* the Sorting Hat was warning me about!”

“What?” said Severus’s voice, sounding genuinely surprised, though of course Harry didn’t look at his face.

Harry got up out of his desk.

“Sit down, Potter,” said an angry voice from somewhere he wasn’t looking.

Harry ignored it, and looked around the classroom. “I have no intention of letting one unprofessional teacher ruin my time at Hogwarts,” Harry said with deadly calm. “I think I’ll take my leave of this class, and either hire a tutor to teach me Potions while I’m here, or if the Board is really that locked up, learn over the summer. If any of you decide that you don’t care to be bullied by this man, my sessions will be open to you.”

“*Sit down, Potter!*”

Harry strode across the room and grasped the doorknob.

It didn’t turn.

Harry slowly turned around, and caught a glimpse of Severus smiling nastily before he remembered to look away.

“Open this door.”

“No,” said Severus.

"You are making me feel threatened," said a voice so icy it didn't sound like Harry's at all, "and that is a mistake."

Severus's voice laughed. "What do you intend to do about it, little boy?"

Harry took six long strides forward away from the door, until he was standing near the back row of desks.

Then Harry drew himself upright and raised his right hand in one terrible motion, fingers poised to snap.

Neville screamed and dived under his desk. Other children shrank back or instinctively raised their arms to shield themselves.

"*Harry don't!*" shrieked Hermione. "Whatever you were going to do to him, don't do it!"

"Have you all gone *mad?*" barked Severus's voice.

Slowly, Harry lowered his hand. "I wasn't going to hurt him, Hermione," Harry said, his voice a little lower. "I was just going to blow up the door."

Though now that Harry remembered it, you weren't supposed to Transfigure things that were to be burned, which meant that going back in time afterward and getting Fred or George to Transfigure some carefully measured amount of explosives might not actually have been such a good idea . . .

"*Silencio,*" said Severus's voice.

Harry tried to say "What?" and found that no sound was coming out.

"This has become ridiculous. I think you've been allowed to get yourself in enough trouble for one day, Potter. You are the most disruptive and unruly student I have ever seen, and I don't recall how many points Ravenclaw has right now, but I'm sure I can manage to wipe them all out. Ten points from Ravenclaw. Ten points from Ravenclaw. Ten points from Ravenclaw! Fifty points from Ravenclaw! Now sit down and watch the rest of the class take their lesson!"

Harry put his hand into his pouch and tried to say 'marker' but of course no words came out. For one brief moment that stopped him; and then it occurred to Harry to spell out M-A-R-K-E-R using finger motions, which worked. P-A-D and he had a pad of paper. Harry strode over to an empty desk, not the one he'd originally sat down in, and scrawled a brief message. He tore off that sheet of paper, put away the marker and pad in a pocket of his robes for quicker access, and held up his message, not to Snape, but to the rest of the class.

*I'M LEAVING
DOES ANYONE ELSE
NEED TO GET OUT?*

"You're insane, Potter," Severus said with cold contempt.

Aside from that, no one spoke.

Harry swept an ironic bow to the teacher's desk, walked over to the wall, and with one smooth motion yanked open a closet door, stepped in, and slammed the door shut behind him.

There was the muffled sound of someone snapping his fingers, and then nothing.

In the classroom, students looked at each other in puzzlement and fear.

The Potions Master's face was now completely enraged. He crossed the room in terrible strides and yanked open the closet door.

The closet was empty.



One hour earlier, Harry listened from inside the closed closet. There was no sound from outside, and no point in taking risks either.

C-L-O-A-K, his fingers spelled out.

Once he was invisible, he very carefully and slowly cracked open the closet door and peeked out. No one seemed to be in the classroom.

The door wasn't locked.

It was when Harry was outside the dangerous place and inside the hallway, safely invisible, that some of the anger drained away and he realized what he'd just done.

What he'd just done.

Harry's invisible face was frozen in absolute horror.

He'd antagonized a teacher three orders of magnitude beyond anything he'd ever managed before. He'd threatened to walk out of Hogwarts and might have to follow through on it. He'd lost all the points Ravenclaw had and then he'd used the Time-Turner...

His imagination showed him his parents yelling at him after he was expelled, Professor McGonagall disappointed in him, and it was just too painful and he couldn't bear it and he *couldn't think of any way to save himself*—

The thought that Harry allowed himself to think was that if getting angry had gotten him into all this trouble, then maybe when he was angry he'd think of a way out, things seemed clearer somehow when he was angry.

And the thought that Harry didn't let himself think was that he just couldn't face this future if he wasn't angry.

So he cast his thoughts back and remembered the burning humiliation —
Tut, tut. Fame clearly isn't everything.

Ten points from Ravenclaw for backchat.

The calming cold washed back through his veins like a wave reflected and returning from some breaker, and Harry let out his breath.

Okay. Back to being sane now.

He was actually feeling a bit disappointed in his non-angry self for collapsing like that and wanting only to get out of trouble. Professor Severus Snape was *everyone's* problem. Normal-Harry had forgotten that and wished for a way to protect *himself*. And let all the other victims go hang? The question wasn't how to protect himself, the question was how to destroy this Potions professor.

So this is my dark side, is it? Bit of a prejudiced term that, my light side seems more selfish and cowardly, not to mention confused and panicky.

And now that he was thinking clearly, it was equally clear what to do next. He'd already given himself an extra hour to prepare, and could get up to five hours more if required...



Minerva McGonagall waited in the Headmaster's office.

Dumbledore sat in his padded throne behind his desk, dressed in four layers of formal lavender robes. Minerva sat in a chair before him, opposite Severus in another chair. Facing the three of them was an empty wooden stool.

They were waiting for Harry Potter.

Harry, Minerva thought despairingly, *you promised you wouldn't bite any teachers!*

And in her mind she could see very clearly the reply, Harry's angry face and his outraged response: *I said I wouldn't bite anyone who didn't bite me first!*

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" Dumbledore called.

The door swept open, and Harry Potter entered. Minerva almost gasped

out loud. The boy looked cool, collected, and utterly in control of himself.

“Good mor —” Harry’s voice suddenly cut off. His jaw dropped.

Minerva tracked Harry’s gaze, and she saw that Harry was staring at Fawkes where the phoenix sat on its golden perch. Fawkes fluttered his bright red-golden wings like the flickering of a flame, and dipped his head in a measured nod to the boy.

Harry turned to stare at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore winked at him.

Minerva felt she was missing something.

Sudden uncertainty crossed Harry’s face. His coolness wavered. Fear showed in his eyes, then anger, and then the boy was calm again.

A chill went down Minerva’s spine. Something was not right here.

“Please sit down,” said Dumbledore. His face was now serious once more.

Harry sat.

“So, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “I’ve heard one report of this day from Professor Snape. Would you care to tell me what happened in your own words?”

Harry’s gaze flicked dismissively to Severus. “It’s not complicated,” said the boy, smiling thinly. “He tried bullying me the way he’s been bullying every non-Slytherin in the school since the day Lucius foisted him off on you. As for the other details, I request a private conversation with you concerning them. A student who is reporting abusive behavior from a professor can hardly be expected to speak frankly in front of that same professor, after all.”

This time Minerva couldn’t stop herself from gasping out loud.

Severus simply laughed.

And the Headmaster’s face grew grave. “Mr. Potter,” the Headmaster said, “one does not speak of a Hogwarts professor in such terms. I fear that you labor under a terrible misapprehension. Professor Severus Snape has my fullest confidence, and serves Hogwarts at my own behest, not Lucius Malfoy’s.”

There was silence for a few moments.

When the boy spoke again his voice was icy. “Am I missing something here?”

“Quite a number of things, Mr. Potter,” said the Headmaster. “You should understand, to start with, that the purpose of this meeting is to discuss how to discipline you for the events of this morning.”

“This man has terrorized your school for years. I spoke to students and collected stories to make sure there would be enough for a newspaper campaign

to rally the parents against him. Some of the younger students cried while they told me. I almost cried when I heard them! *You allowed this abuser to run free? You did this to your students? Why?*"

Minerva swallowed a lump in her throat. She'd — thought that, sometimes, but somehow she'd never quite —

"Mr. Potter," said the Headmaster, his voice now stern, "this meeting is not about Professor Snape. It is about you and your disregard for school discipline. Professor Snape has suggested, and I have agreed, that three full months of detention will be appropriate —"

"Declined," Harry said icily.

Minerva was speechless.

"This is not a request, Mr. Potter," the Headmaster said. The full, entire force of the wizard's gaze was turned on the boy. "This is your punishment —"

"You will explain to me why you allowed this man to hurt the children placed in your care, and if your explanation is not sufficient then I will begin my newspaper campaign with *you* as the target."

Minerva's body swayed with the force of that blow, with the sheer raw *lese majeste*.

Even Severus looked shocked.

"That, Harry, would be most extremely unwise," Dumbledore said slowly. "I am the primary piece opposing Lucius on the gameboard. For you to do such a thing would strengthen him greatly, and I did not think that was your chosen side."

The boy was still for a long moment.

"This conversation grows private," Harry said. His hand flicked in Severus's direction. "Send him away."

Dumbledore shook his head. "Harry, did I not tell you that Severus Snape has my fullest confidence?"

The boy's face showed the shock of it. "This man's bullying makes you vulnerable! I am not the only one who could start a newspaper campaign against you! This is insane! Why are you doing this?"

Dumbledore sighed. "I'm sorry, Harry. It has to do with things that you are not, at this time, ready to hear."

The boy stared at Dumbledore. Then he turned to look at Severus. Then back to Dumbledore again.

"It is insanity," the boy said slowly. "You haven't reined him in because

you think he's *part of the pattern*. That Hogwarts needs an evil Potions Master to be a proper magical school, just as it needs a ghost to teach History."

"That does sound like the sort of thing I would do, doesn't it?" said Dumbledore, smiling.

"Unacceptable," Harry said flatly. His gaze was now cold and dark. "I will not tolerate bullying or abuse. I had considered many possible ways of dealing with this problem, but I will make it simple. Either this man goes, or I do."

Minerva gasped again. Something strange flickered in Severus's eyes.

Now Dumbledore's gaze was also growing cold. "Expulsion, Mr. Potter, is the final threat which may be used against a student. It is not customarily used as a threat by students against the Headmaster. This is the best magical school in the entire world, and an education here is not an opportunity given to everyone. Are you under the impression that Hogwarts cannot get along without you?"

And Harry sat there, smiling thinly.

Sudden horror dawned on Minerva. Surely Harry wouldn't —

"You forget," Harry said, "that you're not the only one who can see patterns. *This grows private. Now send him* —" Harry flicked a hand at Severus again, and then stopped in mid-sentence and mid-gesture.

Minerva could see it on Harry's face, the moment when he remembered. She'd told him, after all.

"Mr. Potter," said the Headmaster, "once again, Severus Snape has my fullest confidence."

"You told him," whispered the boy. "You utter fool."

Dumbledore didn't react to the insult. "Told him what?"

"That the Dark Lord is alive."

"*What in Merlin's name are you on about, Potter?*" cried Severus in tones of sheer astonishment and outrage.

Harry glanced briefly at him, smiling grimly. "Oh, so we *are* a Slytherin, then," Harry said. "I was starting to wonder."

And then there was silence.

Finally Dumbledore spoke. His voice was mild. "Harry, what *are* you talking about?"

"I'm sorry, Albus," Minerva whispered.

Severus and Dumbledore turned to look at her.

"Professor McGonagall didn't tell me," said Harry's voice, swiftly and

less calm than it had been. "I guessed. I told you, I can see the patterns too. I guessed, and she controlled her reaction just as Severus did. But her control fell a shade short of perfection, and I could tell it was control, not genuine."

"And I told him," said Minerva, her voice trembling a little, "that you, and I, and Severus were the only ones who knew."

"Which she did as a concession to prevent me from simply going around asking questions, as I threatened to do if she didn't talk," Harry said. The boy chuckled briefly. "I really should have gotten one of you alone and told you that she told me everything, to see if you let anything slip. Probably wouldn't have worked, but would have been worth a shot." The boy smiled again. "Threat's still on the table and I do expect to be briefed *fully* at some point."

Severus was giving her a look of utter contempt. Minerva raised her chin and bore it. She knew it was deserved.

Dumbledore leaned back in his padded throne. His eyes were as cold as anything Minerva had seen from him since the day his brother died. "And you threaten to abandon us to Voldemort if we do not comply with your wishes."

Harry's voice was razor-sharp. "I regret to inform you that you are not the center of the universe. I'm not threatening to walk out on magical Britain. I'm threatening to walk out on *you*. I am not a meek little Frodo. This is *my* quest and if you want in you will play by *my* rules."

Dumbledore's face was still cold. "I am beginning to doubt your suitability as the hero, Mr. Potter."

Harry's return gaze was equally icy. "I am beginning to doubt your suitability as my Gandalf, *Mr. Dumbledore*. Boromir was at least a plausible mistake. What is this *Nazgul* doing in my Fellowship?"

Minerva was completely lost. She looked at Severus, to see if he was following this, and she saw that Severus had turned his face away from Harry's field of vision and was smiling.

"I suppose," Dumbledore said slowly, "that from your perspective it is a reasonable question. So, Mr. Potter, if Professor Snape is to leave you alone henceforth, will that be the last time this issue arises, or will I find you here every week with a new demand?"

"Leave *me* alone?" Harry's voice was outraged. "I am not his only victim and certainly not the most vulnerable! *Have you forgotten how defenseless children are? How much they hurt?* Henceforth Severus will treat *every* student of Hogwarts with appropriate and professional courtesy, or you will find another

Potions Master, or you will find another hero!"

Dumbledore started laughing. Full-throated, warm, humorous laughter, as if Harry had just performed a comic dance in front of him.

Minerva didn't dare move. Her eyes flickered and she saw that Severus was equally motionless.

Harry's visage grew even colder. "You mistake me, Headmaster, if you think that this is a joke. This is not a request. This is your punishment."

"Mr. Potter —" Minerva said. She didn't even know what she was going to say. She simply couldn't let that go by.

Harry made a shushing gesture at her and continued to speak to Dumbledore. "And if that seems impolite to you," Harry said, his voice now a little less hard, "it seemed no less impolite when you said it to me. You would not say such a thing to anyone who you considered a real human being instead of a subordinate child, and I will treat you with just the same courtesy as you treat me —"

"Oh, indeed, in very deed, this is my punishment if ever there was one! Of *course* you're in here blackmailing me to save your fellow students, not to save yourself! I can't imagine why I would have thought otherwise!" Dumbledore was now laughing even harder. He pounded his fist on the desk three times.

Harry's gaze grew uncertain. His face turned toward her, addressing her for the first time. "Excuse me," Harry said. His voice seemed to be wavering. "Does he need to take his medication or something?"

"Ah . . ." Minerva had no idea what she could possibly say.

"Well," said Dumbledore. He wiped away tears that had formed in his eyes. "Pardon me. I'm sorry for the interruption. Please continue with the blackmail."

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it again. He now seemed a little unsteady. "Ah . . . he's also to stop reading students' minds."

"Minerva," Severus said, his voice deadly, "you —"

"Sorting Hat warned me," said Harry.

"*What?*"

"Can't say anything else. Anyway I think that's it. I'm done."

Silence.

"Now what?" Minerva said, when it became apparent that no one else was going to say anything.

"Now what?" Dumbledore echoed. "Why, now the hero wins, of course."

“*What?*” said Severus, Minerva, and Harry.

“Well, he certainly seems to have backed us into a corner,” Dumbledore said, smiling happily. “But Hogwarts *does* need an evil Potions Master, or it just wouldn’t be a proper magical school, now would it? So how about if Professor Snape is only awful toward students in their fifth year and higher?”

“*What?*” said all three of them again.

“If it’s the most vulnerable victims about whom you’re concerned. Maybe you’re right, Harry. Maybe I *have* forgotten over the decades what it’s like to be a child. So let’s compromise. Severus will continue to unfairly award points to Slytherin and impose lax discipline on his House, and he will be awful to non-Slytherin students in their fifth year and higher. To others he will be scary, but not abusive. He will promise to only read minds when the safety of a student requires it. Hogwarts will have its evil Potions Master, and the most vulnerable victims, as you put it, will be safe.”

Minerva McGonagall was as shocked as she’d ever been in her life. She glanced uncertainly at Severus, whose face had been left completely neutral, as though he couldn’t decide what sort of expression he ought to be wearing.

“I suppose that is acceptable,” Harry said. His voice sounded a bit odd.

“You can’t be serious,” Severus said, his voice as expressionless as his face.

“I am very much in favor of this,” Minerva said slowly. She was so much in favor that her heart was pounding wildly beneath her robes. “But what could we possibly tell the students? They might not have questioned this while Severus was . . . being awful to everyone, but —”

“Harry can tell the other students that he discovered a terrible secret of Severus’s and did a bit of blackmail,” said Dumbledore. “It’s true, after all; he discovered that Severus was reading minds, and he certainly did blackmail us.”

“This is insanity!” exploded Severus.

“Bwah ha ha!” said Dumbledore.

“Ah . . .” said Harry uncertainly. “And if anyone asks me why fifth years and above got shafted? I wouldn’t blame them for being irate, and that part wasn’t exactly my idea —”

“Tell them,” said Dumbledore, “that it wasn’t you who suggested the compromise, that it was all you could get. And then refuse to say anything more. That, too, is true. There’s an art to it, you’ll pick it up with practice.”

Harry nodded slowly. “And the points he took from Ravenclaw?”

“They must not be given back.”

It was Minerva who said it.

Harry looked at her.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Potter," she said. She *was* sorry, but it had to be done. "There *must* be some consequences for your misbehavior or this school will fall to pieces."

Harry shrugged. "Acceptable," he said flatly. "But in the future Severus will not strike at my House connections by taking points from me, nor will he waste my valuable time with detentions. Should he feel that my behavior requires correction, he may communicate his concerns to Professor McGonagall."

"Harry," Minerva said, "will you continue to submit to school discipline, or are you to be above the law now, as Severus was?"

Harry looked at her. Something warm touched his gaze, briefly before it was quashed. "I will continue to be an ordinary student to every member of the staff who is not insane or evil, provided that they do not come under pressure from others who are." Harry glanced briefly at Severus, then turned back to Dumbledore. "Leave Minerva alone, and I'll be a regular Hogwarts student in her presence. No special privileges or immunities."

"Beautiful," Dumbledore said sincerely. "Spoken like a true hero."

"And," she said, "Mr. Potter must publicly apologize for his actions of today."

Harry gave her another look. This one was a bit skeptical.

"The discipline of the school has been gravely injured by your actions, Mr. Potter," Minerva said. "It must be restored."

"I think, Professor McGonagall, that you considerably overestimate the importance of what you call school discipline, as compared to having History taught by a live teacher or not torturing your students. Maintaining the current status hierarchy and enforcing its rules seems ever so much more wise and moral and important when you are on the top and doing the enforcing than when you are on the bottom, and I can cite studies to this effect if required. I could go on for several hours about this point, but I will leave it at that."

Minerva shook her head. "Mr. Potter, you underestimate the importance of discipline because you are not in need of it yourself —" She paused. That hadn't come out right, and Severus, Dumbledore, and even Harry were giving her strange looks. "To learn, I mean. Not every child can learn in the absence of authority. And it is the other children who will be hurt, Mr. Potter, if they see your example as one to be followed."

Harry's lips curved into a twisted smile. "The first and last resort is the truth. The truth is that I shouldn't have gotten angry, I shouldn't have disrupted the class, I shouldn't have done what I did, and I set a bad example for everyone. The truth is also that Severus Snape behaved in a fashion unbecoming a Hogwarts professor, and that from now on he will be more mindful of the injured feelings of students in their fourth year and under. The two of us could both get up and speak the truth. I could live with that."

"In your dreams, Potter!" spat Severus.

"After all," said Harry, smiling grimly, "if the students see that rules are for *everyone* . . . for professors too, not just for poor helpless students who get nothing but suffering out of the system . . . why, the positive effects on school discipline should be *tremendous*."

There was a brief pause, and then Dumbledore chuckled. "Minerva is thinking that you're righter than you have any right to be."

Harry's gaze jerked away from Dumbledore, down to the floor. "Are *you* reading *her* mind?"

"Common sense is often mistaken for Legilimency," said Dumbledore. "I shall talk over this matter with Severus, and no apology will be required from you unless he apologizes as well. And now I declare this matter concluded, at least until lunchtime." He paused. "Although, Harry, I'm afraid that Minerva wished to speak with you about an additional matter. And that is not the result of any pressure on my part. Minerva, if you would?"

Minerva rose from her chair and almost fell. There was too much adrenaline in her blood, her heart was beating too fast.

"Fawkes," said Dumbledore, "accompany her, please."

"I don't —" she started to say.

Dumbledore shot her a look, and she fell silent.

The phoenix soared across the room like a smooth tongue of flame leaping out, and landed on her shoulder. She felt the warmth through her robes, all through her body.

"Please follow me, Mr. Potter," she said, firmly now, and they left through the door.



They stood on the rotating stairs, descending in silence.

Minerva didn't know what to say. She didn't know this person who stood beside her.

And Fawkes began to croon.

It was tender, and soft, like a fireplace would sound if it had melody, and it washed over Minerva's mind, easing, soothing, gentling what it touched...

"*What is that?*" Harry whispered beside her. His voice was unstable, wobbling, changing pitch.

"The song of the phoenix," said Minerva, not really aware of what she was saying, her attention was all on that strange quiet music. "It, too, heals."

Harry turned his face from her, but she caught a glimpse of something agonized.

The descent seemed to take a very long time, or maybe it was only that the music seemed to take a very long time, and when they stepped out through the gap where a gargoyle had been, she was holding Harry's hand firmly in hers.

As the gargoyle stepped back into place, Fawkes left her shoulder, and swooped to hover in front of Harry.

Harry stared at Fawkes like someone hypnotized by the ever-changing light of a fire.

"What am I to do, Fawkes?" whispered Harry. "I couldn't have protected them if I hadn't been angry."

The phoenix's wings continued flapping, it continued hovering in place. There was no sound but the beating of the wings. Then there was a flash like a fire flaring up and going out, and Fawkes was gone.

Both of them blinked, like waking up from a dream, or maybe like falling asleep again.

Minerva looked down.

Harry Potter's bright young face looked up at her.

"Are phoenixes people?" said Harry. "I mean, are they smart enough to count as people? Could I talk with Fawkes if I knew how?"

Minerva blinked hard. Then she blinked again. "No," Minerva said, her voice wavering. "Phoenixes are creatures of powerful magic. That magic gives their existence a weight of meaning which no simple animal could possess. They are fire, light, healing, rebirth. But in the end, no."

"Where can I get one?"

Minerva leaned down and hugged him. She hadn't meant to, but she didn't seem to have much choice in the matter.

When she stood up she found it hard to speak. But she had to ask. “What happened today, Harry?”

“I don’t know the answers to any of the important questions either. Aside from that I’d really rather not think about it for a while.”

Minerva took his hand in hers again, and they walked the rest of the way in silence.

It was only a short trip, since naturally the office of the Deputy was close to the office of the Headmaster.

Minerva sat behind her desk.

Harry sat in front of her desk.

“So,” Minerva whispered. She would have given almost anything not to do this, or not to be the one who had to do it, or for it to be any time but right now. “There is a matter of school discipline. From which you are not exempt.”

“Namely?” said Harry.

He didn’t know. He hadn’t figured it out yet. She felt her throat tighten. But there was work to be done and she would not shirk it.

“Mr. Potter,” said Professor McGonagall, “I need to see your Time-Turner, please.”

All the peace of the phoenix vanished from his face in an instant and Minerva felt like she had just stabbed him.

“No!” Harry said. His voice was panicked. “I need it, I won’t be able to attend Hogwarts, I won’t be able to sleep!”

“You’ll be able to sleep,” she said. “The Ministry has delivered the protective shell for your Time-Turner. I will enchant it to open only between the hours of 9 PM and midnight.”

Harry’s face twisted. “But — but I —”

“Mr. Potter, how many times have you used the Time-Turner since Monday? How many hours?”

“I . . .” Harry said. “Hold on, let me add it up —” He glanced down at his watch.

Minerva felt a rush of sadness. She’d thought so. “It wasn’t just two per day, then. I suspect that if I asked your dorm-mates, I would find that you were struggling to stay up long enough to go to sleep at a reasonable time, and waking up earlier and earlier every morning. Correct?”

Harry’s face said everything she needed to know.

“Mr. Potter,” she said gently, “there are students who cannot be entrusted

with Time-Turners, because they become addicted to them. We give them a potion which lengthens their sleep cycle by the necessary amount, but they end up using the Time-Turner for more than just attending their classes. And so we must take them back. Mr. Potter, you have taken to using the Time-Turner as your solution to everything, often very foolishly so. You used it to get back a Remembrall. You vanished from a closet in a fashion apparent to other students, instead of going back after you were out and getting me or someone else to come and open the door.”

From the look on Harry’s face he hadn’t thought of that.

“And more importantly,” she said, “you should have simply sat in Professor Snape’s class. And watched. And left at the end of class. As you would have done if you had not possessed a Time-Turner. There are some students who cannot be entrusted with Time-Turners, Mr. Potter. You are one of them. I am sorry.”

“But I *need* it!” Harry blurted. “What if there are Slytherins threatening me and I have to escape? It keeps me *safe* —”

“Every other student in this castle runs the same risk, and I assure you that they survive. No student has died in this castle for fifty years. Mr. Potter, you will hand over your Time-Turner and do so now.”

Harry’s face twisted in agony, but he drew out the Time-Turner from under his robes and gave it to her.

From her desk, Minerva drew out one of the protective shells that had been sent to Hogwarts. She snapped the cover into place around the Time-Turner’s turning hourglass, and then she laid her wand on the cover to complete the enchantment.

“*This isn’t fair!*” Harry shrieked. “I saved half of Hogwarts from Professor Snape today, is it right that I be punished for it? I saw the look on your face, you *hated* what he was doing!”

Minerva didn’t speak for a few moments. She was enchanting.

When she finished and looked up, she knew that her face was stern. Maybe it was the wrong thing to do. And then again maybe it was the right thing to do. There was an obstinate child in front of her, and that *didn’t* mean the universe was broken.

“*Fair*, Mr. Potter?” she snapped. “I have had to file *two reports* with the Ministry on public use of a Time-Turner in *two successive days!* Be *extremely* grateful you were allowed to retain the Time-Turner even in restricted form!

The Headmaster made a Floo call to plead with them personally and if you were not the Boy-Who-Lived even that would not have sufficed!"

Harry gaped at her.

She knew that he was seeing the angry face of Professor McGonagall.

Harry's eyes filled up with tears.

"I'm, sorry," he whispered, voice now choked and broken. "I'm sorry, to have, disappointed you..."

"I'm sorry too, Mr. Potter," she said sternly, and handed him the newly restricted Time-Turner. "You may go."

Harry turned and fled from her office, sobbing. She heard his feet pattering away down the hall, and then the sound cut off as the door swung closed.

"I'm sorry too, Harry," she whispered to the quiet room. "I'm sorry too."



Fifteen minutes into lunch hour.

No one was speaking to Harry. Some of the Ravenclaws were shooting him looks of anger, others of sympathy, a few of the youngest students even had looks of admiration, but no one was talking to him. Even Hermione hadn't tried to come over.

Fred and George had gingerly stepped near. They hadn't said anything. The offer was clear, and its optionality. Harry had told them that he would come over when dessert started, no earlier. They had nodded and quickly walked away.

It was probably the utterly expressionless look on Harry's face that was doing it.

The others probably thought he was controlling anger, or dismay. They knew, because they'd seen Flitwick come and get him, that he'd been called to the Headmaster's office.

Harry was trying not to smile, because if he smiled, he would start laughing, and if he started laughing, he wouldn't stop until the nice people in white jackets came to haul him away.

It was too much. It was just all too much. Harry had almost gone over to the Dark Side, his dark side had done things that seemed in retrospect insane, his dark side had won an impossible victory that might have been real and might have been a pure whim of a crazy Headmaster, his dark side had

protected his friends. He just couldn't handle it any more. He needed Fawkes to sing to him again. He needed to use the Time-Turner to go off and take a quiet hour to recover but that wasn't an option any more and the loss was like a hole in his existence but he couldn't think about that because then he might start laughing.

Twenty minutes. All the students who were going to eat lunch had arrived, almost none had departed.

The tapping of a spoon rang through the Great Hall.

"If I may have your attention please," Dumbledore said. "Harry Potter has something he would like to share with us."

Harry took a deep breath and got up. He walked over to the Head Table, with every eye staring at him.

Harry turned and looked out at the four tables.

It was becoming harder and harder not to smile, but Harry kept his face expressionless as he spoke his brief and memorized speech.

"The truth is sacred," Harry said tonelessly. "One of my most treasured possessions is a button which reads 'Speak the truth, even if your voice trembles'. This, then, is the truth. Remember that. I am not saying it because I am being forced to say it, I am saying it because it is true. What I did in Professor Snape's class was foolish, stupid, childish, and an inexcusable violation of the rules of Hogwarts. I disrupted the classroom and deprived my fellow students of their irreplaceable learning time. All because I failed to control my temper. I hope that not a single one of you will ever follow my example. I certainly intend to try never to follow it again."

Many of the students gazing at Harry now had solemn, unhappy looks upon their faces, such as one might see at a ceremony marking the loss of a fallen champion. At the younger parts of the Gryffindor table the look was almost universal.

Until Harry raised his hand.

He did not raise it high. That might have appeared preemptory. He certainly did not raise it toward Severus. Harry simply raised his hand to chest level, and softly snapped his fingers, a gesture that was seen more than heard. It was possible that most of the Head Table wouldn't see it at all.

This seeming gesture of defiance won sudden smiles from the younger students and Gryffindors, and coldly superior sneers from Slytherin, and frowns and worried looks from all others.

Harry kept his face expressionless. "Thank you," he said. "That's all."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," said the Headmaster. "And now Professor Snape has something to share with us as well."

Severus smoothly stood up from his place at the Head Table. "It has been brought to my attention," he said, "that my own actions played a part in provoking the admittedly inexcusable anger of Mr. Potter, and in the ensuing discussion I realized that I had forgotten how easily injured are the feelings of the young and immature —"

There was the sound of many people emitting muffled chokes at the same time.

Severus continued as if he had not heard. "The Potions classroom is a dangerous place, and I still feel that strict discipline is necessary, but henceforth I will be more aware of the . . . emotional fragility . . . of students in their fourth year and younger. My deduction of points from Ravenclaw still stands, but I will revoke Mr. Potter's detention. Thank you."

There was a single clap from the direction of Gryffindor and faster than lightning Severus's wand was in his hand and "*Quietus!*" silenced the offender.

"I will still demand discipline and respect in *all* my classes," Severus said coldly, "and anyone who trifles with me will regret it."

He sat down.

"Thank you too!" Headmaster Dumbledore said cheerfully. "Carry on!"

And Harry, still expressionless, began to walk back to his seat in Ravenclaw.

There was an explosion of conversation. Two words were clearly identifiable in the beginning. The first was an initial "What —" beginning many different sentences such as "What just happened —" and "What the hell —" The second was "*Scourgify!*" as students cleaned up the dropped food and spit-out drinks from themselves, the tablecloth, and each other.

Some students were weeping openly. So was Professor Sprout.

At the Gryffindor table, where a cake waited with fifty-one unlit candles, Fred whispered, "I think we may be out of our league here, George."

And from that day onward, no matter what Hermione tried to tell anyone, it would be an accepted legend of Hogwarts that Harry Potter could make absolutely anything happen by snapping his fingers.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



DELAYED GRATIFICATION

Draco had a stern expression on his face, and his green-trimmed robes somehow looked far more formal, serious, and well-turned-out than the same exact robes as worn by the two boys behind him.

“Talk,” said Draco.

“Yeah! Talk!”

“You heard da boss! Talk!”

“You two, on the other hand, *shut up*.”

The last session of classes on Friday was about to start, in that vast auditorium where all four Houses learned Defense, er, Battle Magic.

The last session of classes on Friday.

Harry was hoping that this class would be non-stressful, and that the brilliant Professor Quirrell would realize this was perhaps not the best time to single out Harry for anything. Harry had recovered a little, but . . .

. . . but just in case, it was probably best to get in a bit of stress relief first.

Harry leaned back in his chair and bestowed a look of great solemnity upon Draco and his minions.

“You ask, what is our aim?” Harry declaimed. “I can answer in one word. It is victory. Victory at all costs — Victory in spite of all terrors — Victory, however long and hard the road may be, for without victory there is no —”

“*Talk about Snape*,” Draco hissed. “*What did you do?*”

Harry wiped away the fake solemnity and gave Draco a more serious look. "You saw it," Harry said. "Everyone saw it. I snapped my fingers."

"*Harry! Stop teasing me!*"

So he'd been promoted to *Harry* now. Interesting. And in fact Harry was fairly sure that he was meant to notice that, and feel bad if he didn't respond somehow . . .

Harry tapped his ears and gave a significant glance at the minions.

"They won't talk," said Draco.

"Draco," Harry said, "I'm going to be one hundred percent honest here and say that yesterday I was not particularly impressed with Mr. Goyle's cunning." Mr. Goyle winced.

"Me neither," said Draco. "I explained to him that I ended up owing you a favor because of it." (Mr. Goyle winced again.) "But there *is* a big difference between that sort of mistake and being indiscreet. That really is something they've been trained from childhood to understand."

"All right then," Harry said. He lowered his voice, even though the background noises had gone to blurs in Draco's presence. "I deduced one of Severus's secrets and did a bit of blackmail."

Draco's expression hardened. "Good, now tell me something you didn't tell in strict confidence to the idiots in Gryffindor, meaning that was the story you *wanted* to get all over the school."

Harry grinned involuntarily and he knew that Draco had caught it.

"What is Severus saying?" Harry said.

"That he hadn't realized how sensitive the feelings of young children were," Draco said. "Even in Slytherin! Even to *me!*"

"Are you sure," Harry said, "that you want to know something your Head of House would rather you not know?"

"Yes," Draco said without hesitation.

Interesting. "Then you really are going to send your minions away first, because I'm not sure I can believe everything you believe about them."

Draco nodded. "Okay."

Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle looked *very* unhappy. "Boss —" said Mr. Crabbe.

"You've given Mr. Potter no reason to trust you," Draco said. "Go!"

They left.

"In particular," Harry said, lowering his voice even further, "I'm not *entirely* sure that they wouldn't just report what I said to Lucius."

"Father wouldn't *do* that!" Draco said, looking genuinely aghast. "They're *mine!*"

"I'm sorry, Draco," Harry said. "I'm just not sure I can believe everything you believe about your father. Imagine it was your secret and me telling you my father wouldn't do that."

Draco nodded slowly. "You're right. *I'm* sorry, Harry. It was wrong of me to ask it of you."

How did I get this promoted? Shouldn't he hate me now? Harry had the feeling he was looking at something exploitable . . . he just wished his brain wasn't so exhausted. Ordinarily he would have loved to try his hand at some complicated plotting.

"Anyway," Harry said. "Trade. I tell you a fact that isn't on the grapevine, and does not *go* on the grapevine, and in *particular* does not go to your father, and in return you tell me what you and Slytherin think about the whole business."

"Deal!"

Now to make this as vague as possible . . . something that wouldn't hurt much even if it did get out . . . "What I said was true. I did discover one of Severus's secrets, and I did do some blackmail. But Severus wasn't the only person involved."

"I knew it!" Draco said exultantly.

Harry's stomach sank. He had apparently said something very significant and he did not know why. This was not a good sign.

"All right," Draco said. He was grinning widely now. "So here's what the reaction was like in Slytherin. First, all the idiots were like, 'We hate Harry Potter! Let's go beat him up!'"

Harry choked. "What is *wrong* with the Sorting Hat? That's not Slytherin, it's *Gryffindor* —"

"Not all children are prodigies," Draco said, though he was smiling in a sort of nasty-conspiratorial way, as though to suggest that he privately agreed with Harry's opinion. "And it took around fifteen seconds for someone to explain to them why this might not be such a favor to Snape, so you're fine. Anyway, after that was the second wave of idiots, the ones who were saying, 'Looks like Harry Potter was just another do-gooder after all.'"

"And then?" Harry said, smiling even though he had no idea why *that* was stupid.

“And then the actual smart people started talking. It’s obvious that you found a way to put a *lot* of pressure on Snape. And while that could be more than one thing . . . the obvious *next* thought is that it has something to do with Snape’s unknown hold over Dumbledore. Am I right?”

“No comment,” Harry said. At least his brain was processing this part correctly. House Slytherin *had* wondered why Severus wasn’t getting fired. And they’d concluded that Severus was blackmailing Dumbledore. Could that actually be true . . . ? But Dumbledore hadn’t seemed to act like it . . .

Draco went on talking. “And the *next* thing the smart people pointed out was that if you could put enough pressure on Snape to make him leave half of Hogwarts alone, that meant you probably had enough power to get rid of him entirely, if you wanted. What you did to him was a humiliation, just the same way he tried to humiliate you — but you left us our Head of House.”

Harry made his smile wider.

“And then the *really* smart people,” Draco said, his face now serious, “went off and had a little discussion by themselves, and someone pointed out that it would be a very stupid thing to leave an enemy around like that. If you could break his hold over Dumbledore, the obvious thing would be to just do it. Dumbledore would kick Snape out of Hogwarts and maybe even have him killed, he’d be *very* grateful to you, and you wouldn’t have to worry about Snape sneaking into your dorm room at night with interesting potions.”

Harry’s face was now neutral. He had not thought of that and he really, really should have. “And from this you concluded . . . ?”

“Snape’s hold was some secret of Dumbledore’s and *you’ve got the secret!*” Draco was looking exultant. “It can’t be powerful enough to destroy Dumbledore entirely, or Snape would have used it by now. Snape refuses to use his hold for anything except staying king of Slytherin House in Hogwarts, and he doesn’t always get what he wants even then, so it must have limits. But it’s got to be really good! Father’s been trying to get Snape to tell him for *years!*”

“And,” Harry said, “now Lucius thinks maybe *I* can tell him. Did you already get an owl —”

“I will tonight,” Draco said, and laughed. “It will say,” his voice took on a different, more formal cadence, “*My beloved son: I’ve already told you of Harry Potter’s potential importance. As you have already realized, his importance has now become greater and more urgent. If you see any possible avenue of friendship or point of pressure with him, you must pursue it, and the full resources of Malfoy*

are at your disposal if needed."

Gosh. "Well," Harry said, "not commenting on whether or not your whole complicated edifice of theory is true, let me just say that we are not quite such good friends as yet."

"I know," Draco said. Then his face turned *very* serious, and his voice grew quiet even within the blur. "Harry, has it occurred to you that if you know something Dumbledore doesn't want known, Dumbledore might simply have you killed? And it would turn the Boy-Who-Lived from a potential competing leader into a valuable martyr, too."

"No comment," Harry said yet again. He hadn't thought of that last part, either. Didn't *seem* to be Dumbledore's style . . . but . . .

"Harry," Draco said, "you've obviously got *incredible* talent, but you've got no training and no mentors and you do stupid things sometimes and *you really need an advisor who knows how to do this or you're going to get hurt!*" Draco's face was fierce.

"Ah," Harry said. "An advisor like Lucius?"

"Like *me!*" said Draco. "I'll promise to keep your secrets from Father, from *everyone*, I'll just help you figure out whatever you want to do!"

Wow.

Harry saw that zombie-Quirrell was staggering in through the doors.

"Class is about to start," said Harry. "I'll think about what you said, there's lots of times I *do* wish I had all your training, it's just I don't know how I can trust you so quickly —"

"You shouldn't," Draco said, "it's too soon. See? I'll give you good advice even if it hurts me. But we should maybe *hurry up* and become closer friends."

"I'm open to that," said Harry, who was already trying to figure out how to exploit it.

"Another bit of advice," Draco said hurriedly as Quirrell slouched toward his desk, "right now everyone in Slytherin's wondering about you, so if you're courting us, which I think you are, you should do something that signals friendship to Slytherin. *Soon*, like today or tomorrow."

"Letting Severus go on awarding extra House points to Slytherin wasn't enough?" No reason Harry couldn't take credit for it.

Draco's eyes flickered with realization, then he said rapidly, "It's not the same, trust me, it's got to be something obvious. Push your Mudblood rival Granger into a wall or something, everyone in Slytherin will know what that

means —”

“That is *not* how it works in Ravenclaw, Draco! If you have to push someone into a wall it means your brain is too *weak* to beat them the right way and everyone in Ravenclaw *knows that* —”

The screen on Harry’s desk flickered on, provoking a sudden wash of nostalgia for television and computers.

“Ahem,” said Professor Quirrell’s voice, seeming to speak personally to Harry out of the screen. “Please take your seats.”



And the children were all seated and staring at the repeater screens on their desks, or looking down directly at the great white marble stage where Professor Quirrell stood, leaning on his desk atop the small dais of darker marble.

“Today,” said Professor Quirrell, “I had planned to teach you your first defensive spell, a small shield that was the ancestor of today’s *Protego*. But on second thought I have changed today’s lesson plan in the light of recent events.”

Professor Quirrell’s gaze searched the rows of seats. Harry winced from where he was sitting, in the back row. He had a feeling he knew who was about to be called on.

“Draco, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy,” said Professor Quirrell.

Whew.

“Yes, Professor?” said Draco. His voice was amplified, seeming to come from the repeater screen on Harry’s desk, which showed Draco’s face as he spoke. Then the screen shifted back to Professor Quirrell, who said:

“Is it your ambition to become the next Dark Lord?”

“That’s an odd question, Professor,” said Draco. “I mean, who’d be dumb enough to admit it?”

A few students laughed, but not many.

“Indeed,” said Professor Quirrell. “So while there’s no point in asking any of you, it would not surprise me in the slightest if there were a student or two in my classes who harbored ambitions of being the next Dark Lord. After all, *I* wanted to be the next Dark Lord when *I* was a young Slytherin.”

This time the laughter was much more widespread.

“Well, it *is* the House of the ambitious, after all,” Professor Quirrell said, smiling. “I didn’t realize until later that what I really enjoyed was Battle Magic, and that my true ambition was to become a great fighting wizard and someday teach at Hogwarts. In any case, when I was thirteen years old, I read through the historical sections of the Hogwarts library, scrutinizing the lives and fates of past Dark Lords, and I made a list of all the mistakes that *I* would never make when *I* was a Dark Lord —”

Harry giggled before he could stop himself.

“Yes, Mr. Potter, very amusing. So, Mr. Potter, can you guess what was the very first item on that list?”

Great. “Um . . . never use a complicated way of dealing with an enemy when you can just Abracadabra them?”

“The *term*, Mr. Potter, is *Avada Kedavra*,” Professor Quirrell’s voice sounded a bit sharp for some reason, “and no, that was *not* on the list I made at age thirteen. Would you care to guess again?”

“Ah . . . never brag to anyone about your evil master plan?”

Professor Quirrell laughed. “Ah, now *that* was number two. My, Mr. Potter, have we been reading the same books?”

There was more laughter, with an undertone of nervousness. Harry clenched his jaw tightly shut and said nothing. A denial would accomplish nothing.

“But no. The *first* item was, ‘I will not go around provoking strong, vicious enemies.’ The history of the world would be very different if Mornelithe Falconsbane or Hitler had grasped that elementary point. Now *if*, Mr. Potter — just *if* by some chance you harbor an ambition similar to the one I held as a young Slytherin — even so, I hope it is not your ambition to become a *stupid* Dark Lord.”

“Professor Quirrell,” Harry said, gritting his teeth, “I am a *Ravenclaw* and it is not my ambition to be stupid, period. I know that what I did today was dumb. But it wasn’t *Dark!* I was *not* the one who threw the first punch in that fight!”

“You, Mr. Potter, are an idiot. But then so was I at your age. Thus I anticipated your answer and altered today’s lesson plan accordingly. Mr. Gregory Goyle, if you would come forward, please?”

There was a surprised pause in the classroom. Harry hadn’t been expecting that.

Neither, from the looks of it, had Mr. Goyle, who looked rather uncertain and worried as he mounted the marble stage and approached the dais.

Professor Quirrell straightened from where he was leaning on the desk. He looked suddenly stronger, and his hands formed fists and he drew himself up into a clearly recognizable martial arts stance.

Harry's eyes widened at the sight, and he realized why Mr. Goyle had been called up.

"Most wizards," Professor Quirrell said, "do not bother much with what a Muggle would term martial arts. Is not a wand stronger than a fist? This attitude is stupid. Wands are held in fists. If you want to be a great fighting wizard you *must* learn martial arts to a level which would impress even a Muggle. I will now demonstrate a certain vitally important technique, which I learned in a *dojo*, a Muggle school of martial arts, of which I shall speak more shortly. For now . . ." Professor Quirrell took several steps forward, still in stance, advancing on where Mr. Goyle stood. "Mr. Goyle, I will ask you to attack me."

"Professor Quirrell," said Mr. Goyle, his voice now amplified as the professor's was, "can I ask what level —"

"Sixth *dan*. You will not be hurt and neither will I. And if you see an opening, please take it."

Mr. Goyle nodded, looking much relieved.

"Note," Professor Quirrell said, "that Mr. Goyle was afraid to attack someone who did not know martial arts to an acceptable level, for fear that I, or he, would be hurt. Mr. Goyle's attitude is exactly correct and he has earned three Quirrell points for it. Now, fight!"

The young boy blurred forward, fists flying, and the Professor blocked every blow, dancing backward, Quirrell kicked and Goyle blocked and spun and tried to trip Quirrell with a sweeping leg and Quirrell hopped over it and it was all happening too fast for Harry to make sense of what was going on and then Goyle was on his back with his legs pushing and Quirrell was actually *flying through the air* and then he hit the ground shoulder first and rolled.

"Stop!" cried Professor Quirrell from the ground, sounding a little panicked. "You win!"

Mr. Goyle pulled up so sharply he staggered, almost tripping and falling from the aborted momentum of his headlong charge toward Professor Quirrell. His face showed utter shock.

Professor Quirrell arched his back and bounced to his feet using a peculiar springing motion that made no use of his hands.

There was a silence in the classroom, a silence born of total confusion.

“Mr. Goyle,” said Professor Quirrell, “what vitally important technique did I demonstrate?”

“How to fall correctly when someone throws you,” said Mr. Goyle. “It’s one of the very first lessons you learn —”

“That too,” said Professor Quirrell.

There was a pause.

“The vitally important technique which I demonstrated,” said Professor Quirrell, “was how to lose. You may go, Mr. Goyle, thank you.”

Mr. Goyle walked off the platform, looking rather bewildered. Harry felt the same way.

Professor Quirrell walked back to his desk and resumed leaning on it. “Sometimes we forget the most basic things, since it has been too long since we learned them. I realized I had done the same with my own lesson plan. You do not teach students to throw until you have taught them to fall. And I must not teach you to fight if you do not understand how to lose.”

Professor Quirrell’s face hardened, and Harry thought he saw a hint of pain, a touch of sorrow, in those eyes. “I learned how to lose in a *dojo* in Asia, which, as any Muggle knows, is where all the good martial artists live. This *dojo* taught a style which had a reputation among fighting wizards as adapting well to magical dueling. The Master of that *dojo* — an old man by Muggle standards — was that style’s greatest living teacher. He had no idea that magic existed, of course. I applied to study there, and was one of the few students accepted that year, from among many contenders. There might have been a tiny bit of special influence involved.”

There was some laughter in the classroom. Harry didn’t share it. That hadn’t been right at all.

“In any case. During one of my first fights, after I had been beaten in a particularly humiliating fashion, I lost control and attacked my sparring partner —”

Yikes.

“— thankfully with my fists, rather than my magic. The Master, surprisingly, did not expel me on the spot. But he told me that there was a flaw in my temperament. He explained it to me, and I knew that he was right. And then

he said that I would learn how to lose.”

Professor Quirrell’s face was expressionless.

“Upon his strict orders, all of the students of the *dojo* lined up. One by one, they approached me. I was *not* to defend myself. I was only to beg for mercy. One by one, they slapped me, or punched me, and pushed me to the ground. Some of them spat on me. They called me awful names in their language. And to each one, I had to say, ‘I lose!’ and similar such things, such as ‘I beg you to stop!’ and ‘I admit you’re better than me!’”

Harry was trying to imagine this and simply failing. There was no way something like that could have happened to the dignified Professor Quirrell.

“I was a prodigy of Battle Magic even then. With wandless magic alone I could have killed everyone in that *dojo*. I did not do so. I learned to lose. To this day I remember it as one of the most unpleasant hours of my life. And when I left that *dojo* eight months later — which was not nearly enough time, but was all I could afford to spend — the Master told me that he hoped I understood why that had been necessary. And I told him that it was one of the most valuable lessons I had ever learned. Which was, and is, true.”

Professor Quirrell’s face turned bitter. “You are wondering where this marvelous *dojo* is, and whether you can study there. You cannot. For not long afterward, another would-be student came to that hidden place, to that remote mountain. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.”

There was the sound of many breaths being drawn in simultaneously. Harry felt sick to his stomach. He knew what was coming.

“The Dark Lord came to that school openly, without disguise, glowing red eyes and all. The students tried to bar his way and he simply Apparated through. There was terror there, but discipline, and the Master came forth. And the Dark Lord demanded — not asked, but demanded — to be taught.”

Professor Quirrell’s face was very hard. “Perhaps the Master had read too many books telling the lie that a true martial artist could defeat even demons. For whatever reason, the Master refused. The Dark Lord asked why he could not be a student. The Master told him he had no patience, and that was when the Dark Lord ripped his tongue out.”

There was a collective gasp.

“You can guess what happened next. The students tried to rush the Dark Lord and fell over, stunned where they stood. And then . . .”

Professor Quirrell’s voice faltered for a moment, then resumed.

“There is an Unforgiveable Curse, the Cruciatus Curse, which produces unbearable pain. If the Cruciatus is extended for longer than a few minutes it produces permanent insanity. One by one, the Dark Lord Crucioed the Master’s students into insanity, and then finished them off with the Killing Curse, while the Master was forced to watch. When all his students had died in this way, the Master followed. I learned this from the single surviving student, whom the Dark Lord had left alive to tell the tale, and who had been a friend of mine . . .”

Professor Quirrell turned away, and when he turned back a moment later, he once again seemed calm and composed.

“Dark Wizards cannot keep their tempers,” Professor Quirrell said quietly. “It is a nearly universal flaw of the species, and anyone who makes a habit of fighting them soon learns to rely on it. Understand that the Dark Lord did *not* win that day. His goal was to learn martial arts, and yet he left without a single lesson. The Dark Lord was foolish to wish that story retold. It did not show his strength, but rather an exploitable weakness.”

Professor Quirrell’s gaze focused on a single child in the classroom.

“Harry Potter,” Professor Quirrell said.

“Yes,” Harry said, his voice hoarse.

“What *precisely* did you do wrong today, Mr. Potter?”

Harry felt like he was going to throw up. “I lost my temper.”

“That is *not* precise,” said Professor Quirrell. “I will describe it more exactly. There are many animals which have what are called dominance contests. They rush at each other with horns — trying to knock each other down, not gore each other. They fight with their paws — with claws sheathed. But why with their claws sheathed? Surely, if they used their claws, they would stand a better chance of winning? But then their enemy might unsheathe their claws as well, and instead of resolving the dominance contest with a winner and a loser, both of them might be severely hurt.”

Professor Quirrell gaze seemed to come straight out at Harry from the repeater screen. “What you demonstrated today, Mr. Potter, is that — unlike those animals who keep their claws sheathed and accept the results — you do not know how to lose a dominance contest. When a *Hogwarts professor* challenged you, you did not back down. When it looked like you might lose, you unsheathed your claws, heedless of the danger. You *escalated*, and then you escalated *again*. It started with a slap at you from Professor Snape, who was

obviously dominant over you. Instead of losing, you slapped back and lost ten points from Ravenclaw. Soon you were talking about leaving Hogwarts. The fact that you escalated even further in some unknown direction, and somehow won at the end, does not change the fact that you are an idiot.”

“I understand,” Harry said. His throat was dry. That *had* been precise. *Frighteningly* precise. Now that Professor Quirrell had said it, Harry could see in hindsight that it was an *exactly* accurate description of what had happened. When someone’s model of you was that good, you had to wonder whether they were right about other things too, like your intent to kill.

“The *next* time, Mr. Potter, that you choose to escalate a contest rather than lose, you may lose *all* the stakes you place on the table. I cannot guess what they were today. I can guess that they were far, far too high for the loss of ten House points.”

Like the fate of magical Britain. That was what he’d done.

“You will protest that you were trying to help all of Hogwarts, a much more important goal worthy of great risks. That is a *lie*. If you had been —”

“I would have taken the slap, waited, and picked the best possible time to make my move,” Harry said, his voice hoarse. “But that would have meant *losing*. Letting him be dominant over me. It was what the Dark Lord couldn’t do with the Master he wanted to learn from.”

Professor Quirrell nodded. “I see that you have understood perfectly. And so, Mr. Potter, today you are going to learn how to lose.”

“I —”

“I will not hear any objections, Mr. Potter. It is evident both that you need this and that you are strong enough to take it. I assure you that your experience will not be so harsh as what I went through, though you may well remember it as the worst fifteen minutes of your young life.”

Harry swallowed. “Professor Quirrell,” he said in a small voice, “can we do this some other time?”

“No,” Professor Quirrell said simply. “You are five days into your Hogwarts education and already this has happened. Today is Friday. Our *next* defense class is on Wednesday. Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday . . . No, we do *not* have time to wait.”

There were a few laughs at this, but very few.

“Please consider it an order from your professor, Mr. Potter. What I would like to say is that otherwise I will not teach you any offensive spells, because I

would then hear that you had severely hurt or even killed someone. Unfortunately I am told that your fingers are already powerful weapons. Do not snap them at any time during this lesson.”

More scattered laughter, sounding rather nervous.

Harry felt like he might cry. “Professor Quirrell, if you do anything like what you talked about, it’s going to make me angry, and I really would rather not get angry again today —”

“The point is *not* to avoid getting angry,” Professor Quirrell said, his face looking grave. “Anger is natural. You need to learn how to lose even when you are angry. Or at least *pretend* to lose so that you can *plan* your vengeance. As I did with Mr. Goyle today, unless of course any of you think he really *is* better —”

“I’m not!” shouted Mr. Goyle from his desk, sounding a little frantic. “I know you didn’t really lose! Please don’t plan any vengeance!”

Harry felt sick to his stomach. Professor Quirrell didn’t know about his mysterious dark side. “Professor, we really need to talk about this after class —”

“We will,” Professor Quirrell said in the tones of a promise. “After you learn how to lose.” His face was serious. “It should go without saying that I will exclude anything which could injure you or even cause you significant pain. The pain will come from the difficulty of losing, instead of fighting back and escalating the battle until you win.”

Harry’s breath was coming in short, panicky pants. He was more frightened than he’d been after leaving the Potions classroom. “Professor Quirrell,” he managed to say, “I don’t want you to get fired over this —”

“I will not be,” Professor Quirrell said, “if *you* tell them afterward that it was necessary. And this I trust you to do.” For a moment Professor Quirrell’s voice turned very dry. “Believe me, they have tolerated worse in their hallways. This case will be exceptional only in that it happens within a classroom.”

“Professor Quirrell,” Harry whispered, but he thought his voice was still being repeated everywhere, “do you really believe that if I don’t do this, I might hurt someone?”

“Yes,” Professor Quirrell said simply.

“Then,” Harry felt nauseous, “I’ll do it.”

Professor Quirrell turned to regard the Slytherins. “So . . . with the full approval of your teacher, and in such a fashion that Snape cannot be blamed for your actions . . . do any of you wish to show your dominance over the

Boy-Who-Lived? Shove him around, push him to the ground, hear him beg for your mercy?"

Five hands went up.

"Everyone with your hand raised, you are an absolute idiot. What part of *pretending* to lose did you not understand? If Harry Potter does become the next Dark Lord he will hunt you down and kill you after he graduates."

The five hands dropped abruptly back to their desks.

"I won't," Harry said, his voice coming out rather weakly. "I swear never to take vengeance upon those who help me learn to lose. Professor Quirrell . . . would you *please* . . . stop that?"

Professor Quirrell sighed. "I *am* sorry, Mr. Potter. I realize that you must find this equally annoying whether you intend to become a Dark Lord or not. But those children *also* had an important life lesson to learn. Would it be acceptable if I awarded you a Quirrell point in apology?"

"Make it two," Harry said.

There was a current of surprised laughter, defusing some of the tension.

"Done," Professor Quirrell said.

"And after I graduate I'm going to hunt you down and *tickle* you."

There was more laughter, although Professor Quirrell didn't smile.

Harry felt like he was wrestling an anaconda, trying to force the conversation through the narrow course that would make people realize he wasn't a Dark Lord after all . . . *why* was Professor Quirrell so suspicious of him?

"Professor," said Draco's unamplified voice. "It is also not my own ambition to become a stupid Dark Lord."

There was a shocked silence in the classroom.

You don't have to do this! Harry almost blurted out loud, but checked himself in time; Draco might not wish it known that he was doing this out of friendship for Harry . . . or out of the desire to appear friendly . . .

Calling *that a desire to appear friendly* made Harry feel small, and mean. If Draco had intended to impress him, it was working perfectly.

Professor Quirrell was regarding Draco gravely. "*You* worry that you cannot pretend to lose, Mr. Malfoy? That this flaw which describes Mr. Potter also describes you? *Surely* your father taught you better."

"When it comes to talking, maybe," said Draco, now on the repeater screen. "Not when it comes to being shoved around and pushed to the ground. I want to be fully as strong as you, Professor Quirrell."

Professor Quirrell's eyebrows went up and stayed up. "I am afraid, Mr. Malfoy," he said after a time, "that the arrangements I made for Mr. Potter, involving some older Slytherins who will be told *afterward* how stupid they were, would not carry over onto you. But it is my professional opinion that you are already very strong. Should I hear that you have failed, as Mr. Potter failed today, I will make the appropriate arrangements and apologize to you and whomever you have hurt. I do not think this will be necessary, however."

"I understand, professor," said Draco.

Professor Quirrell looked over the class. "Does anyone else wish to become strong?"

Some students glanced around nervously. Some, Harry thought from his back row, looked like they were opening their mouths but not saying anything. In the end, no one spoke.

"Draco Malfoy will be one of the generals of your year's armies," said Professor Quirrell, "should he deign to engage in that after-school activity. And now, Mr. Potter, please come forward."



Yes, Professor Quirrell had said, it must be in front of everyone, in front of your friends, because that is where Snape confronted you and that is where you must learn to lose.

So now the first year watched. In magically enforced silence, and with requests from both Harry and the professor not to intervene. Hermione had her face turned away, but she hadn't spoken out or even given him any sort of significant look, maybe because she'd been there in Potions too.

Harry stood on a soft blue mat, such as might be found in a Muggle dojo, which Professor Quirrell had laid out upon the floor for when Harry was pushed down.

Harry was frightened of what he might do. If Professor Quirrell was right about his intent to kill . . .

Harry's wand lay on Professor Quirrell's desk, not because Harry knew any spells that could defend him, but because otherwise (Harry thought) he might have tried to jam it through someone's eye socket. His pouch lay there, now containing his protected but still potentially fragile Time-Turner.

Harry had pleaded with Professor Quirrell to Transfigure him some boxing

gloves and lock them on his hands. Professor Quirrell had given him a look of silent understanding, and refused.

I will not go for their eyes, I will not go for their eyes, I will not go for their eyes, it would be the end of my life in Hogwarts, I'll be arrested, Harry chanted to himself, trying to hammer the thought into his brain, hoping it would stay there if his intent to kill took over.

Professor Quirrell returned, escorting thirteen older Slytherins of different years. Harry recognized one of them as the one he'd hit with a pie. Two others from that confrontation were also present. The one who'd said to stop, that they really shouldn't do this, was missing.

"I repeat," Professor Quirrell said, sounding very stern, "Potter is *not* to be really hurt. Any and all *accidents* will be treated as deliberate. Do you understand?"

The older Slytherins nodded, grinning.

"Then please feel free to take the Boy-Who-Lived down a few pegs," Professor Quirrell said, with a twisted smile that only the first-years understood.

By some form of mutual consent, the pie-target was at the front of the group.

"Potter," said Professor Quirrell, "meet Mr. Peregrine Derrick. He is better than you and he is about to show you that."

Derrick strode forward and Harry's brain screamed discordantly, he must not run away, he must not fight back —

Derrick stopped an arm's length away from Harry.

Harry wasn't angry yet, just frightened. And that meant he beheld a teenage boy fully half a meter taller than himself, with clearly defined muscles, facial hair, and a grin of terrible anticipation.

"Ask him not to hurt you," Professor Quirrell said. "Perhaps if he sees that you're pathetic enough, he'll decide that you're boring, and go away."

There was laughter from the watching older Slytherins.

"Please," Harry said, his voice faltering, "don't, hurt, me . . ."

"That didn't sound very sincere," said Professor Quirrell.

Derrick's smile widened. The clumsy imbecile was looking very superior and . . .

. . . Harry's blood temperature was dropping . . .

"Please don't hurt me," Harry tried again.

Professor Quirrell shook his head. "How in Merlin's name did you manage

to make that sound like an insult, Potter? There is only one response you can possibly expect from Mr. Derrick.”

Derrick stepped forward deliberately, and bumped into Harry.

Harry staggered back a few feet and, before he could stop himself, straightened up icily.

“Wrong,” said Professor Quirrell, “wrong, wrong, wrong.”

“You bumped into me, Potter,” Derrick said. “Apologize.”

“I’m sorry!”

“You don’t *sound* sorry,” said Derrick.

Harry’s eyes widened in indignation, he *had* managed to make that sound pleading —

Derrick pushed him, hard, and Harry fell to the mat on his hands and knees.

The blue fabric seemed to waver in Harry’s vision, not far away.

He was beginning to doubt Professor Quirrell’s real motives in teaching this so-called *lesson*.

A foot rested on Harry’s buttocks and a moment later Harry was pushed hard to the side, sending him sprawling on his back.

Derrick laughed. “This is *fun*,” he said.

All he had to do was say it was over. And report the whole thing to the Headmaster’s office. That would be the end of this *Defense Professor* and his ill-fated stay at Hogwarts and . . . Professor McGonagall would be angry about that, but . . .

(An image of Professor McGonagall’s face flashed before his eyes, she didn’t look angry, just sad —)

“Now tell him that he’s better than you, Potter,” said Professor Quirrell’s voice.

“You’re, better, than, me.”

Harry started to raise himself and Derrick put a foot on his chest and shoved him back down to the mat.

The world was becoming transparent as crystal. Lines of action and their consequences stretched out before him in utter clarity. The fool wouldn’t be expecting him to strike back, a quick hit in the groin would stun him long enough for —

“Try again,” said Professor Quirrell and with a sudden sharp motion Harry rolled and sprang to his feet and whirled on where stood his real enemy, the

Defense Professor —

Professor Quirrell said, “You have no patience.”

Harry faltered. His mind, well-honed in pessimism, drew a picture of a wizened old man with blood pouring from his mouth after Harry had ripped his tongue out —

A moment later, Derrick pushed Harry to the mat again and then sat down on him, sending Harry’s breath whooshing out.

“Stop!” Harry screamed. “Please stop!”

“Better,” said Professor Quirrell. “That even sounded sincere.”

It *had* been. That was the horrible thing, the sickening thing, it *had* been sincere. Harry was panting rapidly, fear and cold anger both flushing through him —

“Lose,” said Professor Quirrell.

“I, lose,” Harry forced out.

“I like it,” Derrick said from on top of him. “Lose some more.”



Hands shoved Harry, sending him stumbling across the circle of older Slytherins to another set of hands that shoved him again. Harry had long since passed the point of trying not to cry, and was now just trying not to fall down.

“What are you, Potter?” said Derrick.

“A, l-loser, I lose, I give up, you win, you’re b-better, than me, please stop —”

Harry tripped over a foot and went crashing to the ground, hands not quite able to catch himself. He was dazed for a moment, then began struggling to his feet again —

“*Enough!*” said Professor Quirrell’s voice, sounding sharp enough to cut iron. “Step away from Mr. Potter!”

Harry saw the surprised looks on their faces. The chill in his blood, which had been flowing and ebbing, smiled in cold satisfaction.

Then Harry collapsed to the mat.

Professor Quirrell talked. There were gasps from the older Slytherins.

“And I believe the scion of Malfoy has something he wants to explain to you as well,” finished Professor Quirrell.

Draco’s voice started talking. His voice sounded almost as sharp as professor Quirrell’s, it had acquired the same cadence Draco had used to imitate his

father, and it was saying things like *could have put Slytherin House in jeopardy* and *who knows how many allies in this school alone* and *total lack of awareness, never mind cunning and dull thugs, useful for nothing but lackeys* and something in Harry's hindbrain, despite everything he knew, was designating Draco as an ally.

Harry ached all over, was probably bruised, his body felt cold, his mind utterly exhausted. He tried to think of Fawkes's song, but without the phoenix present he couldn't remember the melody and when he tried to imagine it he couldn't seem to think of anything except a bird chirping.

Then Draco stopped talking and Professor Quirrell told the older Slytherins they were dismissed, and Harry opened his eyes and struggled to sit up, "Wait," Harry said, forcing the words out, "there's something, I want, to say, to them —"

"Wait on Mr. Potter," Professor Quirrell said coldly to the departing Slytherins.

Harry swayed to his feet. He was careful not to look in the direction of his classmates. He didn't want to see how they were looking at him now. He didn't want to see their pity.

So instead Harry looked at the older Slytherins, who still seemed to be in a state of shock. They stared back at him. Dread was on their faces.

His dark side, when it was in control, had held to the imagination of this moment, and went on pretending to lose.

Harry said, "No one will —"

"Stop," said Professor Quirrell. "If that's what I think it is, please wait until after they're gone. They'll hear about it later. We all have our lessons to learn, Mr. Potter."

"All right," Harry said.

"You. Go."

The older Slytherins fled and the door closed behind them.

"No one's to take any revenge on them," Harry said hoarsely. "That's a request to anyone who considers themselves my friend. I had my lesson to learn, they helped me learn it, they had their lesson to learn too, it's over. If you tell this story, make sure you tell that part too."

Harry turned to look at Professor Quirrell.

"You lost," said Professor Quirrell, his voice gentle for the first time. It sounded strange coming from the professor, like his voice shouldn't even be able to do that.

Harry *had* lost. There had been moments when the cold anger had faded entirely, replaced by fear, and during those moments he'd begged the older Slytherins and he'd meant it . . .

"And are you yet alive?" said Professor Quirrell, still with that strange gentleness.

Harry managed to nod.

"Not all losing is like this," said Professor Quirrell. "There are compromises and negotiated surrenders. There are other ways to placate bullies. There is a whole art form to manipulating others by letting them be dominant over you. But first, losing must be *thinkable*. Will you remember how you lost?"

"Yes."

"Will you be able to lose?"

"I . . . think so . . ."

"I think so too." Professor Quirrell bowed so low that his thin hair almost touched the floor. "Congratulations, Harry Potter, you win."

There was no single source, no first mover, the applause started all at once like a massive thunderclap.

Harry's couldn't keep the shock from his face. He risked a glance at his classmates, and he saw their faces showing not pity but awe. The applause was coming from Ravenclaw and Gryffindor and Hufflepuff and even Slytherin, probably because Draco Malfoy was applauding too. Some students were standing up from their chairs and half of Gryffindor was standing on their desks.

So Harry stood there, swaying, letting their respect wash over him, feeling stronger, and maybe even a little healed.

Professor Quirrell waited for the applause to die away. It took quite a while.

"Surprised, Mr. Potter?" Professor Quirrell said. His voice sounded amused. "You have just found out that the real world does not *always* work like your worst nightmares. Yes, if you had been some poor anonymous boy being abused, then they would probably have respected you less afterward, pitied you even as they comforted you from their loftier perches. That *is* human nature, I'm afraid. But *you* they already know for a figure of power. And they saw you confront your fear and keep confronting it, even though you could have walked away at any time. Did you think less of *me* when I told you that I had deliberately endured being spat upon?"

Harry felt a burning sensation in his throat and frantically clamped down.

He didn't trust this miraculous respect enough to start crying again in front of it.

"Your *extraordinary* achievement in my class deserves an extraordinary reward, Harry Potter. Please accept it with my compliments on behalf of my House, and remember from this day forward that not all Slytherins are alike. There are Slytherins, and then there are Slytherins." Professor Quirrell was smiling quite broadly as he said this. "Fifty-one points to Ravenclaw."

There was a shocked pause and then pandemonium broke out among the Ravenclaw students, howling and whistling and cheering.

(And in the same moment Harry felt something *wrong* about that, Professor McGonagall had been right, there *should* have been consequences, there should have been a cost and a price to be paid, you couldn't just put everything back the way it was like that —)

But Harry saw the elated faces in Ravenclaw and knew he couldn't possibly say no.

His brain made a suggestion. It was a good suggestion. Harry could not even believe his brain was still keeping him upright, let alone producing good suggestions.

"Professor Quirrell," Harry said, as clearly as he could through his burning throat. "You are everything a member of your House should be, and I think you must be just what Salazar Slytherin had in mind when he helped found Hogwarts. I thank you and your House," Draco was very slightly nodding and subtly turning his finger, *keep going*, "and I think this calls for three cheers for Slytherin. With me, everyone?" Harry paused. "*Huzzah!*" Only a few people managed to join in on the first try. "*Huzzah!*" This time most of Ravenclaw was in on it. "*Huzzah!*" That was almost all of Ravenclaw, a scattering of Hufflepuffs and around a quarter of Gryffindor.

Draco's hand moved into a small, quick, thumbs-up gesture.

Most of the Slytherins had expressions of sheer shock. A few were staring at Professor Quirrell in wonder. Blaise Zabini was looking at Harry with a calculating, intrigued expression.

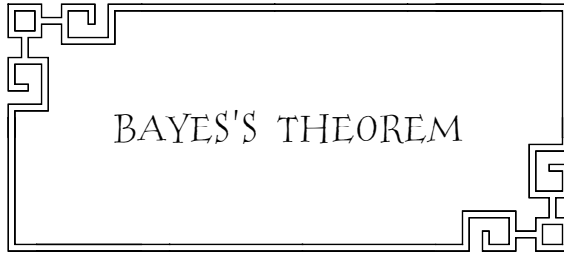
Professor Quirrell bowed. "Thank *you*, Harry Potter," he said, still with that broad smile. He turned to the class. "Now, believe it or not, we still have half an hour left in this session, and that is enough to introduce the Simple Shield. Mr. Potter, of course, is going off and taking a well-earned rest."

"I can —"

“Idiot,” Professor Quirrell said fondly. The class was already laughing. “Your classmates can teach you afterward, or I’ll tutor you privately if that’s what it takes. But *right now*, you’re going through the third door from the left in the back of the stage, where you will find a bed, an assortment of exceptionally tasty snacks, and some extremely light reading from the Hogwarts library. You may not take anything else with you, particularly not your textbooks. Now go.”

Harry went.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Harry stared up at the grey ceiling of the small room, from where he lay on the portable yet soft bed that had been placed there. He'd eaten quite a lot of Professor Quirrell's snacks — intricate confections of chocolate and other substances, dusted with sparkling sprinkles and jeweled with tiny sugar gems, looking highly expensive and proving, in fact, to be quite tasty. Harry hadn't felt the least bit guilty about it either, *this* he had *earned*.

He hadn't tried to sleep. Harry had a feeling that he wouldn't like what happened when he closed his eyes.

He hadn't tried to read. He wouldn't have been able to focus.

Funny how Harry's brain just seemed to keep on running and running, never shutting down no matter how tired it got. It got stupider but it refused to *switch off*.

But there was, there really and truly was a feeling of triumph.

Anti-Dark-Lord-Harry program, +1 point didn't *begin* to cover it. Harry wondered what the Sorting Hat would say *now*, if he could put it on his head.

No *wonder* Professor Quirrell had accused Harry of heading down the path of a Dark Lord. Harry had been too slow on the uptake, he should have seen the parallel right away —

Understand that the Dark Lord did not win that day. His goal was to learn martial arts, and yet he left without a single lesson.

Harry had entered the Potions class with the intent to learn Potions. He'd left without a single lesson.

And Professor Quirrell had heard, and understood with frightening precision, and reached out and yanked Harry off that path, the path that led to his becoming a copy of You-Know-Who.

There was a knock at the door. "Classes are over," said Professor Quirrell's quiet voice.

Harry approached the door and found himself suddenly nervous. Then the tension diminished as he heard Professor Quirrell's footsteps moving away from the door.

What on Earth is that about? Is it what's going to get him fired eventually?

Harry opened the door, and saw that Professor Quirrell was now waiting several bodylengths away.

Does Professor Quirrell feel it too?

They walked across the now-deserted stage to Professor Quirrell's desk, which Professor Quirrell leaned on; and Harry, as before, stopped short of the dais.

"So," Professor Quirrell said. There was a friendly sense about him somehow, even though his face still kept its usual seriousness. "What was it you wanted to talk to me about, Mr. Potter?"

I have a mysterious dark side. But Harry couldn't just blurt it out like that.

"Professor Quirrell," Harry said, "am I off the path to becoming a Dark Lord, now?"

Professor Quirrell looked at Harry. "Mr. Potter," he said solemnly, with only a slight grin, "a word of advice. There is such a thing as a performance which is too perfect. Real people who have just been beaten and humiliated for fifteen minutes do not stand up and graciously forgive their enemies. It is the sort of thing you do when you're trying to *convince* everyone you're not Dark, not —"

"I can't believe this! You can't have every possible observation confirm your theory!"

"And that was a *trifle* too much indignation."

"What on Earth do I have to do to convince you?"

"To convince me that you harbor no ambitions of becoming a Dark Lord?" said Professor Quirrell, now looking outright amused. "I suppose you could just raise your right hand."

"What?" Harry said blankly. "But I can raise my right hand whether or not I —" Harry stopped, feeling rather stupid.

"Indeed," said Professor Quirrell. "You can just as easily do it either way. There is nothing you can do to convince me because I would know that was exactly what you were trying to do. And if we are to be even more precise, then while I suppose it is barely possible that perfectly good people exist even though I have never met one, it is nonetheless *improbable* that someone would be beaten for fifteen minutes and then stand up and feel a great surge of kindly forgiveness for his attackers. On the other hand it is *less* improbable that a young child would imagine this as the *role to play* in order to convince his teacher and classmates that he is not the next Dark Lord. The import of an act lies not in what that act *resembles on the surface*, Mr. Potter, but in the states of mind which make that act more or less probable."

Harry blinked. He'd just had the dichotomy between the representativeness heuristic and the Bayesian definition of evidence explained to him by a wizard.

"But then again," said Professor Quirrell, "anyone can want to impress their friends. That need not be Dark. So without it being any kind of admission, Mr. Potter, tell me honestly. What thought was in your mind at the moment when you forbade any vengeance? Was that thought a true impulse to forgiveness? Or was it an awareness of how your classmates would see the act?"

Sometimes we make our own phoenix song.

But Harry didn't say it out loud. It was clear that Professor Quirrell wouldn't believe him, and would probably respect him less for trying to utter such a transparent lie.

After a few moments of silence, Professor Quirrell smiled with satisfaction. "Believe it or not, Mr. Potter," said the professor, "you need not fear me for having discovered your secret. I am *not* going to tell you to give up on becoming the next Dark Lord. If I could turn back the hands of time and somehow remove that ambition from the mind of my child self, the self of this present time would not benefit from the alteration. For as long as I thought that was my goal, it drove me to study and learn and refine myself and become stronger. We become what we are meant to be by following our desires wherever they lead. That is the insight of Salazar. Ask me to show you to the library section which holds those same books I read as a thirteen-year-old, and I will happily lead the way."

"For the love of crap," Harry said, and sat down on the hard marble floor,

and then lay back on the floor, staring up at the distant arches of the ceiling. It was as close as he could come to collapsing in despair without hurting himself.

"Still too much indignation," observed Professor Quirrell. Harry wasn't looking but he could hear the suppressed laughter in the voice.

Then Harry realized.

"Actually, I think I know what's confusing you here," Harry said. "That was what I wanted to talk to you about, in fact. Professor Quirrell, I think that what you're seeing is my mysterious dark side."

There was a pause.

"Your . . . dark side . . ."

Harry sat up. Professor Quirrell was regarding him with one of the strangest expressions Harry had seen on anyone's face, let alone anyone as dignified as Professor Quirrell.

"It happens when I get angry," Harry explained. "My blood runs cold, everything gets cold, everything seems perfectly clear . . . In retrospect it's been with me for a while — in my first year of Muggle school, someone tried to take away my ball during recess and I held it behind my back and kicked him in the solar plexus which I'd read was a weak point, and the other kids didn't bother me after that. And I bit a math teacher when she wouldn't accept my dominance. But it's only just recently that I've been under enough stress to notice that it's an actual, you know, mysterious dark side, and not just an anger management problem like the school psychologist said. And I don't have any super magical powers when it happens, that was one of the first things I checked."

Professor Quirrell rubbed his nose. "Let me think about this," he said.

Harry waited in silence for a full minute. He used that time to stand up, which was more difficult than he had expected.

"Well," Professor Quirrell said after a while. "I suppose there *was* something you could say that would convince me."

"I *have* already guessed that my dark side is really just another part of me and that the answer isn't to never become angry but to learn to stay in control by accepting it, I'm not dumb or anything and I've seen this story enough times to know where it's going, but it's hard and you seem like the person to help me."

"Well . . . yes . . . very perspicacious of you, Mr. Potter, I must say . . . that side of you is, as you seem to have already surmised, your intent to kill, which

as you say is a part of you . . .”

“And needs to be trained,” Harry said, completing the pattern.

“And needs to be trained, yes.” That strange expression was still on Professor Quirrell’s face. “Mr. Potter, if you truly do not wish to be the next Dark Lord, then what was the ambition which the Sorting Hat tried to convince you to abandon, the ambition for which you were Sorted into Slytherin?”

“I was Sorted into *Ravenclaw*!”

“Mr. Potter,” said Professor Quirrell, now with a much more usual-looking dry smile, “I know you are accustomed to everyone around you being a fool, but please do not mistake me for one of them. The likelihood that the Sorting Hat would play its first prank in eight hundred years while it was upon your head is so small as to not be worth considering. I suppose it is barely possible that you snapped your fingers and invented some simple and clever way to defeat the anti-tampering spells upon the Hat, though I myself can think of no such method. But by far the most probable explanation is that Dumbledore decided he was not happy with the Hat’s choice for the Boy-Who-Lived. This is evident to anyone with the tiniest smidgen of common sense, so your secret is safe at Hogwarts.”

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it again with a feeling of complete helplessness. Professor Quirrell was wrong, but wrong in such a convincing way that Harry was starting to think that it simply *was* the rational judgment given the evidence available to Professor Quirrell. There were times, never *predictable* times but still sometimes, when you would get improbable evidence and the best knowable guess would be wrong. If you had a medical test that was only wrong one time in a thousand, sometimes it would still be wrong anyway.

“Can I ask you never to repeat what I’m about to say?” said Harry.

“Absolutely,” said Professor Quirrell. “Consider me asked.”

Harry wasn’t a fool either. “Can I consider you to have said yes?”

“Very good, Mr. Potter. You may indeed so consider.”

“*Professor Quirrell —*”

“I won’t repeat what you’re about to say,” Professor Quirrell said, smiling.

They both laughed, then Harry turned serious again. “The Sorting Hat did seem to think I was going to end up as a Dark Lord unless I went to Hufflepuff,” Harry said. “But I don’t *want* to be one.”

“Mr. Potter . . .” said Professor Quirrell. “Don’t take this the wrong way. I

promise you will not be graded on the answer. I only want to know your own, honest reply. Why not?"

Harry had that *helpless* feeling again. *Thou shalt not become a Dark Lord* was such an obvious theorem in his moral system that it was hard to describe the actual proof steps. "Um, people would get hurt?"

"Surely you've wanted to hurt people," said Professor Quirrell. "You wanted to hurt those bullies today. Being a Dark Lord means that people you *want* to hurt get hurt."

Harry floundered for words and then decided to simply go with the obvious. "First of all, just because I want to hurt someone doesn't mean it's right —"

"What makes something right, if not your wanting it?"

"Ah," Harry said, "preference utilitarianism."

"Pardon me?" said Professor Quirrell.

"It's the ethical theory that the good is what satisfies the preferences of the most people —"

"No," Professor Quirrell said. His fingers rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I don't think that's quite what I was trying to say. Mr. Potter, in the end people all do what they want to do. Sometimes people give names like 'right' to things they want to do, but how could we possibly act on anything *but* our own desires?"

"Well, obviously," Harry said. "I couldn't *act* on moral considerations if they lacked the power to move me. But that doesn't mean my wanting to hurt those Slytherins has the power to move me *more* than moral considerations!"

Professor Quirrell blinked.

"Not to mention," Harry said, "being a Dark Lord would mean that a lot of innocent bystanders got hurt too!"

"Why does that matter to you?" Professor Quirrell said. "What have they done for you?"

Harry laughed. "Oh, now *that* was around as subtle as *Atlas Shrugged*."

"Pardon me?" Professor Quirrell said again.

"It's a book that my parents wouldn't let me read because they thought it would corrupt me, so of course I read it anyway and I was offended they thought I would fall for any traps that obvious. Blah blah blah, appeal to my sense of superiority, other people are trying to keep me down, blah blah blah."

"So you're saying I need to make my traps less obvious?" said Professor Quirrell. He tapped a finger on his cheek, looking thoughtful. "I can work on

that.”

They both laughed.

“But to stay with the current question,” said Professor Quirrell, “what *have* all these other people done for you?”

“Other people have done *huge* amounts for me!” Harry said. “My parents took me in when my parents died because they were *good people*, and to become a Dark Lord is to betray that!”

Professor Quirrell was silent for a time.

“I confess,” said Professor Quirrell quietly, “when I was your age, that thought could not ever have come to me.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said.

“Don’t be,” said Professor Quirrell. “It was long ago, and I resolved my parental issues to my own satisfaction. So you are held back by the thought of your parents’ disapproval? Does that mean that if they died in an accident, there would be nothing left to stop you from —”

“No,” Harry said. “Just no. It is their *impulse to kindness* which sheltered me. That impulse is not only in my parents. And that impulse is what would be betrayed.”

“In any case, Mr. Potter, you have not answered my original question,” said Professor Quirrell finally. “What *is* your ambition?”

“Oh,” said Harry. “Um . . .” He organized his thoughts. “To understand everything important there is to know about the universe, apply that knowledge to become omnipotent, and use that power to rewrite reality because I have some objections to the way it works now.”

There was a slight pause.

“Forgive me if this is a stupid question, Mr. Potter,” said Professor Quirrell, “but are you *sure* you did not just confess to wanting to be a Dark Lord?”

“That’s only if you use your power for evil,” explained Harry. “If you use the power for good, you’re a Light Lord.”

“I see,” Professor Quirrell said. He tapped his other cheek with a finger. “I suppose I can work with that. But Mr. Potter, while the scope of your ambition is worthy of Salazar himself, how exactly do you propose to go about it? Is step one to become a great fighting wizard, or Head Unspeakable, or Minister of Magic, or —”

“Step one is to become a scientist.”

Professor Quirrell was looking at Harry as if he’d just turned into a cat.

"A scientist," Professor Quirrell said after a while.

Harry nodded.

"A *scientist?*" repeated Professor Quirrell.

"Yes," Harry said. "I shall achieve my objectives through the power . . . of *Science!*"

"A *scientist!*" said Professor Quirrell. There was genuine indignation on his face, and his voice had grown stronger and sharper. "You could be the best of all my students! The greatest fighting wizard to come out of Hogwarts in five decades! I cannot picture you wasting your days in a white lab coat doing pointless things to rats!"

"Hey!" said Harry. "There's more to science than that! Not that there's anything *wrong* with experimenting on rats, of course. But science *is* how you go about understanding and controlling the universe —"

"Fool," said Professor Quirrell, in a voice of quiet, bitter intensity. "You're a fool, Harry Potter." He passed a hand over his face, and when that hand had passed, his face was calmer. "Or more likely you have not yet found your true ambition. May I strongly recommend that you try to become a Dark Lord instead? I will do anything I can to help as a matter of public service."

"You don't like science," Harry said slowly. "Why not?"

"Those fool Muggles will kill us all someday!" Professor Quirrell's voice had grown louder. "They will end it! End all of it!"

Harry was feeling a bit lost here. "What are we talking about here, nuclear weapons?"

"Yes, nuclear weapons!" Professor Quirrell was almost shouting now. "Even He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named never used those, perhaps because he didn't want to rule over a heap of ash! They never should have been made! And it will only get worse with time!" Professor Quirrell was standing up straight instead of leaning on his desk. "There are gates you do not open, there are seals you do not breach! The fools who can't resist meddling are killed by the lesser perils early on, and the survivors all know that there are secrets you *do not share* with anyone who lacks the intelligence and the discipline to discover them for themselves! Every powerful wizard knows that! Even the most terrible Dark Wizards know that! And those idiot Muggles can't seem to figure it out! The eager little fools who discovered the secret of nuclear weapons didn't keep it to themselves, they told their *fool* politicians and now *we* must live under the constant threat of annihilation!"

This was a rather different way of looking at things than Harry had grown up with. It had never occurred to him that nuclear physicists should have formed a conspiracy of silence to keep the secret of nuclear weapons from anyone not smart enough to be a nuclear physicist. The thought was intriguing, if nothing else. Would they have had secret passwords? Would they have had masks?

(Actually, for all Harry knew, there *were* all sorts of incredibly destructive secrets which physicists kept to themselves, and the secret of nuclear weapons was the only one that had escaped into the wild. The world would look the same to him either way.)

"I'll have to think about that," Harry said to Professor Quirrell. "It's a new idea to me. And one of the *hidden* secrets of science, passed down from a few rare teachers to their grad students, is how to avoid flushing new ideas down the toilet the instant you hear one you don't like."

Professor Quirrell blinked again.

"Is there any sort of science you *do* approve of?" said Harry. "Medicine, maybe?"

"Space travel," said Professor Quirrell. "But the Muggles seem to be dragging their feet on the one project which might have let wizardkind escape this planet before they blow it up."

Harry nodded. "I'm a big fan of the space program too. At least we have that much in common."

Professor Quirrell looked at Harry. Something flickered in the professor's eyes. "I will have your word, your promise and your oath never to speak of what follows."

"You have it," Harry said immediately.

"See to it that you keep your oath or you will not like the results," said Professor Quirrell. "I will now cast a rare and powerful spell, not on you, but on the classroom around us. Stand still, so that you do not touch the boundaries of the spell once it has been cast. You must not interact with the magic which I am maintaining. Look only. Otherwise I will end the spell." Professor Quirrell paused. "And try not to fall over."

Harry nodded, puzzled and anticipatory.

Professor Quirrell raised his wand and said something that Harry's ears and mind couldn't grasp at all, words that bypassed awareness and vanished into oblivion.

The marble in a short radius around Harry's feet stayed constant. All the other marble of the floor vanished, the walls and ceilings vanished.

Harry stood on a small circle of white marble in the midst of an endless field of stars, burning terribly bright and unwavering. There was no Earth, no Moon, no Sun that Harry recognized. Professor Quirrell stood in the same place as before, floating in the midst of the starfield. The Milky Way was already visible as a great wash of light and it grew brighter as Harry's vision adjusted to the darkness.

The sight wrenched at Harry's heart like nothing he had ever seen.

"Are we . . . in space . . .?"

"No," said Professor Quirrell. His voice was sad, and reverent. "But it is a true image."

Tears came into Harry's eyes. He wiped them away frantically, he would not miss this for some stupid water blurring his vision.

The stars were no longer tiny jewels set in a giant velvet dome, as they were in the night sky of Earth. Here there was no sky above, no surrounding sphere. Only points of perfect light against perfect blackness, an infinite and empty void with countless tiny holes through which shone the brilliance from some unimaginable realm beyond.

In space, the stars *looked* terribly, terribly, terribly far away.

Harry kept on wiping his eyes, over and over.

"Sometimes," Professor Quirrell said in a voice so quiet it almost wasn't there, "when this flawed world seems unusually hateful, I wonder whether there might be some other place, far away, where I should have been. I cannot seem to imagine what that place might be, and if I can't even imagine it then how can I believe it exists? And yet the universe is so very, very wide, and perhaps it might exist anyway? But the stars are so very, very far away. It would take a long, long time to get there, even if I knew the way. And I wonder what I would dream about, if I slept for a long, long time . . ."

Though it felt like sacrilege, Harry managed a whisper. "Please let me stay here awhile."

Professor Quirrell nodded, where he stood unsupported against the stars.

It was easy to forget the small circle of marble on which you stood, and your own body, and become a point of awareness which might have been still, or might have been moving. With all distances incalculable there was no way to tell.

There was a time of no time.

And then the stars vanished, and the classroom returned.

"I'm sorry," said Professor Quirrell, "but we're about to have company."

"It's fine," Harry whispered. "It was enough." He would never forget this day, and not because of the unimportant things that had happened earlier. He would learn how to cast that spell if it was the last thing he ever learned.

Then the heavy oaken doors of the classroom blasted off their hinges and skittered across the marble floor with a high-pitched shriek.

"QUIRINUS! HOW DARE YOU!"

Like a vast thundercloud, an ancient and powerful wizard blew into the room, a look of such incandescent rage upon his face that the stern look he had earlier turned upon Harry seemed like nothing.

There was a wrench of disorientation in Harry's mind as the part that wanted to run away screaming from the scariest thing it had ever seen ran away, rotating into place a part of him which could take the shock.

None of Harry's facets were happy about having their star-gazing interrupted. "Headmaster Albus Percival —" Harry started to say in icy tones.

WHAM. Professor Quirrell's hand came down hard upon his desk. "*Mr. Potter!*" barked Professor Quirrell. "This is the *Headmaster of Hogwarts* and you are a mere student! You will address him appropriately!"

Harry looked at Professor Quirrell.

Professor Quirrell was giving Harry a stern glare.

Neither of them smiled.

Dumbledore's long strides had come to a halt before where Harry stood in front of the dais and Professor Quirrell stood by his desk. The Headmaster stared in shock at both of them.

"I'm sorry," Harry said in meekly polite tones. "Headmaster, thank you for wanting to protect me, but Professor Quirrell did the right thing."

Slowly, Dumbledore's expression changed from something that would vaporize steel into something merely angry. "I heard students saying that this man had you abused by older Slytherins! That he forbade you to defend yourself!"

Harry nodded. "He knew exactly what was wrong with me and he showed me how to fix it."

"Harry, *what are you talking about?*"

"I was teaching him how to lose," Professor Quirrell said dryly. "It's an

important life skill.”

It was apparent that Dumbledore still didn’t understand, but his voice had lowered in register. “Harry . . .” he said slowly. “If there’s any threat the Defense Professor has offered you to prevent you from complaining —”

You lunatic, after today of all days do you really think I —

“Headmaster,” Harry said, trying to look abashed, “what’s wrong with me isn’t that I keep quiet about abusive professors.”

Professor Quirrell chuckled. “Not perfect, Mr. Potter, but good enough for your first day. Headmaster, did you stay long enough to hear about the fifty-one points for Ravenclaw, or did you storm out as soon as you heard the first part?”

A brief look of disconcertment crossed Dumbledore’s face, followed by surprise. “Fifty-one points for Ravenclaw?”

Professor Quirrell nodded. “He wasn’t expecting them, but it seemed appropriate. Tell Professor McGonagall that I think the story of what Mr. Potter went through to earn back the lost points will do just as well to make her point. No, Headmaster, Mr. Potter didn’t tell me anything. It’s easy to see which part of today’s events are her work, just as I know that the final compromise was your own suggestion. Though I wonder how on Earth Mr. Potter was able to gain the upper hand over both Snape and you and then Professor McGonagall was able to gain the upper hand over him.”

Somehow Harry managed to control his face. Was it *that* obvious to a real Slytherin?

Dumbledore came closer to Harry, scrutinizing. “Your color looks a little off, Harry,” the old wizard said. He peered closely at Harry’s face. “What did you have for lunch today?”

“What?” Harry said, his mind wobbling in sudden confusion. Why would Dumbledore be asking about deep-fried lamb and thin-sliced broccoli when that was just about the *last* probable cause of —

The old wizard straightened up. “Never mind, then. I think you’re fine.”

Professor Quirrell coughed, loudly and deliberately. Harry looked at the professor, and saw that Professor Quirrell was staring sharply at Dumbledore.

“Ah-hem!” Professor Quirrell said again.

Dumbledore and Professor Quirrell locked eyes, and something seemed to pass between them.

“If you don’t tell him,” Professor Quirrell said then, “I will, even if you

fire me for it.”

Dumbledore sighed and turned back to Harry. “I apologize for invading your mental privacy, Mr. Potter,” the Headmaster said formally. “I had no purpose except to determine if Professor Quirrell had done the same.”

What?

The confusion lasted just exactly as long as it took Harry to understand what had just happened.

“You — !”

“Gently, Mr. Potter,” said Professor Quirrell. His face was hard, however, as he stared at Dumbledore.

“Legilimency is sometimes mistaken for common sense,” said the Headmaster. “But it leaves traces which another skillful Legilimens can detect. That was all I looked for, Mr. Potter, and I asked you an irrelevant question to ensure you wouldn’t think about anything important while I looked.”

“You should have asked first!”

Professor Quirrell shook his head. “No, Mr. Potter, the Headmaster had some justification for his concerns, and had he asked for permission you would have thought of exactly those things you did not wish him to see.” Professor Quirrell’s voice grew sharper. “I am rather more concerned, Headmaster, that you saw no need to tell him afterward!”

“You have now made it more difficult to confirm his mental privacy on future occasions,” Dumbledore said. He favored Professor Quirrell with a cold look. “Was that your intention, I wonder?”

Professor Quirrell’s expression was implacable. “There are too many Legilimens in this school. I insist that Mr. Potter receive instruction in Occlumency. Will you permit me to be his tutor?”

“Absolutely not,” Dumbledore said at once.

“I did not think so. Then since *you* have deprived him of my free services, *you* will pay for Mr. Potter’s tutoring by a licensed Occlumency instructor.”

“Such services do not come cheaply,” Dumbledore said, looking at Professor Quirrell in some surprise. “Although I do have certain connections —”

Professor Quirrell shook his head firmly. “No. Mr. Potter will ask his account manager at Gringotts to recommend a neutral instructor. With respect, Headmaster Dumbledore, after the events of this morning I must protest you or your friends having access to Mr. Potter’s mind. I must also insist that the instructor have taken an Unbreakable Vow to reveal nothing, and that he agree

to be Obliviated of each session immediately afterward.”

Dumbledore was frowning. “Such services are *extremely* expensive, as you well know, and I cannot help but wonder why *you* deem them necessary.”

“If it’s money that’s the problem,” Harry spoke up, “I have some ideas for making large amounts of money quickly —”

“Thank you Quirinus, your wisdom is now quite evident and I am sorry for disputing it. Your concern for Harry Potter does you credit, as well.”

“You’re welcome,” said Professor Quirrell. “I hope you will not object if I go on making him a particular focus of my attentions.” Professor Quirrell’s face was now very serious, and very still.

Dumbledore looked at Harry.

“It is my own wish also,” Harry said.

“So that’s how it is to be . . .” the old wizard said slowly. Something strange passed across his face. “Harry . . . you must realize that if you choose this man as your teacher and your friend, your first mentor, then one way or another you will lose him, and the manner in which you lose him may or may not allow you to ever get him back.”

That hadn’t occurred to Harry. But there *was* that jinx on the Defense position . . . one which had apparently worked with perfect regularity for decades . . .

“Probably,” said Professor Quirrell quietly, “but he will have the full use of me while I last.”

Dumbledore sighed. “I suppose it is economical, at least, since as the Defense Professor you’re *already* doomed in some unknown fashion.”

Harry had to work hard to suppress his expression as he realized what Dumbledore had actually been implying.

“I will inform Madam Pince that Mr. Potter is allowed to obtain books on Occlumency,” said Dumbledore.

“There is preliminary training which you must do on your own,” said Professor Quirrell to Harry. “And I do suggest that you hurry up on it.”

Harry nodded.

“I’ll take my leave of you then,” said Dumbledore. He nodded to both Harry and Professor Quirrell, and departed, walking a bit slowly.

“Can you cast the spell again?” Harry said the moment Dumbledore was gone.

“Not today,” said Professor Quirrell quietly, “and not tomorrow either,

I'm afraid. It takes a lot out of me to cast, though less to keep going, and so I usually prefer to maintain it as long as possible. This time I cast it on impulse. Had I thought, and realized we might be interrupted —"

Dumbledore was now Harry's least favorite person in the entire world.

They both sighed.

"Even if I only ever see it once," Harry said, "I will never stop being grateful to you."

Professor Quirrell nodded.

"Have you heard of the Pioneer program?" Harry said. "They were probes that would fly by different planets and take pictures. Two of the probes would end up on trajectories that took them out of the Solar System and into interstellar space. So they put a golden plaque on the probes, with a picture of a man, and a woman, and showing where to find our Sun in the galaxy."

Professor Quirrell was silent for a moment, then smiled. "Tell me, Mr. Potter, can you guess what thought went through my mind when I finished assembling the thirty-seven items on the list of things I would never do as a Dark Lord? Put yourself in my shoes — imagine yourself in my place — and guess."

Harry imagined himself looking over a list of thirty-seven things not to do once he became a Dark Lord.

"You decided that if you had to follow the *whole* list *all* the time, there wouldn't be much point in becoming a Dark Lord in the first place," Harry said.

"*Precisely*," said Professor Quirrell. He was grinning. "So I am going to violate rule two — which was simply 'don't brag' — and tell you about something I have done. I don't see how the knowledge could do any harm. And I strongly suspect you would have figured it out anyway, once we knew each other well enough. Nonetheless . . . I shall have your oath never to speak of what I am about to tell."

"You have it!" Harry had a feeling this was going to be *really* good.

"I subscribe to a Muggle bulletin which keeps me informed of progress on space travel. I didn't hear about Pioneer 10 until they reported its launch. But when I discovered that Pioneer 11 would also be leaving the Solar System forever," Professor Quirrell said, his grin the widest that Harry had yet seen from him, "I snuck into NASA, I did, and I cast a lovely little spell on that lovely golden plaque which will make it last a lot longer than it otherwise

would.”

...

...

...

“Yes,” Professor Quirrell said, who now seemed to be standing around fifty feet taller, “I thought that was how you might react.”

...

...

...

“Mr. Potter?”

“... I can’t think of anything to say.”

“‘You win’ seems appropriate,” said Professor Quirrell.

“You win,” Harry said immediately.

“See?” said Professor Quirrell. “We can only imagine what giant heap of trouble you would have gotten into if you had been unable to say that.”

They both laughed.

A further thought occurred to Harry. “You didn’t add any extra information to the plaque, did you?”

“Extra information?” said Professor Quirrell, sounding as if the idea had never occurred to him before and he was quite intrigued.

Which made Harry rather suspicious, considering that it’d taken less than a minute for *Harry* to think of it.

“Maybe you included a holographic message like in *Star Wars*?” said Harry. “Or... hm. A portrait seems to store a whole human brain’s worth of information... you couldn’t have added any extra mass to the probe, but maybe you could’ve turned an existing part into a portrait of yourself? Or you found a volunteer dying of a terminal illness, snuck them into NASA, and cast a spell to make sure their *ghost* ended up in the plaque —”

“Mr. Potter,” Professor Quirrell said, his voice suddenly sharp, “a spell requiring a human death would certainly be classified by the Ministry as Dark Arts, regardless of circumstances. Students should not be heard talking about such things.”

And the amazing thing about the way Professor Quirrell said it was how perfectly it maintained plausible deniability. It had been said in exactly the appropriate tone for someone who wasn’t willing to discuss such things and thought students should steer away from them. Harry honestly *didn’t know*

whether Professor Quirrell was just waiting to talk about it until after Harry had learned to protect his mind.

"Got it," Harry said. "I won't talk with anyone else about that idea."

"Please be discreet about the whole matter, Mr. Potter," Professor Quirrell said. "I prefer to go through my life without attracting public notice. You will find nothing in the newspapers about Quirinus Quirrell until I decided it was time for me to teach Defense at Hogwarts."

That seemed a little sad, but Harry understood. Then Harry realized the implications. "So just how much awesome stuff *have* you done that no one else knows about —"

"Oh, some," said Professor Quirrell. "But I think that's quite enough for today, Mr. Potter, I confess I am feeling a bit tired —"

"I understand. And *thank you*. For *everything*."

Professor Quirrell nodded, but he was leaning harder on his desk.

Harry quickly took his leave.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Hermione Granger had worried she was turning Bad.

The difference between Good and Bad was usually easy to grasp, she'd never understood why other people had so much trouble. At Hogwarts, "Good" was Professor Flitwick and Professor McGonagall and Professor Sprout. "Bad" was Professor Snape and Professor Quirrell and Draco Malfoy. Harry Potter . . . was one of those unusual cases where you *couldn't* tell just by looking. She was still trying to figure out where he belonged.

But when it came to *herself* . . .

Hermione was having *too much fun* crushing Harry Potter.

She'd done better than him in every single class they'd taken. (Except for broomstick riding which was like gym class, it didn't count.) She'd gotten *real* House points almost every day of their first week, not for weird heroic things, but *smart* things like learning spells quickly and helping other students. She knew those kinds of House points were better, and the best part was, Harry Potter knew it too. She could see it in his eyes every time she won another *real* House point.

If you were Good, you weren't supposed to enjoy winning this much.

It had started on the day of the train ride, though it had taken a while for the whirlwind to sink in. It wasn't until later that night that Hermione had begun to realize just *how much* she'd let that boy walk all over her.

Before she'd met Harry Potter she hadn't had anyone she'd wanted to crush. If someone wasn't doing as well as her in class, it was her job to help them, not rub it in. That was what it meant to be Good.

And now . . .

. . . now she was *winning*, Harry Potter was flinching every time she got another House point, and it was *so much* fun, her parents had warned her against drugs and she suspected this was *more fun* than that.

She'd always liked the smiles that teachers gave her when she did something right. She'd always liked seeing the long row of check-marks on a perfectly answered test. But now when she did well in class she would casually glance around and catch a glimpse of Harry Potter gritting his teeth, and it made her want to burst into song like a Disney movie.

That was Bad, wasn't it?

Hermione had worried she was turning Bad.

And then a thought had come to her which wiped away all her fears.

She and Harry were getting into a Romance! Of course! Everyone knew what it meant when a boy and a girl started fighting all the time. They were *courting* one another! There was nothing Bad about *that*.

It couldn't be that she just *enjoyed* beating the living scholastic daylights out of the most famous student in the school, someone who was *in* books and *talked* like books, the boy who had somehow vanquished the Dark Lord and even smushed *Professor Snape* like a sad little bug, the boy who was, as Professor Quirrell would have put it, dominant, over everyone else in first-year Ravenclaw *except* for Hermione Granger who was utterly *squishing* the Boy-Who-Lived in all his classes besides broomstick riding.

Because that would have been Bad.

No. It was Romance. *That* was it. *That* was why they were fighting.

Hermione was glad she had figured this out in time for today, when Harry would lose their book-reading contest, which the *whole school* knew about, and she wanted to start *dancing* with the sheer overflowing joy of it.

It was 2:45 PM on Saturday and Harry Potter had half of Bathilda Bagshot's *A History of Magic* left to read and she was staring at her pocket watch as it ticked with dreadful slowness toward 2:47 PM.

And the entire Ravenclaw common room was watching.

It wasn't just the first-years, news had spread like spilled milk and fully half of Ravenclaw was crowded into the room, squeezed into sofas and leaning on

bookcases and sitting on the arms of chairs. All six prefects were there including the Head Girl of Hogwarts. Someone had needed to cast an Air-Freshening Charm just so that there would be enough oxygen. And the din of conversation had died into whispers which had now faded into utter silence.

2:46 PM.

The tension was unbearable. If it had been anyone else, *anyone* else, his defeat would have been a foregone conclusion.

But this was Harry Potter, and you couldn't rule out the possibility that he would, sometime in the next few seconds, raise a hand and snap his fingers.

With sudden terror she realized how Harry Potter might be able to do exactly that. It would be *just like him* to have *already finished reading* the second half of the book earlier . . .

Hermione's vision began to swim. She tried to make herself breathe, and found that she simply couldn't.

Ten seconds left, and he still hadn't raised his hand.

Five seconds left.

2:47 PM.

Harry Potter carefully placed a bookmark into his book, closed it, and laid it aside.

"I would like to note for the benefit of posterity," said the Boy-Who-Lived in a clear voice, "that I had only half a book left, and that I ran into a number of unexpected delays —"

"*You lost!*" shrieked Hermione. "*You did! You lost our contest!*"

There was a collective exhalation as everyone started breathing again.

Harry Potter shot her a Look of Flaming Fire, but she was floating in a halo of pure white happiness and nothing could touch her.

"*Do you realize what kind of week I've had?*" said Harry Potter. "Any lesser being would have been hard-pressed to read eight Dr. Seuss books!"

"*You set the time limit.*"

Harry's Look of Flaming Fire grew even hotter. "I did not have any logical way of knowing I'd have to save the entire school from Professor Snape, or get beaten up in Defense class, and if I told you how I lost all the time between 5 PM and dinner on Thursday you would think I was insane —"

"Awww, it sounds like *someone* fell prey to the *planning fallacy*."

Raw shock showed on Harry Potter's face.

"Oh that reminds me, I finished reading the first batch of books you lent

me,” Hermione said with her best innocent look. A couple of them had been *hard* books, too. She wondered how long it had taken *him* to finish reading them.

“Someday,” said the Boy-Who-Lived, “when the distant descendants of *Homo sapiens* are looking back over the history of the galaxy and wondering how it all went so wrong, they will conclude that the original mistake was when someone taught Hermione Granger how to read.”

“But you still lose,” said Hermione. She held a hand to her chin and looked contemplative. “Now what exactly should you lose, I wonder?”

“*What?*”

“You lost the bet,” Hermione explained, “so you have to pay a forfeit.”

“I don’t remember agreeing to this!”

“Really?” said Hermione Granger. She put a thoughtful look on her face. Then, as if the idea had only just then occurred to her, “We’ll take a vote, then. Everyone in Ravenclaw who thinks Harry Potter has to pay up, raise your hand!”

“*What?*” shrieked Harry Potter again.

He spun around and saw that he was surrounded by a sea of raised hands.

And if Harry Potter had looked *more carefully*, he would have noticed that an awful lot of the onlookers seemed to be girls and that practically every female in the room had their hand raised.

“Stop!” wailed Harry Potter. “You don’t know what she’s going to ask! Don’t you *realize* what she’s doing? She’s getting you to make an advance commitment now, and then the pressure of consistency will make you agree with whatever she says afterward!”

“Don’t worry,” said the prefect Penelope Clearwater. “If she asks for something unreasonable, we can just change our minds. Right, everyone?”

And there were eager nods from all the girls whom Penelope Clearwater had told about Hermione’s plan.



A silent figure quietly slipped through the chilled halls of the Hogwarts dungeons. He was to be present in a certain room at 6:00 PM to meet a certain someone, and if at all possible it was best to be early, to show respect.

But when his hand turned the doorknob and opened the door into that

dark, silent, unused classroom, there was a silhouette already standing there amid the rows of dusty old desks. A silhouette which held a small green glowing rod, casting a pale light which hardly illuminated even he who held it, let alone the surrounding room.

The light of the hallway died as the door closed and shut behind him, and Draco's eyes began the process of adjusting to the dim glow.

The silhouette slowly turned to behold him, revealing a shadowed face only partially lit by the eerie green light.

Draco liked this meeting already. Keep the chill green light, make them both taller, give them hoods and masks, move them from a classroom to a graveyard, and it would be just like the start of half the stories his father's friends told about the Death Eaters.

"I want you to know, Draco Malfoy," said the silhouette in tones of deadly calm, "that I do not blame you for my recent defeat."

Draco opened his mouth in unthinking protest, there was no possible reason why he *should* be blamed —

"It was due, more than anything else, to my own stupidity," continued that shadowy figure. "There were many other things I could have done, at any step along the way. You did not ask me to do *exactly* what I did. You only asked for help. I was the one who unwisely chose that particular method. But the fact remains that I lost the contest by half a book. The actions of your pet idiot, and the favor you asked for, and, yes, my own foolishness in going about it, caused me to *lose time*. More time than you know. Time which, in the end, proved critical. The fact remains, Draco Malfoy, that if you had not asked that favor, I *would* have won. And not . . . instead . . . *lost*."

Draco had already heard about Harry's loss, and the forfeit Granger had claimed from him. The news had spread faster than owls could have carried it.

"I understand," Draco said. "I'm sorry." There was nothing else he *could* say if he wanted Harry Potter to be friends with him.

"I am not asking for understanding or sorrow," said the dark silhouette, still with that deadly calm. "But I have just spent two full hours in the presence of Hermione Granger, dressed in such clothing as was provided me, visiting such fascinating places in Hogwarts as a tiny burbling waterfall of what looked to me like snot, accompanied by a number of other girls who insisted on such helpful activities as strewing our path with Transfigured rose petals. I have been on a date, scion of Malfoy. My *first* date. And *when I call that favor due*,

you will pay it.”

Draco nodded solemnly. Before arriving he had taken the wise precaution of learning every available detail of Harry’s date, so that he could get all of his hysterical laughing done before their appointed meeting time, and would not commit a *faux pas* by giggling continuously until he lost consciousness.

“Do you think,” Draco said, “that something sad ought to happen to the Granger girl —”

“Spread the word in Slytherin that the Granger girl is *mine* and anyone who meddles in *my* affairs will have their remains scattered over an area wide enough to include twelve different spoken languages. And since I am not in Gryffindor and I use *cunning* rather than immediate frontal attacks, they should not panic if I am seen smiling at her.”

“Or if you’re seen on a second date?” Draco said, allowing just a tiny note of skepticism into his voice.

“*There will be no second date,*” said the green-lit silhouette in a voice so fearsome that it sounded, not only like a Death Eater, but like Amycus Carrow that one time just before Father told him to stop it, he wasn’t the Dark Lord.

Of course it *was* still a young boy’s high unbroken voice and when you combined that with the *actual words*, well, it just didn’t work. If Harry Potter *did* become the next Dark Lord someday, Draco would use a Pensieve to store a copy of this memory somewhere safe, and Harry Potter would never dare betray him.

“But let us talk of happier matters,” said the green-shadowed figure. “Let us talk of knowledge and of power. Draco Malfoy, let us talk of Science.”

“Yes,” said Draco. “Let us speak.”

Draco wondered how much of his own face could be seen, and how much was in shadow, in that eerie green light.

And though Draco kept his face serious, there was a smile in his heart.

He was *finally* having a real grownup conversation.

“I offer you power,” said the shadowy figure, “and I will tell you of that power and its price. The power comes from knowing the shape of reality and so gaining control over it. What you understand, you can command, and that is power enough to walk upon the Moon. The price of that power is that you must learn to ask questions of Nature, and far more difficult, accept Nature’s answers. You will do experiments, perform tests and see what happens. And you must accept the meaning of those results when they tell you that you are

mistaken. You will have to *learn how to lose*, not to me, but to Nature. When you find yourself arguing with reality, you will have to let reality win. You will find this painful, Draco Malfoy, and I do not know if you are strong in that way. Knowing the price, is it still your wish to learn the human power?"

Draco took a deep breath. He'd thought about this. And it was hard to see how he could answer any other way. He'd been instructed to take every avenue of friendship with Harry Potter. It was just *learning*, he wasn't promising to *do* anything. He could always stop the lessons at any time . . .

There were certainly any number of things about the situation which made it look like a trap, but in all honesty, Draco didn't see how this could go wrong.

Plus Draco did kind of want to rule the world.

"Yes," said Draco.

"Excellent," said the shadowy figure. "I have had something of a *crowded week*, and it will take time to plan your curriculum —"

"I've got a lot of things I need to do myself to consolidate my power in Slytherin," said Draco, "not to mention homework. Maybe we should just start in October?"

"Sounds sensible," said the shadowy figure, "but what I meant to say is that to plan your curriculum, I need to know what I will be teaching you. Three thoughts come to me. The first is that I teach you of the human mind and brain. The second option is that I teach you of the physical universe, those arts which lie on the pathway to visiting the Moon. This involves a great deal of numbers, but to a certain kind of mind those numbers are more beautiful than anything else Science has to teach. Do you like numbers, Draco?"

Draco shook his head.

"Then so much for that. You will learn your mathematics eventually, but not right away, I think. The third option is that I teach you of genetics and evolution and inheritance, what you would call blood —"

"That one," said Draco.

The figure nodded. "I thought you might say as much. But I think it will be the most painful path for you, Draco. What if your family and friends, the blood purists, say one thing, and you find that the experimental test says another?"

"Then I'll figure out how to make the experimental test say the *right* answer!"

There was a pause, as the shadowy figure stood there with its mouth open

for a short while.

“Um,” said the shadowy figure. “It doesn’t really work like that. That’s what I was trying to warn you about here, Draco. You *can’t* make the answer come out to be anything you like.”

“You can *always* make the answer come out your way,” said Draco. That had been practically the first thing his tutors had taught him. “It’s just a matter of finding the right arguments.”

“No,” said the shadowy figure, voice rising in frustration, “no, no, no! Then you get the *wrong answer* and you can’t go to the Moon that way! Nature isn’t a person, you can’t trick them into believing something else, if you try to tell the Moon it’s made of cheese you can argue for days and it won’t change the Moon! What you’re talking about is *rationalization*, like starting with a sheet of paper, moving straight down to the bottom line, using ink to write ‘and *therefore*, the Moon is made of cheese’, and then moving back up to write all sorts of clever arguments above. But either the Moon is made of cheese or it isn’t. The moment you wrote the bottom line, it was already true or already false. Whether or not the whole sheet of paper ends up with the right conclusion or the wrong conclusion is fixed the instant you write down the bottom line. If you’re trying to pick between two expensive trunks, and you like the shiny one, it doesn’t matter what clever arguments you come up with for buying it, the *real* rule you used to *choose which trunk to argue for* was ‘pick the shiny one’, and however effective that rule is at picking good trunks, that’s the kind of trunk you’ll get. Rationality *can’t* be used to argue for a fixed side, its only possible use is *deciding which side to argue*. Science isn’t for *convincing* anyone that the blood purists are right. That’s *politics!* The power of science comes from *finding out the way Nature really is that can’t be changed by arguing!* What science *can* do is tell us *how blood really works*, how wizards really inherit their powers from their parents, and whether Muggleborns are really weaker or stronger —”

“*Stronger!*” said Draco. He had been trying to follow this, a puzzled frown on his face, he could see how it *sort of* made sense but it certainly wasn’t like anything he’d ever heard before. And then Harry Potter had said something Draco couldn’t possibly let pass. “You think Mudbloods are *stronger?*”

“I think nothing,” said the shadowy figure. “I know nothing. I believe nothing. My bottom line is not yet written. I will figure out how to test the magical strength of Muggleborns, and the magical strength of purebloods. If

my tests tell me that Muggleborns are weaker, I will believe they are weaker. If my tests tell me that Muggleborns are stronger, I will believe they are stronger. Knowing this and other truths, I will gain some measure of power —”

“And you expect *me* to believe whatever you say?” Draco demanded hotly.

“I expect you to perform the tests *personally*,” said the shadowy figure quietly. “Are you afraid of what *you* will find?”

Draco stared at the shadowy figure for a while, his eyes narrowed. “Nice trap, Harry,” he said. “I’ll have to remember that one, it’s new.”

The shadowy figure shook his head. “It’s not a trap, Draco. Remember — I *don’t know* what we’ll find. But you do not understand the universe by arguing with it or telling it to come back with a different answer next time. When you put on the robes of a scientist you must forget all your politics and arguments and factions and sides, silence the desperate clings of your mind, and wish only to hear the answer of Nature.” The shadowy figure paused. “Most people can’t do it. That’s why this is difficult. Are you sure you wouldn’t rather just learn about the brain?”

“And if I tell you I’d rather learn about the brain,” Draco said, his voice now hard, “you’ll go around telling people that I was afraid of what I’d find.”

“No,” said the shadowy figure. “I will do no such thing.”

“But you might do the same sort of tests yourself, and if you got the wrong answer, I wouldn’t be there to say anything before you showed it to someone else.” Draco’s voice was still hard.

“I would still ask you first, Draco,” the shadowy figure said quietly.

Draco paused. He hadn’t been expecting that, he’d thought he saw the trap but . . . “You *would*?”

“Of course. How would *I* know who to blackmail or what we could ask from them? Draco, I say again that this is not a trap I set for you. At least not for you personally. If your politics were different, I would be saying, what if the test shows that purebloods are stronger.”

“Really.”

“*Yes!* That’s the price *anyone* has to pay to become a scientist!”

Draco held up a hand. He had to think.

The shadowy, green-lit figure waited.

It didn’t take long to think about, though. If you discarded all the confusing parts . . . then Harry Potter was planning to mess around with something that could cause a gigantic political explosion, and it would be insane to just walk

away and let him do it on his own. “We’ll study blood,” said Draco.

“*Excellent*,” said the figure, and smiled. “Congratulations on being willing to ask the question.”

“Thanks,” Draco said, not quite managing to keep the irony out of his voice.

“Hey, did you think going to the Moon was *easy*? Be glad this just involves changing your mind sometimes, and not a human sacrifice!”

“Human sacrifice would be *way* easier!”

There was a slight pause, and then the figure nodded. “Fair point.”

“Look, Harry,” said Draco without much hope, “I thought the idea was to take all the things that Muggles know, combine them with things that wizards know, and become masters of both worlds. Wouldn’t it be a lot easier to just study all the things that Muggles *already* found out, like the Moon stuff, and use *that* power —”

“No,” said the figure with a sharp shake of his head, sending green shadows moving around his nose and eyes. His voice had turned very grim. “If you cannot learn the scientist’s art of accepting reality, then I *must not* tell you what that acceptance has discovered. It would be like a powerful wizard telling you of those gates which must not be opened, and those seals which must not be broken, before you had proven your intelligence and discipline by surviving the lesser perils.”

A chill went down Draco’s spine and he shuddered involuntarily. He knew it had been visible even in the dim light. “All right,” said Draco. “I understand.” Father had told him that many times. When a more powerful wizard told you that you weren’t ready to know, you didn’t pry any further if you wanted to live.

The figure inclined his head. “Indeed. But there is something else you should understand. The first scientists, being Muggles, lacked your traditions. In the beginning they simply did not comprehend the notion of dangerous knowledge, and thought that all things known should be spoken freely. When their searches turned dangerous, they told their politicians of things that should have stayed secret — don’t look like that, Draco, it wasn’t simple stupidity. They did have to be smart enough to uncover the secret in the first place. But they were Muggles, it was the first time they’d found anything *really* dangerous, and they didn’t *start out* with a tradition of secrecy. There was a war going on, and the scientists on one side worried that if they *didn’t* talk, the scientists of

the *enemy* country would tell *their* politicians first . . .” The voice trailed off significantly. “They didn’t destroy the world. But it was close. And *we* are not going to repeat that mistake.”

“Right,” Draco said, his voice now very firm. “We won’t. We’re wizards, and studying science doesn’t make us Muggles.”

“As you say,” said the green-lit silhouette. “We will establish our *own* Science, a magical Science, and that Science will have smarter traditions from the very start.” The voice grew hard. “The knowledge I share with you will be taught alongside the disciplines of accepting truth, the level of this knowledge will be keyed to your progress in those disciplines, and you will share that knowledge with no one else who has not learned those disciplines. Do you accept this?”

“Yes,” said Draco. What was he supposed to do, say no?

“Good. And what you discover for yourself, you will keep to yourself unless you think that other scientists are ready to know it. What we do share among ourselves, we will not tell the world unless we agree it is safe for the world to know. And whatever our own politics and allegiances, we will *all* punish *any* of our number who reveal dangerous magics or give away dangerous weapons, no matter what sort of war is going on. From this day onward, that will be the tradition and the law of science among wizards. Are we agreed on that?”

“Yes,” said Draco. Actually this *was* starting to sound pretty attractive. The Death Eaters had tried to take power by being scarier than everyone else, and they hadn’t actually won yet. Maybe it was time to try ruling using secrets instead. “And our group stays hidden for as long as possible, and everyone in it has to agree to our rules.”

“Of course. Definitely.”

There was a very short pause.

“We’re going to need better robes,” said the shadowy figure, “with hoods and so on —”

“I was *just thinking* that,” said Draco. “We don’t need whole new robes, though, just cowed cloaks to put on. I have a friend in Slytherin, she’ll take your measurements —”

“Don’t tell her what it’s *for*, though —”

“I’m not *stupid!*”

“And no masks for now, not when it’s just you and me —” said the shadowy

figure.

“Right! But later on we should have some sort of special mark that all our servants have, the Mark of Science, like a snake eating the Moon on their right arms —”

“It’s called a PhD and wouldn’t that make it too easy to identify our people?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, what if someone is like ‘okay, now everyone pull up their robes over their right arms’ and our guy is like ‘whoops, sorry, looks like I’m a spy’ —”

“*Forget I said anything*,” said Draco, sweat suddenly springing out all over his body. He needed a distraction, *fast* — “And what do we call ourselves? The Science Eaters?”

“No,” said the shadowy figure slowly. “That doesn’t sound right . . .”

Draco wiped his robed arm across his forehead, wiping away beads of moisture. What had the Dark Lord been *thinking*? Father had said the Dark Lord was *smart*!

“I’ve got it!” said the shadowy figure suddenly. “You won’t understand yet, but trust me, it fits.”

Right now Draco would have accepted ‘Malfoy Munchers’ as long as it changed the subject. “What is it?”

And standing amid the dusty desks in an unused classroom in the dungeons of Hogwarts, the green-lit silhouette of Harry Potter spread his arms dramatically and said, “This day shall mark the dawn of . . . the *Bayesian Conspiracy*.”



A silent figure trudged wearily through the halls of Hogwarts in the direction of Ravenclaw.

Harry had gone straight from the meeting with Draco to dinner, and stayed at dinner barely long enough to choke down a few fast gulps of food before going off to bed.

It wasn’t even 7 PM yet, but it was well past bedtime for Harry. He’d realized *last* night that he wouldn’t be able to use the Time-Turner on Saturday until after the book-reading contest was already over. But he could still use the Time-Turner on *Friday* night, and gain time that way. So Harry had pushed

himself to stay awake until 9 PM on Friday, when the protective shell opened, and then used the four hours remaining on the Time-Turner to spin back to 5 PM and collapse into sleep. He'd woken up around 2 AM on Saturday morning, just as planned, and read for the next twelve hours straight . . . and it still hadn't been enough. And now Harry would be going to sleep rather early for the next few days, until his sleep cycle caught up again.

The portrait on the door asked Harry some dumb riddle meant for eleven-year-olds that he answered without the words even passing through his conscious mind, and then Harry staggered up the stairs to his dorm room, changed into his pajamas and collapsed into bed.

And found that his pillow seemed rather lumpy.

Harry groaned. He sat up reluctantly, twisted in bed, and lifted up his pillow.

This revealed a note, two golden Galleons, and a book titled *Occlumency: The Hidden Arte*.

Harry picked up the note and read:

My, you do get yourself into trouble and quickly. Your father was no match for you.

You have made a powerful enemy. Snape commands the loyalty, admiration, and fear of all House Slytherin. You cannot trust any of that House now, whether they come to you in friendly guise or fearsome.

From now on you must not meet Snape's eyes. He is a Legilimens and can read your mind if you do. I have enclosed a book which may help you learn to protect yourself, though there is only so far you can get without a tutor. Still you may hope to at least detect intrusion.

So that you may find some extra time in which to study Occlumency, I have enclosed 2 Galleons, which is the price of answer sheets and homework for the first-year History of Magic class (Professor Binns having given the same tests and same assignments every year since he died). Your newfound friends the Weasley twins should be able to sell you a copy. It goes without saying that you must not get caught with it in your possession.

Of Professor Quirrell I know little. He is a Slytherin and a Defense Professor, and that is two marks against him. Consider carefully any advice he gives you, and tell him nothing you do not wish known.

Dumbledore only pretends to be insane. He is extremely intelligent,

and if you continue to step into closets and vanish, he will certainly deduce your possession of an invisibility cloak if he has not done so already. Avoid him whenever possible, hide the Cloak of Invisibility somewhere safe (NOT your pouch) any time you cannot avoid him, and step with great care in his presence.

Please be more careful in the future, Harry Potter.

— Santa Claus

Harry stared at the note.

It *did* seem to be pretty good advice. Of course Harry wasn't going to cheat in History class even if they gave him a dead monkey for a professor. But Severus's Legilimency . . . whoever'd sent this note knew a lot of important, secret things and was willing to tell Harry about them. The note was still warning him against Dumbledore stealing the Cloak but at this point Harry honestly had no clue if that was a bad sign, it could just be an understandable mistake.

There seemed to be some sort of intrigue going on inside Hogwarts. Maybe if Harry *compared stories* between Dumbledore and the note-sender, he could work out a *combined* picture that would be accurate? Like if they *both* agreed on something, then . . .

. . . whatever . . .

Harry stuffed everything into his pouch and turned up the Quieter and pulled the cover over his head and died.



It was Sunday morning and Harry was eating pancakes in the Great Hall, sharp quick bites, glancing nervously at his watch every few seconds.

It was 8:02 AM, and in precisely two hours and one minute, it would be *exactly one week* since he'd seen the Weasleys and crossed over onto Platform Nine and Three-Quarters.

And the thought had occurred to him . . . Harry didn't know if this was a valid way to think about the universe, he didn't know anything any more, but it *seemed possible* . . .

That . . .

Not enough interesting things had happened to him over the last week.

When he was done eating breakfast, Harry planned to go straight up to his room and hide in the bottom level of his trunk and not talk to anyone until 10:03 AM.

And that was when Harry saw the Weasley twins walking toward him. One of them was carrying something concealed behind his back.

He should scream and run away.

He should scream and run away.

Whatever this was . . . it could very well be . . .

. . . the *grand finale* . . .

He really should just scream and run away.

With a resigned feeling that the universe would come and get him *anyway*, Harry continued slicing at the pancake with his fork and knife. He couldn't muster the energy. That was the sad truth. Harry knew now how people felt when they were tired of running, tired of trying to escape fate, and they just fell to the ground and let the horrifically fanged and tentacled demons of the darkest abyss drag them off to their unspeakable destiny.

The Weasley twins drew closer.

And yet closer.

Harry ate another bite of pancake.

The Weasley twins arrived, grinning brightly.

"Hello, Fred," Harry said dully. One of the twins nodded. "Hello, George." The other twin nodded.

"You sound tired," said George.

"You should cheer up," said Fred.

"Look what *we* got you!"

And George took, from behind Fred's back —

A cake with twelve flaming candles.

There was a pause, as the Ravenclaw table stared at them.

"That's not right," said someone. "Harry Potter was born on the thirty-first of Jul —"

"HE IS COMING," said a huge hollow voice that cut through all conversation like a sword of ice. "THE ONE WHO WILL TEAR APART THE VERY —"

Dumbledore had leapt out of his throne and run straight over the Head Table and seized hold of the woman speaking those awful words, Fawkes had appeared in a flash, and all three of them vanished in a crack of fire.

There was a shocked pause . . .

... followed by heads turning in the direction of Harry Potter.

"I didn't do it," Harry said in a tired voice.

"That was a *prophecy!*" someone at the table hissed. "And I bet it's about *you!*"

Harry sighed.

He stood up from his seat, raised his voice, and said very loudly over the conversations that were starting up, "*It's not about me! Obviously! I'm not coming here, I'm already here!*"

Harry sat back down again.

The people who had been looking at him turned away again.

Someone else at the table said, "Then who *is* it about?"

And with a dull, leaden sensation, Harry realized who *wasn't* already at Hogwarts.

Call it a wild guess, but Harry had a feeling the undead Dark Lord would be showing up one of these days.

The conversation continued on around him.

"Not to mention, tear apart the very *what?*"

"I thought I heard Trelawney start to say something with an 'S' just before the Headmaster grabbed her."

"Like... soul? Sun?"

"If someone's going to tear apart the Sun we're *really* in trouble!"

That seemed rather unlikely to Harry, unless the world contained scary things which had heard of David Criswell's ideas about star lifting.

"So," Harry said in tired tones, "this happens every Sunday breakfast, does it?"

"No," said a student who might have been in his seventh year, frowning grimly. "It doesn't."

Harry shrugged. "Whatever. Anyone want some birthday cake?"

"But it's *not* your birthday!" said the same student who'd objected last time.

That was the cue for Fred and George to start laughing, of course.

Even Harry managed a weary smile.

As the first slice was served to him, Harry said, "I've had a *really long week.*"



And Harry was sitting in the cavern level of his trunk, slid shut and locked so no one could get in, a blanket pulled over his head, waiting for the week to be over.

10:01.

10:02.

10:03, but just to be sure . . .

10:04 and the first week was done.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief, and gingerly pulled the blanket off of his head.

A few moments later, he had emerged into the bright sunlit air of his dorm.

Shortly after, and he was in the Ravenclaw common room. A few people looked at him, but no one said anything or tried to talk to him.

Harry found a nice wide writing desk, pulled back a comfortable chair, and sat down. From his pouch he drew a sheet of paper and a pencil.

Mum and Dad had told Harry in no uncertain terms that while they understood his enthusiasm for leaving home and getting away from his parents, he was to write them *every week without fail*, just so that they knew he was alive, unharmed, and not in prison.

Harry stared down at the blank sheet of paper. *Let's see . . .*

After leaving his parents at the train station, he'd . . .

. . . gotten acquainted with a boy raised by Darth Vader, become friends with the three most infamous pranksters in Hogwarts, met Hermione, then there'd been the Incident with the Sorting Hat . . . Monday he'd been given a time machine to treat his sleep disorder, gotten a legendary invisibility cloak from an unknown benefactor, rescued seven Hufflepuffs by staring down five scary older boys one of whom had threatened to break his finger, realized that he possessed a mysterious dark side, learned to cast *Frigideiro* in Charms class, and gotten started on his rivalry with Hermione . . . Tuesday had introduced Astronomy taught by Professor Aurora Sinistra who was nice, and History of Magic taught by a ghost who ought to be exorcised and replaced with a tape recorder . . . Wednesday, he'd been pronounced the Most Dangerous Student in the Classroom . . . Thursday, let's not even think about Thursday . . . Friday, the Incident in Potions Class, followed by his blackmailing the Headmaster, followed by the Defense Professor having him beaten up in class, followed by the Defense Professor turning out to be the most awesome human being who still walked the face of the Earth . . . Saturday he'd lost a bet and gone on his

first date and started redeeming Draco . . . and then this morning Professor Trelawney's unheard prophecy might or might not indicate that an immortal Dark Lord was about to attack Hogwarts.

Harry mentally organized his material, and started writing.

Dear Mum and Dad:

Hogwarts is lots of fun. I learned how to violate the Second Law of Thermodynamics in Charms class, and I met a girl named Hermione Granger who reads faster than I do.

I'd better leave it at that.

Your loving son,

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



A small study room, near but not in the Ravenclaw dorm, one of the many many unused rooms of Hogwarts. Grey stone the floors, red brick the walls, dark stained wood the ceiling, four glowing glass globes set into the four walls of the room. A circular table that looked like a wide slab of black marble set on thick black marble legs for columns, but which had proved to be very light (weight and mass both) and wasn't difficult to pick up and move around if necessary. Two comfortably cushioned chairs which had seemed at first to be locked to the floor in inconvenient places, but which would, the two of them had finally discovered, scoot around to where you stood as soon as you leaned over in a posture that looked like you were about to sit down.

There also seemed to be a number of bats flying around the room.

That was where, future historians would one day record — *if* the whole project ever actually amounted to anything — the scientific study of magic had begun, with two young first-year Hogwarts students.

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, theorist.

And Hermione Jean Granger, experimenter and test subject.

Harry was doing better in classes now, at least the classes he considered interesting. He'd read more books, and not books for eleven-year-olds either. He'd practiced Transfiguration over and over during one of his extra hours every day, taking the other hour for beginning Occlumency. He was taking the

worthwhile classes *seriously*, not just turning in his homework every day, but using his free time to learn more than was required, to read other books beyond the given textbooks, looking to master the subject and not just memorize a few test answers, to excel. You didn't see that much outside Ravenclaw. And now even *within* Ravenclaw, his only remaining competitors were Padma Patil (whose parents came from a non-English-speaking culture and thus had raised her with an actual work ethic), Anthony Goldstein (out of a certain tiny ethnic group that won 25% of the Nobel Prizes), and of course, striding far above everyone like a Titan strolling through a pack of puppies, Hermione Granger.

To run this particular experiment you needed the test subject to learn sixteen new spells, on their own, without help or correction. That meant the test subject was Hermione. Period.

It should be mentioned at this point that the bats flying around the room were *not* glowing.

Harry was having trouble accepting the implications of this.

"*Oogely boogely!*" Hermione said again.

Again, at the tip of Hermione's wand, there was the abrupt, transitionless appearance of a bat. One moment, empty air. The next moment, bat. Its wings seemed to be already moving in the instant when it appeared.

And it *still wasn't glowing*.

"Can I stop now?" said Hermione.

"Are you sure," Harry said through what seemed to be a block in his throat, "that maybe with a bit more practice you couldn't get it to glow?" He was violating the experimental procedure he'd written down beforehand, which was a sin, and he was violating it because he didn't like the results he was getting, which was a *mortal* sin, you could go to Science Hell for that, but it didn't seem to be mattering anyway.

"What did you change this time?" Hermione said, sounding a little weary.

"The durations of the *oo*, *eh*, and *ee* sounds. It's supposed to be 3 to 2 to 2, not 3 to 1 to 1."

"*Oogely boogely!*" said Hermione.

The bat materialized with only one wing and spun pathetically to the floor, flopping around in a circle on the grey stone.

"Now what is it really?" said Hermione.

"3 to 2 to 1."

"*Oogely boogely!*"

This time the bat didn't have any wings at all and fell with a plop like a dead mouse.

"3 to 1 to 2."

And lo the bat did materialize and it did fly up at once toward the ceiling, healthy and glowing a bright green.

Hermione nodded in satisfaction. "Okay, what next?"

There was a long pause.

"*Seriously?* You *seriously* have to say *Oogely boogely* with the duration of the *oo*, *eh*, and *ee* sounds having a ratio of 3 to 1 to 2, or the bat won't glow? *Why? Why? For the love of all that is sacred, why?*"

"Why not?"

"AAAAAAAARRRRRRRGHHHH!"

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Harry had thought about the nature of magic for a while, and then designed a series of experiments based on the premise that virtually everything wizards believed about magic was wrong.

You couldn't *really* need to say 'Wingardium Leviosa' in exactly the right way in order to levitate something, because, come on, 'Wingardium Leviosa'? The universe was going to check that you said 'Wingardium Leviosa' in exactly the right way and otherwise it wouldn't make the quill float?

No. Obviously no, once you thought about it seriously. Someone, quite possibly an actual preschool child, but at any rate some English-speaking magic user, who thought that 'Wingardium Leviosa' sounded all flyish and floaty, had originally spoken those words while casting the spell for the first time. And then told everyone else it was necessary.

But (Harry had reasoned) it didn't *have* to be that way, it wasn't built into the universe, it was built into *you*.

There was an old story passed down among scientists, a cautionary tale, the story of Blondlot and the N-Rays.

Shortly after the discovery of X-Rays, an eminent French physicist named Prosper-Rene Blondlot — who had been first to measure the speed of radio waves and show that they propagated at the speed of light — had announced the discovery of an amazing new phenomenon, N-Rays, which would induce a faint brightening of a screen. You had to look hard to see it, but it was there. N-Rays had all sorts of interesting properties. They were bent by aluminum and could be focused by an aluminum prism into striking a treated thread of

cadmium sulfide, which would then glow faintly in the dark . . .

Soon dozens of other scientists had confirmed Blondlot's results, especially in France.

But there were still other scientists, in England and Germany, who said they weren't quite sure they could see that faint glow.

Blondlot had said they were probably setting up the machinery wrong.

One day Blondlot had given a demonstration of N-Rays. The lights had turned out, and his assistant had called off the brightening and darkening as Blondlot performed his manipulations.

It had been a normal demonstration, all the results going as expected.

Even though an American scientist named Robert Wood had quietly stolen the aluminum prism from the center of Blondlot's mechanism.

And that had been the end of N-Rays.

Reality, Philip K. Dick had once said, *is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.*

Blondlot's sin had been obvious in retrospect. He shouldn't have told his assistant what he was doing. Blondlot should have made sure the assistant *didn't* know what was being tried or when it was being tried, before asking him to describe the screen's brightness. It could have been that simple.

Nowadays it was called "blinding" and it was one of the things modern scientists took for granted. If you were doing a psychology experiment to see whether people got angrier when they were hit over the head with red truncheons than with green truncheons, you didn't get to look at the subjects yourself and decide how "angry" they were. You would snap photos of them after they'd been hit with the truncheon, and send the photos off to a panel of raters, who would rate on a scale of 1 to 10 how angry each person looked, obviously *without* knowing what color of truncheon they'd been hit with. Indeed there was no good reason to tell the raters what the experiment was about, at all. You *certainly* wouldn't tell the experimental subjects that *you thought* they ought to be angrier when hit by red truncheons. You'd just offer them 20 pounds, lure them into a test room, hit them with a truncheon, color randomly assigned of course, and snap the photo. In fact the truncheon-hitting and photo-snapping would be done by an assistant who hadn't been told about the hypothesis, so he couldn't look expectant, hit harder, or snap the photo at just the right time.

Blondlot had destroyed his reputation with the sort of mistake that would

get a failing grade and probably derisive laughter from the T.A. in a first-year undergraduate course on experimental design . . . in 1991.

But this had been a bit longer ago, in 1904, and so it had taken months before Robert Wood had formulated the obvious alternative hypothesis and figured out how to test it, and dozens of other scientists had been sucked in.

More than two centuries after science had gotten started. That late in scientific history, it still hadn't been obvious.

Which made it *entirely* plausible that in the tiny wizarding world, where science didn't seem much known at all, no one had ever tried the first, the simplest, the most obvious thing that any modern scientist would think to check.

The books were full of complicated instructions for all the things you had to do *exactly right* in order to cast a spell. And, Harry had hypothesized, the process of obeying those instructions, of checking that you were following them correctly, probably *did* do something. It *forced you to concentrate on the spell*. Being told to just wave your wand and wish probably *wouldn't* work as well. And once you believed the spell was supposed to work a certain way, once you had practiced it that way, you might not be able to convince yourself that it could work any *other* way . . .

. . . if you did the simple but wrong thing, and tried to test alternative forms *yourself*.

But what if you *didn't know* what the original spell had been like?

What if you gave Hermione a list of spells she hadn't studied yet, taken from a book of silly prank spells in the Hogwarts library, and some of those spells had the correct and original instructions, while others had one changed gesture, one changed word? What if you kept the instructions constant, but told her that a spell supposed to create a red worm was supposed to create a blue worm instead?

Well, in that case, it had turned out . . .

. . . Harry was having trouble believing his results here . . .

. . . if you told Hermione to say "Oogely boogely" with the vowel durations in the ratio of 3 to 1 to 1, instead of the correct ratio of 3 to 1 to 2, you still got the bat but it wouldn't glow any more.

Not that belief was *irrelevant* here. Not that *only* the words and wand movements mattered.

If you gave Hermione completely incorrect information about what a spell

was supposed to do, it would stop working.

If you didn't tell her at all what the spell was supposed to do, it would stop working.

If she knew in very vague terms what the spell was supposed to do, or she was only partially wrong, then the spell would work as originally described in the book, not the way she'd been told it should.

Harry was, at this moment, literally banging his head against the brick wall. Not hard. He didn't want to damage his precious brains. But if he didn't have some outlet for his frustration, he would spontaneously catch on fire.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

It seemed the universe actually *did* want you to say 'Wingardium Leviosa' and it wanted you to say it in a certain exact way and it didn't care what *you* thought the pronunciation should be any more than it cared how you felt about gravity.

WHYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY?

The worst part of it was the smug, amused look on Hermione's face.

Hermione had *not* been okay with sitting around obediently following Harry's instructions without being told why.

So Harry had explained to her what they were testing.

Harry had explained why they were testing it.

Harry had explained why probably no wizard had tried it before them.

Harry had explained that he was actually fairly confident of his prediction.

Because, Harry had said, there was *no way* that the universe actually wanted you to say 'Wingardium Leviosa'.

Hermione had pointed out that this was not what her books said. Hermione had asked if Harry really thought he was smarter, at eleven years old and just over a month into his Hogwarts education, than all the other wizards in the world who disagreed with him.

Harry had said the following exact words:

"Of course."

Now Harry was staring at the red brick directly in front of him and contemplating how hard he would have to hit his head in order to give himself a concussion that would interfere with long-term memory formation and prevent him from remembering this later. Hermione wasn't laughing, but he could feel her *intent to laugh* radiating out from behind him like a dreadful pressure on his skin, sort of like knowing you were being stalked by a serial

killer only *worse*.

"Say it," Harry said.

"I wasn't *going* to," said the kindly voice of Hermione Granger. "It didn't seem nice."

"Just get it over with," said Harry.

"Okay! So you gave me this *whole long lecture* about how hard it was to do basic science and how we might need to stay on the problem for *thirty-five years*, and then you went and expected us to make the greatest discovery in the history of magic in the first hour we were working together. You didn't just hope, you really expected it. You're silly."

"Thank you. Now —"

"I've read all the books you gave me and I still don't know what to call that. Overconfidence? Planning fallacy? Super duper Lake Wobegon effect? They'll have to name it after you. Harry Bias."

"All *right!*"

"But it *is* cute. It's such a boy thing to do."

"*Drop dead.*"

"Aw, you say the most romantic things."

Thud. Thud. Thud.

"So what's next?" said Hermione.

Harry rested his head against the bricks. His forehead was starting to hurt where he'd been banging it. "Nothing. I have to go back and design different experiments."

Over the last month, Harry had carefully worked out, in advance, a course of experimentation for them that would have lasted until December.

It would have been a *great* set of experiments if the *very first test* had not falsified the basic premise.

Harry could not believe he had been this dumb.

"Let me correct myself," said Harry. "I need to design *one* new experiment. I'll let you know when we've got it, and we'll do it, and then I'll design the next one. How does that sound?"

"It sounds like *someone* wasted a *whole lot of effort.*"

Thud. Ow. He'd done that a bit harder than he'd planned.

"So," said Hermione. She was leaning back in her chair and the smug look was back on her face. "What did we discover today?"

"I discovered," said Harry through gritted teeth, "that when it comes to

doing truly basic research on a genuinely confusing problem where you have no clue what's going on, my books on scientific methodology aren't worth crap —"

"Language, Mr. Potter! Some of us are innocent young girls!"

"Fine. But if my books were worth a *carp*, that's a kind of fish not anything bad, they would have given me the following important piece of advice: When there's a confusing problem and you're just starting out and you have a falsifiable hypothesis, go test it. Find some simple, easy way of doing a basic check and do it right away. Don't worry about designing an elaborate course of experiments that would make a grant proposal look impressive to a funding agency. Just check as fast as possible whether your ideas are false before you start investing huge amounts of effort in them. How does that sound for a moral?"

"Mmm . . . okay," said Hermione. "But I was also hoping for something like 'Hermione's books aren't worthless. They're written by wise old wizards who know way more about magic than I do. I should pay attention to what Hermione's books say.' Can we have that moral too?"

Harry's jaw seemed to be clenched too tightly to let any words out, so he just nodded.

"Great!" Hermione said. "I liked this experiment. We learned a lot from it and it only took me an hour or so."

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"



In the dungeons of Slytherin.

An unused classroom lit with eerie green light, much brighter this time and coming from a small crystal globe with a temporary enchantment, but eerie green light nonetheless, casting strange shadows from the dusty desks.

Two boy-sized figures in cowed grey cloaks (no masks) had entered in silence, and sat down in two chairs opposite the same desk.

It was the second meeting of the Bayesian Conspiracy.

Draco Malfoy hadn't been sure if he should look forward to it or not.

Harry Potter, judging by the expression on his face, didn't seem to have any doubts on the appropriate mood.

Harry Potter looked like he was ready to kill someone.

"Hermione Granger," said Harry Potter, just as Draco was opening his mouth. "*Don't ask.*"

He couldn't have gone on another date, could he? thought Draco, but that didn't make any sense.

"Harry," said Draco, "I'm sorry but I have to ask this anyway, did you *really* order the Mudblood girl an expensive mokeskin pouch for her birthday?"

"Yes, I did. You've already worked out why, of course."

Draco reached up and raked fingers through his hair in frustration, his cowl brushing the back of his hand. He *hadn't* been quite sure why, but now he couldn't say so. And Slytherin *knew* he was courting Harry Potter, he'd made it obvious enough in Defense class. "Harry," said Draco, "people know I'm friends with you, they don't know about the Conspiracy of course, but they know we're friends, and it makes *me* look bad when you do that sort of thing."

Harry Potter's face tightened. "Anyone in Slytherin who can't understand the concept of acting nice toward people you don't actually like should be ground up and fed to pet snakes."

"There are a lot of people in Slytherin who *don't*," Draco said, his voice serious. "Most people are stupid, and you have to look good in front of them anyway." Harry Potter *had* to understand that if he ever wanted to get anywhere in life.

"What do *you* care what other people think? Are you really going to live your life needing to explain everything you do to the dumbest idiots in Slytherin, letting *them* judge *you*? I'm sorry, Draco, but I'm not lowering my cunning plots to the level of what the dumbest Slytherins can understand, just because it might make you look bad otherwise. Not even your friendship is worth that. It would *take all the fun out of life*. Tell me *you* haven't ever thought the same thing when someone in Slytherin is being too stupid to breathe, that it's beneath the dignity of a Malfoy to have to pander to them."

Draco genuinely hadn't. Ever. Pandering to idiots was like breathing, you did it without thinking about it.

"Harry," Draco said at last. "Just doing whatever you want, without worrying about how it looks, isn't smart. The *Dark Lord* worried about how he looked! He was feared and hated, and he knew *exactly* what sort of fear and hate he wanted to create. *Everyone* has to worry about what other people think."

The cowed figure shrugged. “Perhaps. Remind me sometime to tell you about something called Asch’s Conformity Experiment, you might find it quite amusing. For now I’ll just note that it’s dangerous to worry about what other people think on *instinct*, because you *actually care*, not as a matter of cold-blooded calculation. Remember, I was beaten and bullied by older Slytherins for fifteen minutes, and afterward I stood up and graciously forgave them. Just like the good and virtuous Boy-Who-Lived ought to do. But my cold-blooded calculations, Draco, tell me that I have *no use* for the dumbest idiots in Slytherin, since *I don’t own a pet snake*. So I have no reason to care what they think about how I conduct my duel with Hermione Granger.”

Draco did not clench his fists in frustration. “She’s just some Mudblood,” Draco said, keeping his voice calm, rather than shouting. “If you don’t like her, push her down the stairs.”

“Ravenclaw would know —”

“Have Pansy Parkinson push her down the stairs! You wouldn’t even have to manipulate her, offer her a Sickle and she’d do it!”

“*I would know! Hermione beat me in a book-reading contest, she’s getting better grades than me, I have to defeat her with my brain or it doesn’t count!*”

“*She’s just a Mudblood! Why do you respect her that much?*”

“*She’s a power among Ravenclaws! Why do you care what some powerless idiot in Slytherin thinks?*”

“*It’s called politics! And if you can’t play it you can’t have power!*”

“*Walking on the moon is power! Being a great wizard is power! There are kinds of power that don’t require me to spend the rest of my life pandering to morons!*”

Both of them stopped, and, in almost perfect unison, began taking deep breaths to calm themselves.

“Sorry,” Harry Potter said after a few moments, wiping sweat from his forehead. “Sorry, Draco. You’ve got a lot of political power and it makes sense for you to keep it. You *should* be calculating what Slytherin thinks. It’s an important game and I shouldn’t have insulted it. But you can’t ask *me* to lower the level of my game in Ravenclaw, just so that you don’t look bad by associating with me. Tell Slytherin you’re gritting your teeth while you pretend to be my friend.”

That was exactly what Draco *had* told Slytherin, and he still wasn’t sure whether it was true.

“Anyway,” Draco said. “Speaking of your image. I’m afraid I’ve got some

bad news. Rita Skeeter heard some of the stories about you and she's been asking questions."

Harry Potter raised his eyebrows. "Who?"

"She writes for the *Daily Prophet*," Draco said. He tried to keep the worry out of his voice. The *Daily Prophet* was one of Father's primary tools, he used it like a wizard's wand. "That's the newspaper people actually pay attention to. Rita Skeeter writes about celebrities, and as she puts it, uses her quill to puncture their over-inflated reputations. If she can't find any rumors about you, she'll just make up her own."

"I see," said Harry Potter. His green-lit face looked very thoughtful beneath the cowl.

Draco hesitated before saying what he had to say next. By now someone had certainly reported to Father that he was courting Harry Potter, and Father would also know that Draco hadn't written home about it, and Father would understand that Draco didn't think he could actually keep it a secret, which sent a clear message that Draco was practicing his own game now but still on Father's side, since if Draco had been tempted away, he would have been sending false reports.

It followed that Father had probably anticipated what Draco was about to say next.

Playing the game with Father for real was a rather unnerving sensation. Even if they were on the same side. It was, on the one hand, exhilarating, but Draco also knew that in the end it would turn out that Father had played the game better. There was no other way it could possibly go.

"Harry," Draco finally said. "This isn't a suggestion. This isn't my advice. Just the way it is. My father could almost certainly quash that article. But it would cost you."

That Father had been expecting Draco to tell Harry Potter exactly that was not something Draco said out loud. Harry Potter would work it out on his own, or not.

But instead Harry Potter shook his head, smiling beneath the cowl. "I have no intention of trying to quash Rita Skeeter."

Draco didn't even try to keep the incredulity out of his voice. "You *can't* tell me you don't care what the *newspaper* says about you!"

"I care less than you might think," said Harry Potter. "But I have my own ways of dealing with the likes of Skeeter. I don't need Lucius's help."

A worried look came over Draco's face before he could stop it. Whatever Harry Potter was about to do next, it would be something Father wasn't expecting, and Draco was feeling very nervous about where that might lead.

Draco also realized that his hair was getting sweaty underneath the cowl. He'd never actually worn one of those before, and hadn't realized that the Death Eaters' cloaks probably had things like Cooling Charms.

Harry Potter wiped some sweat from his forehead again, grimaced, took out his wand, pointed it upward, took a deep breath, and said "*Frigideiro!*"

Moments later Draco felt the cold draft.

"*Frigideiro! Frigideiro! Frigideiro! Frigideiro! Frigideiro!*"

Then Harry Potter lowered the wand, though his hand seemed a bit shaky, and put it back into his robes.

The whole room seemed perceptibly cooler. Draco could have done that too, but still, not bad.

"So," Draco said. "Science. You're going to tell me about blood."

"We're going to *find out* about blood," Harry Potter said. "By doing experiments."

"All right," Draco said. "What sort of experiments?"

Harry Potter smiled evilly beneath his cowl, and said, "You tell me."



Draco had heard of something called the Socratic Method, which was teaching by asking questions (named after an ancient philosopher who had been too smart to be a real Muggle and hence had been a disguised pureblood wizard). One of his tutors had used Socratic teaching a lot. It had been annoying but effective.

Then there was the Potter Method, which was insane.

To be fair, Draco had to admit that Harry Potter had tried the Socratic Method first and it hadn't been working too well.

Harry Potter had asked how Draco would go about *disproving* the blood purist hypothesis that wizards couldn't do the neat stuff now that they'd done eight centuries ago because they had interbred with Muggleborns and Squibs.

Draco had said that he did not understand how Harry Potter could sit there with a straight face and claim this was not a trap.

Harry Potter had replied, still with a straight face, that if it was a trap it

would have been so pathetically obvious that *he* ought to be ground up and fed to pet snakes, but it was *not* a trap, it was simply a rule of how scientists operated that you had to try to disprove your own theories, and if you made an honest effort and failed, that was victory.

Draco had tried to point out the staggering stupidity of this by suggesting that the key to surviving a duel was to cast Avada Kedavra on your own foot and miss.

Harry Potter had *nodded*.

Draco had shaken his head.

Harry Potter had then presented the idea that scientists watched ideas fight to see which ones won, and you *couldn't fight without an opponent*, so Draco needed to figure out opponents for the blood purist hypothesis to fight so that blood purism could win, which Draco understood a little better even though Harry Potter had said it with a rather distasteful look. Like, it was clear that if blood purism was the way the world really was, then the sky just had to be blue, and if some other theory was true, the sky just had to be green; and nobody had seen the sky yet; and then you went outside and looked and the blood purists won; and after this had happened six times in a row, people would start noticing the trend.

Harry Potter had then proceeded to claim that all the opponents Draco was inventing were too weak, so blood purism wouldn't get credit for defeating them because the battle wouldn't be impressive enough. Draco had understood that too. *Wizards have gotten weaker because house elves are stealing our magic* hadn't sounded impressive to him either.

(Though Harry Potter *had* said that one at least was testable, in that they could try to check if house elves had gotten stronger over time, and even draw a picture representing the increasing strength of house elves and another picture representing the decreasing strength of wizards and if the two pictures matched that would point to the house elves, all said in such completely serious tones that Draco had felt an impulse to ask Dobby a few pointed questions under Veritaserum before snapping out of it.)

And Harry Potter had finally said that Draco *couldn't* fix the battle, scientists weren't dumb, it would be *obvious* if you fixed the battle, it had to be a *real fight*, between two different theories that might both *really* be true, with a test that only the *true* hypothesis would win, something that actually *would* come out different ways depending on which hypothesis was actually correct, and

there would be experienced scientists watching to make sure that was exactly what happened. Harry Potter had claimed that he himself just wanted to know *how blood really worked* and for that he need to see blood purism *really win* and Draco wasn't going to fool *him* with theories that were just there to be knocked down.

Even having seen the point, Draco hadn't been able to invent any "plausible alternatives", as Harry Potter put it, to the idea that wizards were getting less powerful because they were mixing their blood with mud. It was too obviously true.

It was then that Harry Potter had said, rather frustrated, that he couldn't imagine Draco was *really* this bad at considering different viewpoints, *surely* there'd been Death Eaters who'd posed as enemies of blood purism and had come up with much more plausible-sounding arguments against their own side than Draco was offering. If Draco had been trying to pose as a member of Dumbledore's faction, and come up with the house elf hypothesis, he wouldn't have fooled anyone for a second.

Draco had been forced to admit this was a point.

Hence the Potter Method.

"Please, Dr. Malfoy," whined Harry Potter, "why won't you accept my paper?"

Harry Potter had needed to repeat the phrase "just pretend to be pretending to be a scientist" three times before Draco had understood.

In that moment Draco had realized that there was something deeply *wrong* with Harry Potter's brain, and anyone who tried Legilimency on it would probably never come back out again.

Harry Potter had then gone into further and considerable detail: Draco was to pretend to be a Death Eater who was posing as the editor of a scientific journal, Dr. Malfoy, who wanted to reject his enemy Dr. Potter's paper "On the Heritability of Magical Ability", and if the Death Eater didn't act like a real scientist would, he would be revealed as a Death Eater and executed, while Dr. Malfoy was also being watched by his own rivals and needed to *appear* to reject Dr. Potter's paper for neutral scientific reasons or he would lose his position as journal editor.

It was a wonder the Sorting Hat wasn't gibbering madly in St. Mungo's.

It was also the most complicated thing anyone had *ever* asked Draco to pretend and there was no possible way he could have refused the challenge.

Right now they were, as Harry Potter had put it, getting in the mood.

"I'm afraid, Dr. Potter, that you wrote this in the wrong color of ink," Draco said. "Next!"

Dr. Potter's face did an excellent job of crumpling in despair, and Draco couldn't help but feel a flash of Dr. Malfoy's glee, even though the Death Eater was only pretending to be Dr. Malfoy.

This part was *fun*. He could have done this all day long.

Dr. Potter got up from the chair, slumped over in dismay, and trudged off, and turned into Harry Potter, who gave Draco a thumbs-up, and then turned back into Dr. Potter again, now approaching with an eager smile.

Dr. Potter sat down and presented Dr. Malfoy with a piece of parchment on which was written:

On the Heritability of Magical Ability

Dr. H. J. Potter-Evans-Verres, Institute for Sufficiently Advanced Science

My observation:

*Today's wizards can't do things as impressive as
what wizards used to do 800 years ago.*

My conclusion:

*Wizardkind has become weaker by mixing
their blood with Muggleborns and Squibs.*

"Dr. Malfoy," said Dr. Potter with a hopeful look, "I was wondering if the *Journal of Irreproducible Results* could consider for publication my paper entitled 'On the Heritability of Magical Ability'."

Draco looked at the parchment, smiling while he considered possible rejections. If he was a professor, he would have refused the essay as too short, so —

"It's too long, Dr. Potter," said Dr. Malfoy.

For a moment there was genuine incredulity on Dr. Potter's face.

"Ah . . ." said Dr. Potter. "How about if I get rid of the separate lines for observations and conclusions, and just put in a *therefore* —"

"Then it'll be too short. Next!"

Dr. Potter trudged off.

“All right,” said Harry Potter, “you’re getting *too* good at this. Two more times to practice, and then third time is for real, no interruptions between, I’ll just come in straight at you and that time you’ll reject the paper based on the actual content, remember, your scientific rivals are watching.”

Dr. Potter’s next paper was perfect in every way, a marvel of its kind, but unfortunately had to be rejected because Dr. Malfoy’s journal was having trouble with the letter E. Dr. Potter offered to rewrite it without those words, and Dr. Malfoy explained that it was really more of a vowel problem.

The paper after that was rejected because it was Tuesday.

It was, in fact, Saturday.

Dr. Potter tried to point this out and was told “Next!”

(Draco was starting to understand why Snape had used his hold over Dumbledore just to get a position that let him be awful to students.)

And then —

Dr. Potter was approaching with a superior smirk on his face.

“This is my latest paper, *On the Heritability of Magical Ability*,” Dr. Potter stated confidently, and thrust out the parchment. “I have decided to allow your journal to publish it, and have prepared it in perfect accordance with your guidelines so that you may publish it quickly.”

The Death Eater decided to track down and kill Dr. Potter after his mission was done. Dr. Malfoy kept a polite smile on his face, since his rivals were watching, and said . . .

(The pause stretched, with Dr. Potter looking at him impatiently.)

. . . “Let me look at that, please.”

Dr. Malfoy took the parchment and perused it carefully.

The Death Eater was starting to get nervous about the fact that he wasn’t a real scientist, and Draco was trying to remember how to talk like Harry Potter.

“You, ah, need to consider other possible explanations for your, um, observation, besides just this one —”

“Really?” interrupted Dr. Potter. “Like what, exactly? *House elves are stealing our magic*? My data admit of only one possible conclusion, Dr. Malfoy. There are no other plausible hypotheses.”

Draco was trying furiously to order his brain to think, what would he say if he was posing as a member of Dumbledore’s faction, what *did* they claim was the explanation for wizardkind’s decline, Draco had never bothered to

actually ask that . . .

“If you can’t think of any other way to explain my data, you’ll have to publish my paper, *Dr. Malfoy*.”

It was the sneer on Dr. Potter’s face that did it.

“Oh yeah?” snapped Dr. Malfoy. “How do you know that magic itself isn’t fading away?”

Time stopped.

Draco and Harry Potter exchanged looks of appalled horror.

Then Harry Potter spat something that was probably an extremely bad word if you’d been raised by Muggles. “*I didn’t think of that!*” said Harry Potter. “And I should have. The magic goes away. *Damn, damn, damn!*”

The alarm in Harry Potter’s voice was contagious. Without even thinking about it, Draco’s hand went into his robes and clutched at his wand. He’d thought the House of Malfoy was *safe*, so long as you only married into families that could trace their bloodlines back four generations you were supposed to be *safe*, it had never occurred to him before that there might be nothing anyone could do to stop the end of magic. “Harry, what do we do?” Draco’s voice was rising in panic. “*What do we do?*”

“*Let me think!*”

After a few moments, Harry grabbed from a nearby desk the same quill and roll of parchment he’d used to write his pretend paper, and started scribbling something.

“We’ll figure it out,” Harry said, his voice tight, “if magic is fading out of the world we’ll figure out how fast it’s fading and how much time we have left to do something, and then we’ll figure out why it’s fading, and then we’ll do something about it. Draco, have wizarding powers been declining at a steady rate, or have there been sudden drops?”

“I . . . I don’t know . . .”

“You told me that no one had matched the four founders of Hogwarts. So it’s been going on for at least eight centuries, then? You can’t remember hearing anything about the problems suddenly appearing five centuries ago or anything like that?”

Draco was trying frantically to think. “I always heard that nobody was as good as Merlin and then after that nobody was as good as the Founders of Hogwarts.”

“All right,” Harry said. He was still scribbling. “Because three centuries

ago is when Muggles started to not believe in magic, which I thought might have something to do with it. And about a century and a half ago was when Muggles began using a kind of technology that stops working around magic and I was wondering if it might also go the other way around.”

Draco exploded out of his chair, so angry he could hardly even speak. “It’s the *Muggles* —”

“*Damn it!*” roared Harry. “Weren’t you even listening to *yourself*? It’s been going on for eight centuries at least and the Muggles weren’t doing anything interesting then! *We have to figure out the real truth!* The Muggles *might* have something to do with this but if they *don’t* and you go blaming everything on them and that stops us from figuring out what’s *really* going on then one day you’re going to wake up in the morning and find out that your wand is just a stick of wood!”

Draco’s breath stopped in his throat. His father often said *our wands will break in our hands* in his speeches but Draco had never really thought before about what that *meant*, it wasn’t going to happen to *him* after all. And now suddenly it seemed very real. *Just a stick of wood*. Draco could imagine just what it would be like to take out his wand and try to cast a spell and find that nothing was happening...

That could happen to *everyone*.

There would be no more wizards, no more magic, ever. Just Muggles who had a few legends about what their ancestors had been able to do. Some of the Muggles would be called Malfoy, and that would be all that was left of the name.

For the first time in his life, Draco realized why there were Death Eaters.

He’d always taken for granted that becoming a Death Eater was something you did when you grew up. Now Draco *understood*, he knew why Father and Father’s friends had sworn to give their lives to prevent the nightmare from coming to pass, there were things you couldn’t just stand by and watch happen. But what if it was going to happen *anyway*, what if all the sacrifices, all the friends they’d lost to Dumbledore, the *family* they’d lost, what if it had all been for *nothing*...

“Magic *can’t* be fading away,” Draco said. His voice was breaking. “It wouldn’t be *fair*.”

Harry stopped scribbling and looked up. His face had an angry expression. “Your father never told you that life isn’t fair?”

Father had said that every single time Draco used the word. “But, but, it’s too awful to believe that —”

“Draco, let me introduce you to something I call the Litany of Tarski. It changes every time you use it. On this occasion it runs like so: *If magic is fading out of the world, I want to believe that magic is fading out of the world. If magic is not fading out of the world, I want not to believe that magic is fading out of the world. Let me not become attached to beliefs I may not want.* If we’re living in a world where magic is fading, *that’s what we have to believe*, we have to know what’s coming, so we can stop it, or in the very worst case, be prepared to do what we can in the time we have left. Not believing it won’t stop it from happening. So the *only* question we have to ask is whether magic is *actually* fading, and if that’s the world we live in then that’s what we want to believe. Litany of Gendlin: *What’s true is already so, owning up to it doesn’t make it worse.* Got that, Draco? I’m going to make you memorize it later. It’s something you repeat to yourself any time you start wondering if it’s a good idea to believe something that isn’t actually true. In fact I want you to say it right now. *What’s true is already so, owning up to it doesn’t make it worse.* Say it.”

“What’s true is already so,” repeated Draco, his voice trembling, “owning up to it doesn’t make it worse.”

“If magic is fading, I want to believe that magic is fading. If magic is not fading, I want not to believe that magic is fading. Say it.”

Draco repeated back the words, the sickness churning in his stomach.

“Good,” Harry said, “remember, it might *not* be happening, and then you won’t have to believe it, either. *First* we just want to know what’s actually going on, which world we actually live in.” Harry turned back to his work, scribbled some more, and then turned the parchment so Draco could see it. Draco leaned over the desk and Harry brought the green light closer.

Observation:

Wizardry isn’t as powerful now as it was when Hogwarts was founded.

Hypotheses:

1. *Magic itself is fading.*
2. *Wizards are interbreeding with Muggles and Squibs.*
3. *Knowledge to cast powerful spells is being lost.*
4. *Wizards are eating the wrong foods as children, or something else besides blood*

is making them grow up weaker.

5. *Muggle technology is interfering with magic. (Since 800 years ago?)*
6. *Stronger wizards are having fewer children. (Draco = only child? Check if 3 powerful wizards, Quirrell / Dumbledore / Dark Lord, had any children.)*

Tests:

“All right,” Harry said. His breathing sounded a little calmer. “Now when you’re dealing with a confusing problem and you have no idea what’s going on, the smart thing to do is figure out some really simple tests, things you can look at right away. We need fast tests that distinguish between these hypotheses. Observations that would come out a different way for at least one of them compared to all the other ones.”

Draco stared at the list in shock. He was suddenly realizing that he knew an awful lot of purebloods who were only children. Himself, Vincent, Gregory, practically *everyone*. The two most powerful wizards everyone talked about were Dumbledore and the Dark Lord and neither had any children just like Harry had suspected . . .

“It’s going to be really hard to distinguish between 2 and 6,” Harry said, “it’s in the blood either way, you’d have to try and track the decline of wizardry and compare that to how many kids different wizards were having and measure the abilities of Muggleborns compared to purebloods . . .” Harry’s fingers were tapping nervously on the desk. “Let’s just lump 6 in with 2 and call them the blood hypothesis for now. 4 is unlikely because then everyone would notice a sudden drop when the wizards switched to new foods, it’s hard to see what would’ve changed steadily over 800 years. 5 is unlikely for the same reason, no sudden drop, Muggles weren’t doing anything 800 years back. 4 looks like 2 and 5 looks like 1 anyway. So mainly we should be trying to distinguish between 1, 2, and 3.” Harry turned the parchment to himself, drew an ellipse around those three numbers, turned it back. “Magic is fading, blood is weakening, knowledge is disappearing. What test comes out differently depending on which of those is true? What could we see that would mean any one of these was false?”

“I don’t know!” blurted Draco. “Why are you asking me? You’re the scientist!”

“Draco,” Harry said, a note of pleading desperation in his voice, “I only know what Muggle scientists know! You grew up in the wizarding world, I didn’t! You know more magic than I do and you know more *about* magic than

I do and you thought of this whole idea in the first place, so start thinking like a scientist and solve this!”

Draco swallowed hard and stared at the paper.

Magic is fading . . . wizards are interbreeding with Muggles . . . knowledge is being lost . . .

“What does the world look like if magic is fading?” said Harry Potter. “You know more about magic, you should be the one guessing not me! Imagine you’re telling a story about it, what happens in the story?”

Draco imagined it. “Charms that used to work stop working.” *Wizards wake up and find that their wands are sticks of wood . . .*

“What does the world look like if the wizarding blood gets weaker?”

“People can’t do things their ancestors could do.”

“What does the world look like if knowledge is being lost?”

“People don’t know how to cast the Charms in the first place . . .” said Draco. He stopped, surprised at himself. “That’s a test, isn’t it?”

Harry nodded decisively. “That’s one.” He wrote it down on the parchment under *Tests*:

A. Are there spells we know but can’t cast (1 or 2) or are the lost spells no longer known (3)?

“So that distinguishes between 1 and 2 on the one hand, and 3 on the other hand,” said Harry. “Now we need some way to distinguish between 1 and 2. Magic fading, blood weakening, how could we tell the difference?”

“What kind of Charms did students used to cast in their first year at Hogwarts?” said Draco. “If they used to be able to cast much more powerful Charms, the blood was stronger —”

Harry Potter shook his head. “Or magic itself was stronger. We have to figure out some way of telling the *difference*.” Harry stood up from his chair, began pacing nervously through the classroom. “No, wait, that might still work. Suppose different spells use up different amounts of magical energy. Then if the ambient magic weakened, the powerful spells would die first, but the spells everyone learns in their first year would stay the same . . .” Harry’s nervous pacing sped up. “It’s not a very good test, it’s more about powerful wizardry being lost versus all wizardry being lost, someone’s blood could be too weak for powerful wizardry but strong enough for easy spells . . . Draco, do you know if more powerful wizards within a *single* era, like powerful wizards from just this century, are more powerful as children? If the Dark Lord had

cast the Cooling Charm when he was eleven, could he have frozen the whole room?"

Draco's face screwed up as he tried to recollect. "I can't remember hearing anything about the Dark Lord but I think Dumbledore's supposed to have done something amazing on his Transfiguration O.W.L.s in fifth year . . . I think other powerful wizards were good in Hogwarts too . . ."

Harry scowled, still pacing. "They could just be studying hard. Still, if first-year students learned the same spells and seemed about as powerful then as now, we could call that *weak* evidence favoring 1 over 2 . . . wait, hold on." Harry stopped where he stood. "I have another test that might distinguish between 1 and 2. It would take a while to explain, it uses some things that scientists know about blood and inheritance, but it's an easy question to ask. And if we *combine* my test and your test and they both come out the same way, that's a strong hint at the answer." Harry almost ran back to the desk, took the parchment and wrote:

B. Did ancient first-year students cast the same sort of spells, with the same power, as now? (Weak evidence for 1 over 2, but blood could also be losing powerful wizardry only.)

C. Additional test that distinguishes 1 and 2 using scientific knowledge of blood, will explain later.

"Okay," said Harry, "we can at least try to tell the difference between 1 and 2 and 3, so let's go with this right away, we can figure out *more* tests after we do the ones we already have. Now it's going to look a little odd if Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter go around asking questions together, so here's my idea. You'll go through Hogwarts and find old portraits and ask them about what spells they learned to cast during their first years. They're portraits so they won't know there's anything odd about Draco Malfoy doing that. I'll ask recent portraits and living people about spells we know but can't cast, no one will notice anything unusual if Harry Potter asks weird questions. And I'll have to do complicated research about forgotten spells, so I want you to be the one to gather the data I need for my own scientific question. It's a simple question and you should be able to find the answer by asking portraits. You might want to write this down, ready?"

Draco sat down again and scrabbled in his bookbag for parchment and quill. When it was laid down on the desk, Draco looked up, face determined. "Go ahead."

“Find portraits who knew a married Squib couple — don’t make that face, Draco, it’s important information. Just ask recent portraits who are Gryffindors or something. Find portraits who knew a married Squib couple well enough to know the names of all their children. Write down the name of each child and whether that child was a wizard, a Squib, or a Muggle. If they don’t know whether the child was a Squib or a Muggle, write down ‘non-wizard’. Write that down for *every* child the couple had, don’t leave any out. If the portrait only knows the name of the wizarding children, not the names of *all* the children, then don’t write down *any* data from that couple. It’s very important that you only bring me data from someone who knows *all* the children a Squib couple had, well enough to know them all by name. Try to get at least forty names total, if you can, and if you have time for more, even better. Have you got all that?”

“Repeat it,” Draco said, when he was done writing, and Harry repeated it.

“I’ve got it,” Draco said, “but why —”

“It has to do with one of the secrets of blood that scientists already discovered. I’ll explain when you get back. Let’s split up and meet back here in an hour, 6:22 PM that should be. Are we ready to go?”

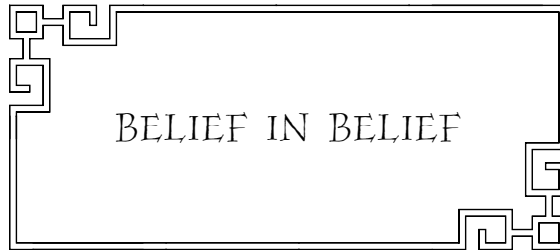
Draco nodded decisively. It was all very rushed, but he’d long since been taught how to rush.

“Then go!” said Harry Potter and yanked off his cowled cloak and shoved it into his pouch, which began eating it, and, without even waiting for his pouch to finish, spun around and began striding rapidly toward the classroom door, bumping into a desk and almost falling over in his haste.

By the time Draco had managed to get his own cloak off and stow it in his bookbag, Harry Potter was gone.

Draco almost ran out the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



"**A**nd then Janet was a Squib," said the portrait of a short young woman with a gold-trimmed hat.

Draco wrote it down. That was only twenty-eight but it was time to go back and meet Harry.

He'd needed to ask other portraits to help translating, English had changed a lot, but the oldest portraits had described first-year spells that sounded an awful lot like the ones they had now. Draco had recognized around half of them and the other half didn't sound any more powerful.

The sick feeling in his stomach had grown with each answer until finally, unable to take it any more, he'd gone off and asked other portraits Harry Potter's strange question about Squib marriages, instead. The first five portraits hadn't known anyone and finally he'd asked those portraits to ask *their* acquaintances to ask *their* acquaintances and so managed to find some people who'd actually admit to being friends with Squibs.

(The first-year Slytherin had explained he was working on an important project with a Ravenclaw and the Ravenclaw had told him they needed this information and then run off without saying why. This had garnered many sympathetic looks.)

Draco's feet were heavy as he walked through the corridors of Hogwarts. He should have been running but he couldn't seem to muster the energy. He kept on thinking that he didn't want to know about this, he didn't want to

be involved in any of this, he didn't want this to be his responsibility, just let Harry Potter do it, if magic was fading let Harry Potter take care of it . . .

But Draco knew that wasn't right.

Chill the dungeons of Slytherin, grey the stone walls, Draco usually liked the atmosphere, but now it seemed too much like fading.

His hand on the doorknob, Harry Potter already inside and waiting, wearing his cowed cloak.

"The ancient first-year spells," Harry Potter said. "What did you find?"

"They're no more powerful than the spells we use now."

Harry Potter's fist struck a desk, hard. "Damn it. All right. My own experiment was a failure, Draco. There's something called the Interdict of Merlin —"

Draco hit himself on the forehead, realizing.

"— which stops anyone from getting knowledge of powerful spells out of books, even if you find and read a powerful wizard's notes they won't make sense to you, it has to go from one living mind to another. I couldn't find any powerful spells that we had the instructions for but couldn't cast. But if you can't get them out of old books, why would anyone bother passing them on by word of mouth after they stopped working? Did you get the data on the Squib couples?"

Draco started to hand the parchment over —

But Harry Potter held up a hand. "Law of science, Draco. First I tell you the theory and the prediction. Then you show me the data. That way you know I'm not just making up a theory to fit; you know that the theory actually predicted the data in *advance*. I have to explain this to you anyway, so I have to explain it *before* you show me the data. That's the rule. So put on your cloak and let's sit down."

Harry Potter sat down at a desk with torn scraps of paper arranged across its surface. Draco drew his cloak out of his bookbag, drew it on, and sat down across from Harry on the other side, giving the paper scraps a puzzled look. They were arranged in two rows and the rows were about twenty scraps long.

"The secret of blood," said Harry Potter, an intense look on his face, "is something called deoxyribonucleic acid. You don't say that name in front of anyone who's not a scientist. Deoxyribonucleic acid is the recipe that tells your body how to grow, two legs, two arms, short or tall, whether you have brown eyes or green. It's a material thing, you can *see* it if you have microscopes,

which are like telescopes only they look at things that are very small instead of very far away. And that recipe has two copies of everything, always, in case one copy is broken. Imagine two long rows of pieces of paper. At each place in the row, there are two pieces of paper, and when you have children, your body selects one piece of paper at random from each place in the row, and the mother's body will do the same, and so the child also gets two pieces of paper at each place in the row. Two copies of everything, one from your mother, one from your father, and when you have children they get one piece of paper from you at random in each place."

As Harry spoke, his fingers ranged over the paired scraps of paper, pointing to one part of the pair when he said "from your mother", the other when he said "from your father". And as Harry talked about picking a piece of paper at random, his hand pulled a Knut out of his robes and flipped it; Harry looked at the coin, and then pointed to the top piece of paper. All without a pause in the speech.

"Now when it comes to something like being short or tall, there's a *lot* of places in the recipe that make *little* differences. So if a tall father marries a short mother, the child gets some pieces of paper saying 'tall' and some pieces of paper saying 'short', and usually the child ends up middle-sized. But not always. By luck, the child might get a lot of pieces saying 'tall', and not many papers saying 'short', and grow up pretty tall. You could have a tall father with five papers saying 'tall' and a tall mother with five papers saying 'tall' and by amazing luck the child gets *all ten* papers saying 'tall' and ends up taller than both of them. You see? Blood isn't a perfect fluid, it doesn't mix perfectly. Deoxyribonucleic acid is made up of lots of little pieces, like a glass of pebbles instead of a glass of water. That's why a child isn't always exactly in the middle of the parents."

Draco listened with his mouth open. How in Merlin's name had the Muggles figured all this out? They could *see* the recipe?

"Now," Harry Potter said, "suppose that, just like with tallness, there's lots of little places in the recipe where you can have a piece of paper that says 'magic' or 'not magic'. If you have enough pieces of paper saying 'magic' you're a wizard, if you have a *lot* of pieces of paper you're a powerful wizard, if you have too few you're a Muggle, and in between you're a Squib. Then, when two Squibs marry, most of the time the children should also be Squibs, but once in a while a child will get lucky and get most of the father's magic papers *and*

most of the mother's magic papers, and be strong enough to be a wizard. But probably not a very powerful one. If you started out with a lot of powerful wizards and they married only each other, they would stay powerful. But if they started marrying Muggleborns who were just barely magical, or Squibs . . . you see? The blood wouldn't mix perfectly, it would be a glass of pebbles, not a glass of water, because that's just the way blood works. There would still be powerful wizards now and then, when they got a lot of magic papers by luck. But they wouldn't be as powerful as the most powerful wizards from earlier."

Draco nodded slowly. He'd never heard it explained that way before. There was a surprising beauty to how exactly it fit.

"*But*," Harry said. "That's only *one* hypothesis. Suppose that instead there's only a *single* place in the recipe that makes you a wizard. Only *one* place where a piece of paper can say 'magic' or 'not magic'. And there are two copies of everything, always. So then there are only three possibilities. Both copies can say 'magic'. One copy can say 'magic' and one copy can say 'not magic'. Or both copies can say 'not magic'. Wizards, Squibs, and Muggles. Two copies and you can cast spells, one copy and you can still use potions or magic devices, and zero copies means you might even have trouble looking straight at magic. Muggleborns wouldn't really be born to Muggles, they would be born to two Squibs, two parents each with one magic copy who'd grown up in the Muggle world. Now imagine a witch marries a Squib. Each child will get one paper saying 'magic' from the mother, always, it doesn't matter which piece gets picked at random, both say 'magic'. But like flipping a coin, half the time the child will get a paper saying 'magic' from the father, and half the time the child will get the father's paper saying 'not magic'. When a witch marries a Squib, the result won't be a lot of weak wizarding children. Half the children will be wizards and witches just as powerful as their mother, and half the children will be Squibs. Because if there's just *one* place in the recipe that makes you a wizard, then magic isn't like a glass of pebbles that can mix. It's like a single magical pebble, a sorcerer's stone."

Harry arranged three pairs of papers side by side. On one pair he wrote 'magic' and 'magic'. On another pair he wrote 'magic' on the top paper only. And the third pair he left blank.

"In which case," Harry said, "either you have two stones or you don't. Either you're a wizard or not. Powerful wizards would get that way by studying harder and practicing more. And if wizards get *inherently* less powerful, not

because of spells being lost but because people can't cast them . . . then maybe they're eating the wrong foods or something. But if it's gotten steadily worse over eight hundred years, then that could mean magic itself is fading out of the world."

Harry arranged another two pairs of papers side by side, and took out a quill. Soon each pair had one piece of paper saying 'magic' and the other paper blank.

"And that brings me to the prediction," said Harry. "What happens when two Squibs marry. Flip a coin twice. It can come up heads and heads, heads and tails, tails and heads, or tails and tails. So one quarter of the time you'll get two heads, one quarter of the time you'll get two tails, and half the time you'll get one heads and one tail. Same thing if two Squibs marry. One quarter of the children would come up magic and magic, and be wizards. One quarter would come up not-magic and not-magic, and be Muggles. The other half would be Squibs. It's a very old and very classic pattern. It was discovered by Gregor Mendel who is not forgotten, and it was the first hint ever uncovered for how the recipe worked. Anyone who knows anything about blood science would recognize that pattern in an instant. It wouldn't be exact, any more than if you flip a coin twice forty times you'll always get exactly ten pairs of two heads. But if it's seven or thirteen wizards out of forty children that'll be a strong indicator. That's the test I had you do. Now let's see your data."

And before Draco could even think, Harry Potter had taken the parchment out of Draco's hand.

Draco's throat was very dry.

Twenty-eight children.

He wasn't sure of the exact number but he was pretty sure around a fourth had been wizards.

"Six wizards out of twenty-eight children," Harry Potter said after a moment. "Well, that's that, then. And first-years were casting the same spells at the same power level eight centuries ago, too. Your test and my test both came out the same way."

There was a long silence in the classroom.

"What now?" Draco whispered.

He'd never been so terrified.

"It's not definite yet," said Harry Potter. "My experiment failed, remember? I need you to design another test, Draco."

"I, I . . ." Draco said. His voice was breaking. "I can't do this Harry, it's too much for me."

Harry's look was fierce. "Yes you can, because you have to. I thought about it myself, too, after I found out about the Interdict of Merlin. Draco, is there any way of observing the strength of magic directly? Some way that doesn't have anything to do with wizards' blood or the spells we learn?"

Draco's mind was just blank.

"Anything that affects magic affects wizards," said Harry. "But then we can't tell if it's the wizards or the magic. What does magic affect that *isn't* a wizard?"

"Magical creatures, obviously," said Draco without even thinking about it.

Harry Potter slowly smiled. "Draco, that's *brilliant*."

It's the sort of dumb question you'd only ask in the first place if you'd been raised by Muggles.

Then the sickness in Draco's stomach got even worse as he realized what it would mean if magical creatures *were* getting weaker. They would know for certain then that magic was fading, and there was a part of Draco that was already sure that was exactly what they would find. He didn't want to see this, he didn't want to know . . .

Harry Potter was already halfway to the door. "Come *on*, Draco! There's a portrait not far from here, we'll just ask them to go get someone old and find out right away! We're cloaked, if someone sees us we can just run away! Let's go!"



It didn't take long after that.

It was a wide portrait, but the three people in it were looking rather crowded. There was a middle-aged man from the twelfth century, dressed in black swathes of cloth; who spoke to a sad-looking young woman from the fourteenth century, with hair that seemed to constantly frizz about her head as if she'd been charged up by a static spell; and she spoke to a dignified, wizened old man from the seventeenth century with a solid gold bowtie; and him they could understand.

They had asked about Dementors.

They had asked about phoenixes.

They had asked about dragons and trolls and house elves.

Harry had frowned, pointed out that creatures which needed the most magic could just be dying out entirely, and had asked for the most powerful magical creatures known.

There wasn't anything unfamiliar on the list, except for a species of Dark creature called mind flayers which the translator noted had finally been exterminated by Harold Shea, and those didn't sound half as scary as Dementors.

Magical creatures were as powerful now as they'd ever been, apparently.

The sickness in Draco's stomach was easing, and now he just felt confused.

"Harry," Draco said in the middle of the old man translating a list of all eleven powers of a beholder's eyes, "what does this mean?"

Harry held up a finger and the old man finished the list.

Then Harry thanked all the portraits for helping — Draco, pretty much on automatic, did so as well and more graciously — and they headed back to the classroom.

And Harry brought out the original parchment with the hypotheses, and began scribbling.

Observation:

Wizardry isn't as powerful now as it was when Hogwarts was founded.

Hypotheses:

1. *Magic itself is fading.*
2. *Wizards are interbreeding with Muggles and Squibs.*
3. *Knowledge to cast powerful spells is being lost.*
4. *Wizards are eating the wrong foods as children, or something else besides blood is making them grow up weaker.*
5. *Muggle technology is interfering with magic. (Since 800 years ago?)*
6. *Stronger wizards are having fewer children. (Draco = only child? Check if 3 powerful wizards, Quirrell / Dumbledore / Dark Lord, had any children.)*

Tests:

- A. *Are there spells we know but can't cast (1 or 2) or are the lost spells no longer known (3)? Result: Inconclusive due to Interdict of Merlin. No known un-castable spell, but could simply have not been passed on.*

- B. *Did ancient first-year students cast the same sort of spells, with the same power, as now? (Weak evidence for 1 over 2, but blood could also be losing powerful wizardry only.) Result: Same level of first-year spells then as now.*
- C. *Additional test that distinguishes 1 and 2 using scientific knowledge of blood, will explain later. Result: There's only one place in the recipe that makes you a wizard, and either you have two papers saying 'magic' or you don't.*
- D. *Are magical creatures losing their powers? Distinguishes 1 from (2 or 3). Result: Magical creatures seem to be as strong as they ever were.*

"A failed," said Harry Potter. "B is weak evidence for 1 over 2. C falsifies 2. D falsifies 1. 4 was unlikely and B argues against 4 as well. 5 was unlikely and D argues against it. 6 is falsified along with 2. That leaves 3. Interdict of Merlin or not, I didn't actually find any known spell that couldn't be cast. So when you add it all up, it looks like knowledge is being lost."

And the trap snapped shut.

As soon as the panic went away, as soon as Draco understood that magic *wasn't* fading out, it took all of five seconds to realize.

Draco shoved himself away from the desk and stood up so hard that his chair skittered with a scraping noise across the floor and fell over.

"So it was all just a stupid trick, then."

Harry Potter stared at him for a moment, still sitting. When he spoke, his voice was quiet. "It was a fair test, Draco. If it had come out a different way, I would have accepted it. That's not something I would ever cheat on. Ever. I didn't look at your data before I made my predictions. I told you up front when the Interdict of Merlin invalidated the first experiment —"

"Oh," Draco said, the anger starting to come out into his voice, "you didn't know how the whole thing was going to come out?"

"I didn't *know* anything you didn't know," Harry said, still quietly. "I admit that I suspected. Hermione Granger was too powerful, she should have been barely magical and she wasn't, how can a Muggleborn be the best spellcaster in Hogwarts? And she's getting the best grades on her essays too, it's too much coincidence for one girl to be the strongest magically *and* academically unless there's a single cause. Hermione Granger's existence pointed to there being only one thing that makes you a wizard, something you either have or you don't, and the power differences coming from how much we know and how much we practice. And there weren't different classes for purebloods and

Muggleborns, and so on. There were too many ways the world didn't look the way it would look if you were right. But Draco, I didn't see anything you couldn't see too. I didn't perform any tests I didn't tell you about. I didn't cheat, Draco. I wanted us to work out the answer together. And I never thought that magic might be fading out of the world until you said it. It was a scary idea for me, too."

"Whatever," Draco said. He was working very hard to control his voice and not just start screaming at Harry. "You claim you're not going to run off and tell anyone else about this."

"Not without consulting you first," Harry said. He opened his hands in a pleading gesture. "Draco, I'm being as nice as I can but *the world turned out to just not be that way*."

"Fine. Then you and I are through. I'm going to just walk away and forget any of this ever happened."

Draco spun around, feeling the burning sensation in his throat, the sense of betrayal, and that was when he realized he really *had* liked Harry Potter, and that thought didn't slow him down for a moment as he strode toward the classroom door.

And Harry Potter's voice came, now louder, and worried:

"Draco . . . you *can't* forget. Don't you understand? That was your sacrifice."

Draco stopped in midstride and turned around. "*What* are you talking about?"

But there was already a freezing coldness in Draco's spine.

He knew even before Harry Potter said it.

"To become a scientist. You questioned one of your beliefs, not just a small belief but something that had great significance to you. You did experiments, gathered data, and the outcome proved the belief was wrong. You saw the results and understood what they meant." Harry Potter's voice was faltering. "Remember, Draco, you can't sacrifice a *true* belief that way, because the experiments will confirm it instead of falsifying it. Your sacrifice to become a scientist was your *false* belief that wizard blood was mixing and getting weaker."

"*That's not true!*" said Draco. "I didn't sacrifice the belief. I still believe that!" His voice was getting louder, and the chill was getting worse.

Harry Potter shook his head. His voice came in a whisper. "Draco . . . I'm sorry, Draco, you *don't* believe it, not anymore." Harry's voice rose again. "I'll prove it to you. Imagine that someone tells you they're keeping a dragon in

their house. You tell them you want to see it. They say it's an invisible dragon. You say fine, you'll listen to it move. They say it's an inaudible dragon. You say you'll throw some cooking flour into the air and see the outline of the dragon. They say the dragon is permeable to flour. And the telling thing is that they know, in *advance*, exactly which experimental results they'll have to explain away. They *know* everything will come out the way it does if there's no dragon, they know in *advance* just which excuses they'll have to make. So maybe they *say* there's a dragon. Maybe they *believe* they believe there's a dragon, it's called belief-in-belief. But they don't actually believe it. You can be mistaken about what you believe, most people never realize there's a difference between believing something and thinking it's good to believe it." Harry Potter had risen from the desk now, and taken a few steps toward Draco. "And Draco, you don't believe any more in blood purism, I'll show you that you don't. If blood purism is true, then Hermione Granger doesn't make sense, so what could explain her? Maybe she's a wizarding orphan raised by Muggles, just like I was? I could go to Granger and ask to see pictures of her parents, to see if she looks like them. Would you expect her to look different? Should we go perform that test?"

"They would have put her with relatives," Draco said, his voice trembling. "They'll still look the same."

"You see. You already know what experimental result you'll have to excuse. If you still believed in blood purism you would say, sure, let's go take a look, I bet she won't look like her parents, she's too powerful to be a real Muggleborn —"

"They *would* have put her with relatives!"

"Scientists can do tests to check for sure if someone is the true child of a father. Granger would probably do it if I paid her family enough. *She* wouldn't be afraid of the results. So what do you expect that test to show? Tell me to run it and we will. But you already know what the test will say. You'll always know. You won't ever be able to forget. You might *wish* you believed in blood purism, but you'll always *expect to see happen* just exactly what would happen if there was only one thing that made you a wizard. That was your sacrifice to become a scientist."

Draco's breathing was ragged. "Do you realize *what you've done*?" Draco surged forward and he seized Harry by the collar of his robes. His voice rose to a scream, it sounded unbearably loud in the closed classroom and the silence.

“Do you realize what you’ve done?”

Harry’s voice was shaky. “You had a belief. The belief was false. I helped you see that. What’s true is already so, owning up to it doesn’t make it worse —”

The fingers on Draco’s right hand clenched into a fist and that hand dropped down and blasted up unstoppably and punched Harry Potter in the jaw so hard that his body went crashing back into a desk and then to the floor.

“Idiot!” screamed Draco. *“Idiot! Idiot!”*

“Draco,” whispered Harry from the floor, “Draco, I’m sorry, I didn’t think this would happen for months, I didn’t expect you to awaken as a scientist this quickly, I thought I would have longer to prepare you, teach you the techniques that make it hurt less to admit you’re wrong —”

“What about Father?” Draco said. His voice trembled with rage. “Were you going to prepare *him* or did you just not *care* what happened after this?”

“You can’t tell *him*!” Harry said, his voice rising in alarm. “He’s not a scientist! You promised, Draco!”

For a moment the thought of Father not knowing came as a relief.

And then the real anger started to rise.

“So you planned for me to lie to him and tell him I still believe,” Draco said, voice shaking. “I’ll always have to lie to him, and now when I grow up I can’t be a Death Eater, and I won’t even be able to tell him why not.”

“If your father really loves you,” whispered Harry from the floor, “he’ll still love you even if you don’t become a Death Eater, and it sounds like your father *does* really love you, Draco —”

“*Your* stepfather is a scientist,” Draco said. The words coming out like biting knives. “If *you* weren’t going to be a scientist, he would still love you. But you’d be a *little less special* to him.”

Harry flinched. The boy opened his mouth, as if to say ‘I’m sorry’, and then closed his mouth, seeming to think better of it, which was either very smart of him or very lucky, because Draco might have tried to kill him.

“You should have warned me,” Draco said. His voice rose. “*You should have warned me!*”

“I... I did... every time I told you about the power, I told you about the price. I said, you have to admit you’re wrong. I said this would be the hardest path for you. That this was the sacrifice anyone had to make to become a scientist. I said, what if the experiment says one thing and your family and friends say another —”

"You call that a warning?" Draco was screaming now. *"You call that a warning? When we're doing a ritual that calls for a permanent sacrifice?"*

"I... I..." The boy on the floor swallowed. "I guess maybe it wasn't clear. I'm sorry. But that which can be destroyed by the truth should be."

Hitting him wasn't enough.

"You're wrong about one thing," Draco said, his voice deadly. "Granger isn't the strongest student in Hogwarts. She just gets the best grades in class. You're about to find out the difference."

Sudden shock showed in Harry's face, and he tried to roll quickly to his feet —

It was already too late for him.

"Expelliarmus!"

Harry's wand flew across the room.

"Gom jabbar!"

A pulse of inky blackness struck Harry's left hand.

"That's a torture spell," said Draco. "It's for getting information out of people. I'm just going to leave it on you and lock the door behind me when I go. Maybe I'll set the locking spell to wear off after a few hours. Maybe it won't wear off until you die in here. Have fun."

Draco moved smoothly backward, wand still on Harry. Draco's hand dipped down, picked up his bookbag, without his aim wavering.

The pain was already showing in Harry Potter's face as he spoke. "Malfoys are above the underage magic laws, I take it? It's not because your blood is stronger. It's because you already practiced. In the beginning you were as weak as any of us. Is my prediction wrong?"

Draco's hand whitened on his wand, but his aim stayed steady.

"Just so you know," Harry said through gritted teeth, "if you'd told me I was wrong I would have listened. *I* won't ever torture *you* when you show me that I'm wrong. And you *will*. Someday. You're awakened as a scientist now, and even if you never learn to use your power, you'll always," Harry gasped, "be looking, for ways, to test, your beliefs —"

Draco's backing away was less smooth, now, a little faster, and he had to work to keep his wand on Harry as he reached back to open the door and stepped back out of the classroom.

Then Draco shut the door again.

He cast the most powerful locking Charm he knew.

Draco waited until he heard Harry's first scream before casting the *Quietus*. And then he walked away.



"*Aaahhhhh! Finite Incantatem! Aaaahhh!*"

Harry's left hand had been put into a pot of boiling cooking oil and left there. He'd put everything he had into the *Finite Incantatem* and it still wasn't working.

Some hexes required specific counters or you couldn't undo them, or maybe it was just that Draco was that much stronger.

"*Aaaaahhhhh!*"

Harry's hand was really starting to hurt, now, and that was interfering with his attempts to think creatively.

But a few screams later, Harry realized what he had to do.

His pouch, unfortunately, was on the wrong side of his body, and it took some twisting to reach into it, especially with his other arm flailing around in a reflex, unstoppable attempt to fling off the source of pain. By the time he managed it his other arm had managed to throw away his wand again.

"Medical *ahhhhh* kit! Medical kit!"

On the floor, the green light was too dim to see by.

Harry couldn't stand. He couldn't crawl. He rolled across the floor to where he thought his wand was, and it wasn't there, and with one hand he managed to raise himself high enough to see his wand, and he rolled there, and got the wand, and rolled back to where the medical kit was opened. There was also a good deal of screaming, and a bit of throwing up.

It took eight tries before Harry could cast *Lumos*.

And then, well, the package wasn't designed to be opened one-handed, because all wizards were idiots, that was why. Harry had to use his teeth and so it took a while before Harry finally managed to wrap the Numbcloth over his left hand.

When all feeling in his left hand was finally gone, Harry let his mind come apart, and lay motionless on the floor, and cried for a while.

Well, Harry's mind said silently into itself, when it had recovered enough to think in words again. *Was it worth it?*

Slowly, Harry's functional hand reached up to a desk.

Harry pulled himself to his feet.

Took a deep breath.

Exhaled.

Smiled.

It wasn't much of a smile, but it was a smile nonetheless.

Thank you, Professor Quirrell, I couldn't have lost without you.

He hadn't redeemed Draco yet, not even close. Contrary to what Draco himself might now believe, Draco was still the child of a Death Eater, through and through. Still a boy who'd grown up thinking "rape" was something the cool older kids did. But it was one heck of a start.

Harry couldn't claim it had all gone just as planned. It had all gone just as completely made up on the spot. The *plan* hadn't called for this to happen until December or thereabouts, after Harry had taught Draco the techniques not to deny the evidence when he saw it.

But he'd seen the look of fear on Draco's face, realized that Draco was *already* taking an alternative hypothesis seriously, and seized the moment. One case of true curiosity had the same sort of redeeming power in rationality that one case of true love had in movies.

In retrospect, Harry had given himself hours to make the most important discovery in the history of magic, and months to break through the undeveloped mental barriers of an eleven-year-old boy. This could indicate that Harry had some sort of major cognitive deficit with respect to estimating task completion times.

Was Harry going to Science Hell for what he'd done? Harry wasn't sure. He'd contrived to keep Draco's mind on the possibility that magic was fading, made sure Draco would carry out the part of the experiment that would seem at first to point in that direction. He'd waited until after explaining genetics to prompt Draco into realizing about magical creatures (though Harry had thought in terms of ancient artifacts like the Sorting Hat, which no one could duplicate anymore, but which continued to function). But Harry hadn't actually exaggerated any evidence, hadn't distorted the meaning of any results. When the Interdict of Merlin had invalidated the test that should have been definitive, he'd told Draco up front.

And then there was the part *after* that . . .

But he hadn't actually *lied* to Draco. Draco had believed it, and *that would make it true*.

The end, admittedly, had not been fun.

Harry turned, and staggered toward the door.

Time to test Draco's locking spell.

The first step was simply trying to turn the doorknob. Draco could have been bluffing.

Draco hadn't been bluffing.

"*Finite Incantatem.*" Harry's voice came out rather hoarse, and he could feel that the spell hadn't taken.

So Harry tried it again, and that time it felt true. But another twist at the doorknob showed it hadn't worked. No surprise there.

Time to bring out the big guns. Harry drew a deep breath. This spell was one of the most powerful he'd learned so far.

"*Alohomora!*"

Harry staggered a little after saying it.

And the classroom door still didn't open.

That shocked Harry. Harry hadn't been planning to go anywhere near Dumbledore's forbidden corridor, of course. But a spell to open magical locks had seemed like a useful sort of spell anyway, and so Harry had learned it. Was Dumbledore's forbidden corridor meant to lure people so stupid that they didn't notice the security was worse than what Draco Malfoy could put on it?

Fear was creeping back into Harry's system. The placard in the medical kit had said the Numbcloth could only safely be used for up to thirty minutes. After that it would come off automatically, and not be reusable for 24 hours. Right now it was 6:51 PM. He'd put on the Numbcloth about five minutes ago.

So Harry took a step back, and considered the door. It was a solid panel of dark oaken wood, interrupted only by the brass metal doorknob.

Harry didn't know any explosive or cutting or smashing spells, and Transfiguring explosive would have violated the rule against Transfiguring things to be burned. Acid was a liquid and would have made fumes . . .

But that was no obstacle to a *creative thinker*.

Harry laid his wand against one of the door's brass hinges, and concentrated on the form of cotton as a pure abstraction apart from any material cotton, and also on the pure material apart from the pattern that made it a brass hinge, and brought the two concepts together, imposing shape on substance. An hour of Transfiguration practice every day for a month had gotten Harry to the point where he could Transfigure a subject of five cubic centimeters in just

under a minute.

After two minutes the hinge hadn't changed at all.

Whoever had designed Draco's locking spell, they'd thought of that, too. Or the door was part of Hogwarts and the castle was immune.

A glance showed the walls to be solid stone. So was the floor. So was the ceiling. You couldn't separately Transfigure a part of something that was a solid whole; Harry would have needed to try Transfiguring the whole wall, which would have taken hours or maybe days of continuous effort, if he could have done it at all, and if the wall wasn't contiguous with the rest of the whole castle...

Harry's Time-Turner wouldn't open until 9 PM. After that he could go back to 6pm, before the door was locked.

How long would the torture spell last?

Harry swallowed hard. Tears were coming into his eyes again.

His brilliantly creative mind had just offered the ingenious suggestion that Harry could cut his hand off using the hacksaw in the tool set stored in his pouch, which would hurt, obviously, but might hurt a lot less than Draco's pain spell, since the nerves would be gone; and he had tourniquets in the healer's kit.

And that was obviously a hideously stupid idea that Harry would regret the rest of his entire life.

But Harry didn't know if he could hold out for two hours under torture.

He wanted *out* of this classroom, he wanted out of this classroom *now*, he didn't want to wait in here screaming for two hours until he could use the Time-Turner, he needed to *get out* and find someone to get the torture spell off his hand...

Think! Harry screamed at his brain. *Think! Think!*



The Slytherin dorm was mostly empty. People were at dinner. For some reason Draco himself wasn't feeling very hungry.

Draco closed the door to his private room, locked it, Charmed it shut, Quieted it, sat down on his bed, and started to cry.

It wasn't fair.

It wasn't fair.

It was the first time Draco had ever really *lost* before, Father had warned him that losing for real would hurt the first time it happened, but he'd lost *so much*, it wasn't fair, it wasn't fair for him to lose *everything* the very first time he lost.

Somewhere in the dungeons, a boy Draco had actually liked was screaming in pain. Draco had never hurt anyone he'd liked before. Punishing people who deserved it was supposed to be fun, but this just felt sick inside. Father hadn't warned him about that, and Draco wondered if it was a hard lesson everyone had to learn when they grew up, or if Draco was just weak.

Draco wished it were Pansy screaming. That would have felt better.

And the worst part was knowing that it might have been a mistake to hurt Harry Potter.

Who else was there for Draco now? Dumbledore? After what he'd done? Draco would sooner have been burned alive.

Draco would have to go back to Harry Potter because there was nowhere else for him to go. And if Harry Potter said he didn't want him, then Draco would be nothing, just a pathetic little boy who could never be a Death Eater, never join Dumbledore's faction, never learn science.

The trap had been perfectly set, perfectly executed. Father had warned Draco over and over that what you sacrificed to Dark rituals couldn't be regained. But Father hadn't known that the accursed Muggles had invented rituals that didn't need wands, rituals you could be tricked into doing without knowing it, and that was only one of the terrible secrets which scientists knew and which Harry Potter had brought with him.

Draco started crying harder, then.

He didn't want this, he *didn't want this* but there was no turning back. It was too late. He was already a scientist.

Draco knew he should go back and free Harry Potter and apologize. It would have been the smart thing to do.

Instead Draco stayed in his bed and sobbed.

He'd already hurt Harry Potter. It might be the only time Draco ever got to hurt him, and he would have to hold to that one memory for the rest of his life.

Let him keep screaming.

Harry dropped the remnants of his hacksaw to the ground. The brass hinges had proved impervious, not even scratched, and Harry was beginning to suspect that even the desperation act of trying to Transfigure acid or explosives would have failed to open this door. On the plus side, the attempt had destroyed the hacksaw.

His watch said it was 7:02 PM, with less than fifteen minutes left, and Harry tried to remember if there were any other sharp things in his pouch that needed destroying, and felt another fit of tears welling up. If only, when his Time-Turner opened, he could go back and *prevent* —

And that was when Harry realized he was being *silly*.

It wasn't the first time he'd been locked in a room.

Professor McGonagall had already told him the correct way to do this.

... she'd also told him not to use the Time-Turner for this sort of thing.

Would Professor McGonagall realize that this occasion really *did* warrant a special exception? Or just take away the Time-Turner entirely?

Harry gathered up all his things, all the evidence, into his pouch. A *Scourgify* took care of the vomit on the floor, though not the sweat that had soaked his robes. He left the overturned desks overturned, it wasn't important enough to be worth doing with one hand.

When he was done, Harry glanced down at his watch. 7:04 PM.

And then Harry waited. Seconds passed, feeling like years.

At 7:07 PM, the door opened.

Professor Flitwick's puff-bearded face looked rather concerned. "Are you all right, Harry?" said the squeaky voice of Ravenclaw's Head of House. "I got a note saying you'd been locked in here —"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



MACHIAVELLIAN INTELLIGENCE HYPOTHESIS

ACT 3:

Draco waited in a small windowed alcove he'd found near the Great Hall, stomach churning.

There would be a price, and it would not be small. Draco had known that as soon as he'd woken up and realized that he didn't dare enter the Great Hall for breakfast because he might see Harry Potter there and Draco didn't know what would happen after that.

Footsteps approached.

"Here ya go," said Vincent's voice. "Now da boss ain't in a good mood today, so ya'd better watch your step."

Draco was going to skin that idiot alive and send back the flayed body with a request for a more intelligent servant, like a dead gerbil.

One set of footsteps went off, and the other set of footsteps came closer.

The churning in Draco's stomach got worse.

Harry Potter came into sight. His face was carefully neutral, but his blue-trimmed robes looked oddly askew, as if they hadn't been put on quite right —

"*Your hand*," Draco said without thinking about it at all.

Harry raised his left arm, as though to look at it himself.

The hand dangled limply from it, like something dead.

"Madam Pomfrey said it's not permanent," Harry said quietly. "She said it should mostly recover by the time classes start tomorrow."

For a single instant the news came as a relief.

And then Draco realized.

"You went to Madam Pomfrey," whispered Draco.

"Of course I did," said Harry Potter, as though stating the obvious. "My hand wasn't working."

It was slowly dawning on Draco what an *absolute* fool he'd been, far worse than the older Slytherins he'd chewed out.

He'd just taken for granted that no one would go to the authorities when a Malfoy did something to them. That no one would want Lucius Malfoy's eye on them, ever.

But Harry Potter wasn't a frightened little Hufflepuff trying to stay out of the game. He was already playing it, and Father's eye was already on him.

"What else did Madam Pomfrey say?" said Draco, his heart in his throat.

"Professor Flitwick said that the spell cast on my hand had been a Dark torture hex and extremely serious business, and that refusing to say who did it was absolutely unacceptable."

There was a long pause.

"And then?" Draco said in a shaking voice.

Harry Potter smiled slightly. "I apologized deeply, which made Professor Flitwick look *very* stern, and then I told Professor Flitwick that the whole thing was, indeed, extremely serious, secret, *delicate* business, and that I'd already informed the Headmaster about the project."

Draco gasped. "No! Flitwick isn't going to just accept that! He'll check with Dumbledore!"

"Indeed," said Harry Potter. "I was promptly hauled off to the Headmaster's office."

Draco was trembling now. If Dumbledore brought Harry Potter before the Wizengamot, willingly or otherwise, and had the Boy-Who-Lived testify under Veritaserum that Draco had tortured him . . . too many people loved Harry Potter, Father could *lose* that vote . . .

Father might be able to convince Dumbledore not to do that, but it would *cost*. Cost terribly. The game had rules now, you couldn't just threaten someone at random any more. But Draco had walked into Dumbledore's hands of his

own free will. And Draco was a very valuable hostage.

Though since Draco couldn't be a Death Eater now, he wasn't as valuable as Father thought.

The thought tore at his heart like a Cutting Charm.

"Then what?" whispered Draco.

"Dumbledore deduced immediately that it was you. He knew we'd been associating."

The worst possible scenario. If Dumbledore hadn't guessed who did it, he might not have risked using Legilimency just to find out . . . but if Dumbledore *knew* . . .

"And?" Draco forced out the word.

"We had a little chat."

"And?"

Harry Potter grinned. "And I explained that it would be in his best interest not to do anything."

Draco's mind ran into a brick wall and splattered. He just stared at Harry Potter with his mouth hanging slack like a fool.

It took that long for Draco to remember.

Harry knew Dumbledore's mysterious secret, the one Snape used as his hold.

Draco could just see it now. Dumbledore looking all stern, concealing his eagerness as he explained to Harry what a terribly serious matter this was.

And Harry politely telling Dumbledore to keep his mouth shut if he knew what was good for him.

Father had warned Draco against people like this, people who could ruin you and still be so likable that it was hard to hate them properly.

"After which," Harry said, "the Headmaster told Professor Flitwick that this was, indeed, a secret and delicate matter of which he had already been informed, and that he did not think pressing it at this time would help me or anyone. Professor Flitwick started to say something about the Headmaster's usual plotting going much too far, and I had to interrupt at that point and explain that it had been my *own* idea and not anything the Headmaster forced me into, so Professor Flitwick spun around and started lecturing *me*, and the Headmaster interrupted *him* and said that as the Boy-Who-Lived I was doomed to have weird and dangerous adventures so I was safer if I got into them on purpose instead of waiting for them to happen by accident, and that was when

Professor Flitwick threw up his little hands and started shrieking in a high-pitched voice at *both* of us about how he didn't care what we were cooking up together, but this wasn't ever to happen again for as long as I was in Ravenclaw House or he would have me thrown out and I could go to Gryffindor which was where all this *Dumbledoring* belonged —

Harry was making it *very* hard for Draco to hate him.

"Anyway," Harry said, "I didn't want to be thrown out of Ravenclaw, so I promised Professor Flitwick that nothing like this would happen again, and if it did, I would just tell him who did it."

Harry's eyes should have been cold. They weren't. The voice should have made it a deadly threat. It wasn't.

And Draco saw the question that should have been obvious, and it killed the mood in an instant.

"Why . . . didn't you?"

Harry walked over to the window, into the small beam of sunlight shining into the alcove, and turned his head outward, toward the green grounds of Hogwarts. The brightness shone on him, on his robes, on his face.

"Why didn't I?" Harry said. His voice caught. "I guess because I just couldn't get angry at you. I knew I'd hurt you first. I won't even call it fair, because what I did to you was worse than what you did to me."

It was like running into another brick wall. Harry could have been speaking archaic Greek for all Draco understood him then.

Draco's mind scrabbled for patterns and came up flat blank. The statement was a concession that hadn't been in Harry's best interests. It wasn't even what Harry should say to make Draco a more loyal servant, now that Harry held power over him. For that Harry should be emphasizing how kindly he'd been, not how much he'd hurt Draco.

"Even so," Harry said, and now his voice was lower, almost a whisper, "please don't do that again, Draco. It hurt, and I'm not sure I could forgive you a second time. I'm not sure I'd be able to want to."

Draco just didn't get it.

Was Harry trying to be *friends* with him?

There was no way Harry Potter could be dumb enough to believe that was still possible after what he'd done.

You could be someone's friend and ally, like Draco had tried to do with Harry, or you could destroy their life and leave them no other options. Not

both.

But then Draco didn't understand what else Harry *could* be trying.

And a strange thought came to Draco then, something Harry had kept talking about yesterday.

And the thought was: *Test it.*

You're awakened as a scientist now, Harry had said, *and even if you never learn to use your power, you'll always, be looking, for ways, to test, your beliefs...* Those ominous words, spoken in gasps of agony, had kept running through Draco's mind.

If Harry *was* pretending to be the repentant friend who had accidentally hurt someone . . .

"You *planned* what you did to me!" Draco said, managing to put a note of accusation in his voice. "You didn't do it because you got angry, you did it because you *wanted* to!"

Fool, Harry Potter would say, *of course I planned it, and now you're mine* —

Harry turned back toward Draco. "What happened yesterday *wasn't* the plan," Harry said, his voice seeming stuck in his throat. "The *plan* was that I would teach you why you were always better off knowing the truth, and then we would try together to discover the truth about blood, and whatever the answer was we would accept it. Yesterday I . . . rushed things."

"Always better off knowing the truth," Draco said coldly. "Like you did me a *favor*."

Harry nodded, blowing Draco's mind completely, and said, "What if Lucius comes up with the same idea I did, that the problem is stronger wizards having fewer children? He might start a program to pay the strongest purebloods to have more children. In fact, if blood purism *were* right, that's just what Lucius *should* be doing — addressing the problem on *his* side, where he can make things happen right away. Right now, Draco, you're the only friend Lucius has who would try to stop him from wasting the effort, because you're the only one who knows the *real* truth and can predict the real results."

The thought came to Draco that Harry Potter had been raised in a place so strange that he was now effectively a magical creature rather than a wizard. Draco simply couldn't guess what Harry would say or do next.

"*Why?*" Draco said. Putting pain and betrayal into his voice wasn't hard at all. "Why did you *do* this to me? What *was* your plan?"

"Well," Harry said, "you're Lucius's heir, and believe it or not, Dumbledore

thinks I belong to him. So we could grow up and fight their battles with each other. Or we could do something else.”

Slowly, Draco’s mind wrapped around this. “You want to provoke a fight to the finish between them, then seize power after they’re both exhausted.” Draco felt cold dread in his chest. He would *have* to try and stop that no matter the cost to himself —

But Harry shook his head. “Stars above, *no!*”

“No . . . ?”

“You wouldn’t go along with that and neither would I,” said Harry. “This is *our* world, we don’t want to break it. But imagine, say, Lucius thought the Conspiracy was your tool and you were on his side, Dumbledore thought the Conspiracy was my tool and I was on his side, Lucius thought that you’d turned me and Dumbledore believed the Conspiracy was mine, Dumbledore thought that I’d turned you and Lucius believed the Conspiracy was yours, and so they both helped us out but only in ways that the other one wouldn’t notice.”

Draco did not have to fake being speechless.

Father had once taken him to see a play called *The Tragedy of Light*, about this *incredibly* clever Slytherin named Light who’d set out to purify the world of evil using an ancient ring that could kill anyone whose name and face he knew, and who’d been opposed by another incredibly clever Slytherin, a villain named Lawliet, who’d worn a disguise to conceal his true face; and Draco had shouted and cheered at all the right parts, especially in the middle; and then the play had ended sadly and Draco had been hugely disappointed and Father had gently pointed out that the word ‘Tragedy’ was right there in the title.

Afterward, Father had asked Draco if he understood why they had gone to see this play.

Draco had said it was to teach him to be as cunning as Light and Lawliet when he grew up.

Father had said that Draco couldn’t possibly be more wrong, and pointed out that while Lawliet had cleverly concealed his face there had been no good reason for him to tell Light his *name*. Father had then gone on to demolish almost every part of the play, while Draco listened with his eyes growing wider and wider. And Father had finished by saying that plays like this were *always* unrealistic, because if the playwright had known what someone *actually* as smart as Light would *actually* do, the playwright would have tried to take over

the world himself instead of just writing plays about it.

That was when Father had told Draco about the Rule of Three, which was that any plot which required more than three different things to happen would never work in real life.

Father had *further* explained that since only a fool would attempt a plot that was *as complicated as possible*, the real limit was two.

Draco couldn't even find words to describe the sheer gargantuan unworkability of Harry's master plan.

But it was *just* the sort of mistake you would make if you didn't have any mentors and thought you were clever and had learned about plotting by watching plays.

"So," said Harry, "what do you think of the plan?"

"It's clever . . ." Draco said slowly. Shouting *brilliant!* and gasping in awe would have looked too suspicious. "Harry, can I ask a question?"

"Sure," said Harry.

"Why did you buy Granger an expensive pouch?"

"To show no hard feelings," said Harry at once. "Though I expect she'll also feel awkward if she refuses any small requests I make over the next couple of months."

And that was when Draco realized that Harry actually *was* trying to be his friend.

Harry's move against Granger *had* been smart, maybe even brilliant. Make your enemy not suspect you, *and* put them into your debt in a friendly way so that you could maneuver them into position *just by asking them*. Draco couldn't have gotten away with that, his target would have been too suspicious, but the Boy-Who-Lived *could*. So the first step of Harry's plot was to give his enemy an expensive present, Draco wouldn't have thought of that, but it could *work* . . .

If you were Harry's enemy, his plots might be hard to see through at first, they might even be stupid, but his reasoning would make *sense* once you understood it, you would comprehend that he was trying to hurt you.

The way Harry was acting toward Draco right now did *not* make sense.

Because if you were Harry's *friend*, then he tried to be friends with you in the alien, incomprehensible way he'd been raised by Muggles to do, even if it meant destroying your entire life.

The silence stretched.

"I know that I've abused our friendship terribly," Harry said finally. "But please realize, Draco, that in the end, I just wanted the two of us to find the truth together. Is that something you can forgive?"

A fork with two paths, but with only one path easy to go back on later if Draco changed his mind . . .

"I guess I understand what you were trying to do," Draco lied, "so yes."

Harry's eyes lit up. "I'm glad to hear that, Draco," he said softly.

The two students stood in that alcove, Harry still dipped in the lone sunbeam, Draco in shadow.

And Draco realized with a note of horror and despair, that although it was a terrifying fate indeed to be Harry's friend, Harry now had so many different avenues for threatening Draco that being his enemy would be even *worse*.

Probably.

Maybe.

Well, he could always switch to being enemies later . . .

He was doomed.

"So," Draco said. "Now what?"

"We study again next Saturday?"

"It better not go like the last one —"

"Don't worry, it won't," said Harry. "A few more Saturdays like *that* and you'd be ahead of *me*."

Harry laughed. Draco didn't.

"Oh, and before you go," Harry said, and grinned sheepishly. "I know this is a bad time, but I wanted to ask you for advice about something, actually."

"Okay," Draco said, still a bit distracted by that last statement.

Harry's eyes grew intent. "Buying that pouch for Granger used up most of the gold I managed to steal from my Gringotts vault —"

What.

"— and McGonagall has the vault key, or Dumbledore does now, maybe. And I was just about to launch a plot that might take some money, so I was wondering if you know how I can get access —"

"I'll loan you the money," said Draco's mouth in sheer existential reflex.

Harry looked taken aback, but in a pleased way. "Draco, you don't have to —"

"How much?"

Harry named the amount and Draco couldn't quite keep the shock from

showing on his face. That was almost all the spending money Father had given Draco to last out the whole year, Draco would be left with just a few Galleons —

Then Draco mentally kicked himself. All he had to do was write Father and explain that the money was gone because he had managed to *loan it to Harry Potter*, and Father would send him a special congratulatory note written in golden ink, a giant Chocolate Frog that would take two weeks to eat, and ten times as many Galleons just in case Harry Potter needed another loan.

"It's way too much, isn't it," said Harry. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked —"

"Excuse me, I *am* a Malfoy, you know," said Draco. "I was just surprised you *wanted* that much."

"Don't worry," Harry Potter said cheerfully. "It's nothing that threatens your family's interests, just me being evil."

Draco nodded. "No problem, then. You want to go get it right now?"

"Sure," said Harry.

As they left the alcove and started heading toward the dungeons, Draco couldn't help but ask, "So *can* you tell me which plot this is for?"

"Rita Skeeter."

Draco thought some very bad words to himself, but it was far too late to say no.



By the time they'd reached the dungeons, Draco had started pulling together his thoughts again.

He *was* having trouble hating Harry Potter. Harry *had* been trying to be friendly, he was just insane.

And that wasn't going to stop Draco's revenge or even slow it down.

"So," Draco said, after looking around to make certain no one was nearby. Their voices would both be Blurred, of course, but it never hurt to be extra sure. "I've been thinking. When we bring new recruits into the Conspiracy, they're going to have to *think* we're equals. Otherwise it would only take *one* of them to blow the plot to Father. You already worked that out, right?"

"Naturally," said Harry.

"*Will* we be equals?" said Draco.

"I'm afraid not," Harry said. It was clear that he was trying to sound gentle, and also clear that he was trying to suppress a good deal of condescension and not quite succeeding. "I'm sorry, Draco, but you don't even know what the word *Bayesian* in *Bayesian Conspiracy* means right now. You're going to have to study for months before we take anyone else in, just so you can put up a *good front*."

"Because I don't know enough science," Draco said, carefully keeping his voice neutral.

Harry shook his head at that. "The problem isn't that you're ignorant of specific science things like deoxyribonucleic acid. *That* wouldn't stop you from being my equal. The problem is that you aren't trained in the methods of rationality, the *deeper* secret knowledge behind how all those discoveries got made in the first place. I'll *try* to teach you those, but they're a lot harder to learn. Think of what we did yesterday, Draco. Yes, you did some of the work. But I was the only one in control. You answered some of the questions. I asked all of them. You helped push. I did the steering by myself. And without the methods of rationality, Draco, you can't possibly steer the Conspiracy where it needs to go."

"I see," said Draco, his voice sounding disappointed.

Harry's voice tried to gentle itself even more. "I'll try to respect your expertise, Draco, about things like people stuff. But you need to respect my expertise too, and there's just no *way* you could be my equal when it comes to steering the Conspiracy. You've only been a scientist for *one day*, you know *one* secret about deoxyribonucleic acid, and you aren't trained in *any* of the methods of rationality."

"I understand," said Draco.

And he did.

People stuff, Harry had said. Seizing control of the Conspiracy probably wouldn't even be difficult. And afterward, he would kill Harry Potter just to be sure —

The memory rose up in Draco of how sick inside it had felt last night, knowing Harry was screaming.

Draco thought some more bad words.

Fine. He *wouldn't* kill Harry. Harry had been raised by Muggles, it wasn't his fault he was insane.

Instead, Harry would live on, just so that Draco could tell him that it had

all been for Harry's own good, really, he ought to be grateful —

And with a sudden twitch of surprised pleasure, Draco realized that it actually *was* for Harry's own good. If Harry tried to carry out his plan of playing Dumbledore and Father for fools, he would *die*.

That made it *perfect*.

Draco would take all of Harry's dreams away from him, just as Harry had done to him.

Draco would tell Harry that it had been for his own good, and it would be absolutely true.

Draco would wield the Conspiracy and the power of science to purify the wizarding world, and Father would be as proud of him as if he'd been a Death Eater.

Harry Potter's evil plots would be foiled, and the forces of right would prevail.

The perfect revenge.

Unless . . .

Just pretend to be pretending to be a scientist, Harry had told him.

Draco didn't have words to describe exactly what was wrong with Harry's mind —

(since Draco had never heard the term *depth of recursion*)

— but he could guess what sort of plots it implied.

. . . unless all that was exactly what Harry *wanted* Draco to do as part of some even *larger* plot which Draco would play *right into* by trying to foil this one, Harry might even *know* that his plan was unworkable, it might have no purpose *except* luring Draco to thwart it —

No. That way lay *madness*. There *had* to be a limit. The Dark Lord himself hadn't been *that* twisty. That sort of thing didn't happen in real life, only in Father's silly bedtime stories about foolish gargoyles who always ended up furthering the hero's plans every time they tried to stop him.



And beside Draco, Harry walked along with a smile on his face, thinking about the evolutionary origins of human intelligence.

In the beginning, before people had quite understood how evolution worked, they'd gone around thinking crazy ideas like *human intelligence evolved*

so that we could invent better tools.

The reason why this was crazy was that only one person in the tribe had to invent a tool, and then everyone else would use it, and it would spread to other tribes, and still be used by their descendants a hundred years later. That was great from the perspective of scientific progress, but in evolutionary terms, it meant that the person who invented something didn't have much of a fitness *advantage*, didn't have all that many *more* children than everyone else. Only *relative* fitness advantages could increase the relative frequency of a gene in the population, and drive some lonely mutation to the point where it was universal and everyone had it. And brilliant inventions just weren't common enough to provide the sort of consistent selection pressure it took to promote a mutation. It was a natural guess, if you looked at humans with their guns and tanks and nuclear weapons and compared them to chimpanzees, that the intelligence was there to make the technology. A natural guess, but wrong.

Before people had quite understood how evolution worked, they'd gone around thinking crazy ideas like *the climate changed, and tribes had to migrate, and people had to become smarter in order to solve all the novel problems.*

But human beings had four times the brain size of a chimpanzee. 20% of a human's metabolic energy went into feeding the brain. Humans were *ridiculously* smarter than any other species. That sort of thing didn't happen because the environment stepped up the difficulty of its problems a little. Then the organisms would just get a little smarter to solve them. Ending up with that gigantic outsized brain must have taken some sort of *runaway* evolutionary process, something that would push and push without limits.

And today's scientists had a pretty good guess at what that runaway evolutionary process had been.

Harry had once read a famous book called *Chimpanzee Politics*. The book had described how an adult chimpanzee named Luit had confronted the aging alpha, Yeroen, with the help of a young, recently matured chimpanzee named Nikkie. Nikkie had not intervened directly in the fights between Luit and Yeroen, but had prevented Yeroen's other supporters in the tribe from coming to his aid, distracting them whenever a confrontation developed between Luit and Yeroen. And in time Luit had won, and become the new alpha, with Nikkie as the second most powerful...

... though it hadn't taken very long after that for Nikkie to form an alliance with the defeated Yeroen, overthrow Luit, and become the *new new*

alpha.

It really made you appreciate what millions of years of hominids trying to outwit *each other* — an evolutionary arms race without limit — had led to in the way of increased mental capacity.

'Cause, y'know, a human would have totally seen that one coming.



And beside Harry, Draco walked along, suppressing his smile as he thought about his revenge.

Someday, maybe in years but someday, Harry Potter would learn just what it meant to underestimate a Malfoy.

Draco had awakened as a scientist in a single day. Harry had said that wasn't supposed to happen for months.

But of course if you were a Malfoy, you would be a more powerful scientist than anyone who wasn't.

So Draco would learn all of Harry Potter's methods of rationality, and then when the time was ripe —

Author's Note

Since the science in this story is usually all correct, I include a warning that in Ch. 22–25 Harry overlooks many possibilities, the most important of which is that there are lots of magical genes but they're all on one chromosome (which wouldn't happen naturally, but the chromosome might have been engineered). In this case, the inheritance pattern would be Mendelian, but the magical chromosome could still be degraded by chromosomal crossover with its nonmagical homologue. (Harry has read about Mendel and chromosomes in science history books, but he hasn't studied enough actual genetics to know about chromosomal crossover. Hey, he's only eleven.) However, although a modern science journal would find a lot more nits to pick, everything Harry presents as strong evidence is in fact strong evidence — the other possibilities are improbable.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



ACT 2:

(The sun shone brilliantly into the Great Hall from the enchanted sky-ceiling above, illuminating the students as though they sat beneath the naked sky, gleaming from their plates and bowls, as, refreshed by a night's sleep, they inhaled breakfast in preparation for whatever plans they'd made for their Sunday.)

So. There was only one thing that made you a wizard.

That wasn't surprising, when you thought about it. What DNA mostly did was tell ribosomes how to chain amino acids together into proteins. Conventional physics seemed quite capable of describing amino acids, and no matter how many amino acids you chained together, conventional physics said you would never, ever get magic out of it.

And yet magic seemed to be hereditary, following DNA.

Then that probably *wasn't* because the DNA was chaining together non-magical amino acids into magical proteins.

Rather the key DNA sequence did not, of itself, give you your magic at all. Magic came from somewhere else.

(At the Ravenclaw table there was one boy who was staring off into space, as his right hand automatically spooned some unimportant food into his mouth

from whatever was in front of him. You probably could have substituted a pile of dirt and he wouldn't have noticed.)

And for some reason the Source of Magic was paying attention to a particular DNA marker among individuals who were ordinary ape-descended humans in every other way.

(Actually there were quite a lot of boys and girls staring off into space. It was the *Ravenclaw* table, after all.)

There were other lines of logic leading to the same conclusion. *Complex* machinery was always universal within a sexually reproducing species. If gene B relied on gene A, then A had to be useful on its own, and rise to near-universality in the gene pool on its own, before B would be useful often enough to confer a fitness advantage. Then once B was universal you would get a variant A* that relied on B, and then C that relied on A* and B, then B* that relied on C, until the whole machine would fall apart if you removed a single piece. But it all had to happen *incrementally* — evolution never looked ahead, evolution would never start promoting B in *preparation* for A becoming universal later. Evolution was the simple historical fact that, whichever organisms did in fact have the most children, their genes would in fact be more frequent in the next generation. So each piece of a complex machine had to become nearly universal before other pieces in the machine would evolve to depend on its presence.

So *complex, interdependent* machinery, the powerful sophisticated protein machines that drove life, was always *universal* within a sexually reproducing species — except for a small handful of *non-interdependent variants* that were being selected on at any given time, as further complexity was slowly laid down. It was why all human beings had the same underlying brain design, the same emotions, the same facial expressions wired up to those emotions; those adaptations were complex, so they *had* to be universal.

If magic had been like that, a big complex adaptation with lots of necessary genes, then a wizard mating with a Muggle would have resulted in a child with only half those parts and half the machine wouldn't do much. And so there would have been no Muggleborns, ever. Even if all the pieces had individually gotten into the Muggle gene pool, they'd never reassemble all in one place to form a wizard.

There hadn't been some genetically isolated valley of humans that had stumbled onto an evolutionary pathway leading to sophisticated magical sections of the brain. That complex genetic machinery, if wizards interbred with

Muggles, would never have reassembled into Muggleborns.

So however your genes made you a wizard, it *wasn't* by containing the blueprints for complicated machinery.

That was the other reason Harry had guessed the Mendelian pattern would be there. If magical genes weren't complicated, why would there be more than one?

And yet magic itself seemed pretty complicated. A door-locking spell would prevent the door from opening *and* prevent you from Transfiguring the hinges *and* resist *Finite Incantatem* and *Alohomora*. Many elements all pointing in the same direction: you could call that goal-orientation, or in simpler language, purposefulness.

There were only two known causes of purposeful complexity. Natural selection, which produced things like butterflies. And intelligent engineering, which produced things like cars.

Magic didn't seem like something that had self-replicated into existence. Spells were purposefully complicated, but not, like a butterfly, complicated for the purpose of making copies of themselves. Spells were complicated for the purpose of serving their user, like a car.

Some intelligent engineer, then, had created the Source of Magic, and told it to pay attention to a particular DNA marker.

The obvious next thought was that this had something to do with "Atlantis".

Harry had asked Hermione about that earlier — on the train to Hogwarts, after hearing Draco say it — and so far as she knew, nothing more was known than the word itself.

It might have been pure legend. But it was also plausible enough that a civilization of magic-users, especially one from *before* the Interdict of Merlin, would have managed to blow itself up.

The line of reasoning continued: Atlantis had been an isolated civilization that had somehow brought into being the Source of Magic, and told it to serve only people with the Atlantean genetic marker, the blood of Atlantis.

And by similar logic: The words a wizard spoke, the wand movements, those weren't complicated enough of themselves to build up the spell effects from scratch — not the way that the three billion base pairs of human DNA actually *were* complicated enough to build a human body from scratch, not the way that computer programs took up thousands of bytes of data.

So the words and wand movements were just triggers, levers pulled on

some hidden and more complex machine. Buttons, not blueprints.

And just like a computer program wouldn't compile if you made a single spelling error, the Source of Magic wouldn't respond to you unless you cast your spells in exactly the right way.

The chain of logic was inexorable.

And it led inevitably toward a single final conclusion.

The ancient forebears of the wizards, thousands of years earlier, had told the Source of Magic to only levitate things if you said . . .

'Wingardium Leviosa.'

Harry slumped over at the breakfast table, resting his forehead wearily on his right hand.

There was a story from the dawn days of Artificial Intelligence — back when they were just starting out and no one had yet realized the problem would be difficult — about a professor who had delegated one of his grad students to solve the problem of computer vision.

Harry was beginning to understand how that grad student must have felt.

This could take a while.

Why did it take more effort to cast the Alohomora spell, if it was just like pressing a button?

Who'd been silly enough to build in a spell for *Avada Kedavra* that could only be cast using hatred?

Why did wordless Transfiguration require you to make a complete mental separation between the concept of form and concept of material?

Harry might not be done with this problem by the time he graduated Hogwarts. He could still be working on this problem when he was *thirty years old*. Hermione had been right, Harry *hadn't* realized that on a gut level before. He'd just given an inspiring speech about determination.

Harry's mind briefly considered whether to get on a gut level that he might never solve the problem at all, then decided that would be taking things much too far.

Besides, so long as he could get as far as immortality in the first few decades, he'd be fine.

What method had the Dark Lord used? Come to think, the fact that the Dark Lord had somehow managed to survive the death of his first body was almost *infinitely* more important than the fact that he'd tried to take over magical Britain —

“Excuse me,” said an expected voice from behind him in very unexpected tones. “At your convenience, Mr. Malfoy requests the favor of a conversation.”

Harry did not choke on his breakfast cereal. Instead he turned around and beheld Mr. Crabbe.

“Excuse *me*,” said Harry. “Don’t you mean ‘Da boss wants ta talk wid youse?’”

Mr. Crabbe didn’t look happy. “Mr. Malfoy instructed me to speak properly.”

“I can’t hear you,” Harry said. “You’re not speaking properly.” He turned back to his bowl of tiny blue crystal snowflakes and deliberately ate another spoonful.

“Da boss wants to talk with youse,” came a threatening voice from behind him. “Ya’d better come see him if ya know what’s good for ya.”

There. *Now* everything was going according to plan.



ACT 1:

“A *reason*?” said the old wizard. He restrained the fury from his face. The boy before him had been the victim, and certainly did not need to be frightened any further. “There is *nothing* that can excuse —”

“What I did to him was worse.”

The old wizard stiffened in sudden horror. “Harry, *what have you done?*”

“I tricked Draco into believing that I’d tricked him into participating in a ritual that sacrificed his belief in blood purism. And that meant he couldn’t be a Death Eater when he grew up. He’d lost everything, Headmaster.”

There was a long quiet in the office, broken only by the tiny puffs and whistles of the fiddly things, which after enough time had come to seem like silence.

“Dear me,” said the old wizard, “I *do* feel silly. And *here* I was expecting you might try to redeem the heir of Malfoy by, say, *showing him true friendship and kindness.*”

“*Ha!* Yeah, like *that* would have worked.”

The old wizard sighed. This was taking it too far. “Tell me, Harry. Did it even *occur* to you that there was something *incongruous* about setting out to

redeem someone through lies and trickery?”

“I did it without telling any direct lies, and since we’re talking about Draco Malfoy here, I think the word you’re looking for is *congruous*.” The boy looked rather smug.

The old wizard shook his head in despair. “And *this* is the hero. We’re all doomed.”



ACT 5:

The long, narrow tunnel of rough stone, unlit except by a child’s wand, seemed to stretch on for miles.

The reason for this was simple: It *did* stretch on for miles.

The time was three in the morning, and Fred and George were starting the long way down the secret passage that led from a statue of a one-eyed witch in Hogwarts, to the cellar of the candy shop in Hogsmeade.

“How’s it doing?” said Fred in a low voice.

(Not that there’d be anyone listening, but there was something odd about talking in a normal voice when you were going through a secret passage.)

“Still on the fritz,” said George.

“Both, or —”

“Intermittent one fixed itself again. Other one’s same as ever.”

The Map was an extraordinarily powerful artifact, capable of tracking every sentient being on the school grounds, in real time, by name. Almost certainly, it had been created during the original raising of Hogwarts. It was *not good* that errors were starting to pop up. Chances were that no one except Dumbledore could fix it if it was broken.

And the Weasley twins weren’t about to turn the Map over to Dumbledore. It would have been an unforgivable insult to the Marauders — the four unknowns who’d managed to steal part of the *Hogwarts security system*, something probably forged by Salazar Slytherin himself, and twist it into a *tool for student pranking*.

Some might have considered it disrespectful.

Some might have considered it criminal.

The Weasley twins firmly believed that if Godric Gryffindor had been

around to see it, he would have approved.

The brothers walked on and on and on, mostly in silence. The Weasley twins talked to each other when they were thinking through new pranks, or when one of them knew something the other didn't. Otherwise there wasn't much point. If they already knew the same information, they tended to think the same thoughts and make the same decisions.

(Back in the old days, whenever magical identical twins were born, it had been the custom to kill one of them after birth.)

In time, Fred and George clambered out into a dusty cellar, strewn with barrels and racks of strange ingredients.

Fred and George waited. It wouldn't have been polite to do anything else.

Before too long a thin old man in black pajamas clambered down the steps that led into the cellar, yawning. "Hello, boys," said Ambrosius Flume. "I wasn't expecting you tonight. Out of stock already?"

Fred and George decided that Fred would speak.

"Not exactly, Mr. Flume," said Fred. "We were hoping you could help us with something considerably more . . . interesting."

"Now, boys," said Flume, sounding severe, "I hope you didn't wake me up just so I could tell you again that I'm not selling you any merchandise that could get you into real trouble. Not until you're sixteen, anyways —"

George drew forth an item from his robes, and wordlessly passed it to Flume. "Have you seen this?" said Fred.

Flume looked at yesterday's edition of the *Daily Prophet* and nodded, scowling. The headline on the paper read THE NEXT DARK LORD? and showed a young boy which some student's camera had managed to catch in an uncharacteristically cold and grim expression.

"I can't believe that Malfoy," Flume snapped. "Going after the boy when he's only eleven! The man ought to be ground up and used to make chocolates!"

Fred and George blinked in unison. *Malfoy* was behind Rita Skeeter? Harry Potter hadn't warned them about that . . . which surely meant that Harry didn't know. He never would have brought them in if he did . . .

Fred and George exchanged glances. Well, Harry didn't *need* to know until after the job was done.

"Mr. Flume," Fred said quietly, "the Boy-Who-Lived needs your help."

Flume looked at them both.

Then he let out his breath with a sigh.

“All right,” said Flume, “what do you want?”



ACT 6:

When Rita Skeeter was intent on a tasty prey, she didn't tend to notice the scurrying ants who constituted the rest of the universe, which was how she almost bumped into the balding young man who'd stepped into her pathway.

“Miss Skeeter,” said the man, sounding rather severe and cold for someone whose face looked that young. “Fancy running into you here.”

“Out of my way, buster!” snapped Rita, and tried to step around him.

The man in her pathway matched the movement so perfectly that it was like neither of them had moved at all, just stood still while the street shifted around them.

Rita's eyes narrowed. “Who do you think you are?”

“How very foolish,” the man said dryly. “It would have been wise to memorize the face of the disguised Death Eater training Harry Potter to be the next Dark Lord. After all,” a thin smile, “*that* certainly sounds like someone you wouldn't want to run into on the street, especially after doing a hatchet job on him in the newspaper.”

Rita took a moment to place the reference. *This* was Quirinus Quirrell? He looked too young and too old at the same time; his face, if it relaxed from its severe and condescending pose, would belong to someone in his late thirties. And his hair was already falling out? Couldn't he afford a healer?

No, that wasn't important, she had a time and a place and a beetle to be. She'd just received an anonymous tip about Madam Bones making time with one of her younger assistants. That would be worth quite a bonus if she could manage to verify it, Bones was high on the hit list. The tipster had said that Bones and her young assistant were due to eat lunch in a special room at Mary's Place, a very popular room for certain purposes; a room which, she'd found, was secure against all listening devices, but not proof against a beautiful blue beetle nestled up against one wall . . .

“Out of my *way!*” Rita said, and tried to push Quirrell from her path. Quirrell's arm brushed her own, deflecting, and Rita staggered as the thrust went into the thin air.

Quirrell pulled up the sleeve of his left robe, showing his left arm. “Observe,” said Quirrell, “no Dark Mark. I would like your paper to publish a retraction.”

Rita let out an incredulous laugh. Of course the man wasn’t a real Death Eater. The paper wouldn’t have published it if he was. “Forget it, buster. Now take a hike.”

Quirrell stared at her for a moment.

Then he smiled.

“Miss Skeeter,” said Quirrell, “I had hoped to find some lever that would prove persuasive. Yet I find that I cannot deny myself the pleasure of simply crushing you.”

“It’s been tried. Now get out of my way, buster, or I’ll find some Aurors and have you arrested for obstruction of journalism.”

Quirrell swept her a small bow, and then walked past. “Goodbye, Rita Skeeter,” said his voice from behind her.

As Rita bulled on ahead, she noted in the back of her mind that the man was whistling a tune as he walked away.

Like *that* would scare her.



ACT 4:

“Sorry, count me out,” said Lee Jordan. “I’m more the giant spider type.”

The Boy-Who-Lived had said that he had *important* work for the Order of Chaos, something serious and secret, more significant and difficult than their usual run of pranks.

And then Harry Potter had launched into a speech that was inspiring, yet vague. A speech to the effect that Fred and George and Lee had tremendous potential if they could just learn to be *weirder*. To make people’s lives *surreal*, instead of just surprising them with the equivalents of buckets of water propped above doors. (Fred and George had exchanged interested looks, they’d never thought of that one.) Harry Potter had invoked a picture of the prank they’d pulled on Neville — which, Harry had mentioned with some remorse, the Sorting Hat had chewed him out on — but which must have made Neville *doubt his own sanity*. For Neville it would have felt like being suddenly transported

into an alternate universe. The same way everyone else had felt when they'd seen Snape apologize. That was the *true power of pranking*.

Are you with me? Harry Potter had cried, and Lee Jordan had answered no.

"Count us *in*," said Fred, or possibly George, for there was no doubt that Godric Gryffindor would have said yes.

Lee Jordan gave a regretful grin, and stood up, and left the deserted and Quieted corridor where the four members of the Order of Chaos had met and sat down in a conspiratorial circle.

The three members of the Order of Chaos got down to business.

(It wasn't *that* sad. Fred and George would still work with Lee on giant spider pranks, same as ever. They'd only started calling it the Order of Chaos in order to recruit Harry Potter, after Ron had told them about Harry being weird and evil, and Fred and George had decided to save Harry by showing him true friendship and kindness. Thankfully this no longer seemed necessary — although they weren't *quite* sure about that . . .)

"So," said one of the twins, "what's this about?"

"Rita Skeeter," said Harry. "Do you know who she is?"

Fred and George nodded, frowning.

"She's been asking questions about me."

That wasn't good news.

"Can you guess what I want you to do?"

Fred and George looked at each other, a bit puzzled. "You want us to slip her some of our more interesting candies?"

"No," said Harry. "No, no, *no!* That's giant-spider thinking! Come on, what would *you* do if you heard that Rita Skeeter was looking for rumors about *you*?"

That made it obvious.

Grins slowly started on the faces of Fred and George.

"Start rumors about ourselves," they replied.

"*Exactly*," said Harry, grinning widely. "But these can't be just *any* rumors. I want to teach people never to believe what the newspaper says about Harry Potter, any more than Muggles believe what the newspaper says about Elvis. At first I just thought about flooding Rita Skeeter with so many rumors that she wouldn't know what to believe, but then she'll just cherry-pick the ones that sound plausible and bad. So what I want you to do is create a fake story about me, and get Rita Skeeter to believe it somehow. But it has to be something

that, afterward, everyone will *know* was fake. We want to fool Rita Skeeter and her editors, and *afterward* have the proof come out that it was false. And of course — given that those are the requirements — the story has to be as *ridiculous* as it can possibly be, and still get printed. Do you understand what I want you to do?”

“Not exactly . . .” Fred or George said slowly. “You want us to *invent* the story?”

“I want you to do *all* of it,” Harry Potter said. “I’m sort of busy right now, plus I want to be able to say truthfully that I had no idea what was coming. Surprise me.”

For a moment there was a very evil grin on the faces of Fred and George.

Then they turned serious. “But Harry, we don’t really know how to do anything like that —”

“So figure it out,” Harry said. “I have confidence in you. Not *total* confidence, but if you *can’t* do it, *tell* me that, and I’ll try someone else, or do it myself. If you have a really good idea — for both the ridiculous story, and how to convince Rita Skeeter and her editors to print it — then you can go ahead and do it. But don’t go with something mediocre. If you can’t come up with something *awesome*, just say so.”

Fred and George exchanged worried glances.

“I can’t think of anything,” said George.

“Neither can I,” said Fred. “Sorry.”

Harry stared at them.

And then Harry began to explain how you went about thinking of things.

It had been known to take longer than two seconds, said Harry.

You *never* called *any* question impossible, said Harry, until you had taken an actual clock and thought about it for five minutes, by the motion of the minute hand. Not five minutes metaphorically, five minutes by a physical clock.

And *furthermore*, Harry said, his voice emphatic and his right hand thumping hard on the floor, you did *not* start out immediately looking for solutions.

Harry then launched into an explanation of a test done by someone named Norman Maier, who was something called an organizational psychologist, and who’d asked two different sets of problem-solving groups to tackle a problem.

The problem, Harry said, had involved three employees doing three jobs. The junior employee wanted to just do the easiest job. The senior employee

wanted to rotate between jobs, to avoid boredom. An efficiency expert had recommended giving the junior person the easiest job and the senior person the hardest job, which would be 20% more productive.

One set of problem-solving groups had been given the instruction “Do not propose solutions until the problem has been discussed as thoroughly as possible without suggesting any.”

The other set of problem-solving groups had been given no instructions. And those people had done the natural thing, and reacted to the presence of a problem by proposing solutions. And people had gotten attached to those solutions, and started fighting about them, and arguing about the relative importance of freedom versus efficiency and so on.

The first set of problem-solving groups, the ones given instructions to *discuss* the problem first and *then* solve it, had been far more likely to hit upon the solution of letting the junior employee keep the easiest job and rotating the other two people between the other two jobs, for what the expert’s data said would be a 19% improvement.

Starting out by looking for solutions was taking things *entirely out of order*. Like starting a meal with dessert, only *bad*.

(Harry also quoted someone named Robyn Dawes as saying that the harder a problem was, the more likely people were to try to solve it immediately.)

So Harry was going to leave this problem to Fred and George, and they would discuss all the aspects of it and brainstorm anything they thought might be remotely relevant. And they shouldn’t try to come up with an actual solution until they’d finished doing that, unless of course they *did* happen to randomly think of something awesome, in which case they could write it down for afterward and then go back to thinking. And he didn’t want to hear back from them about any so-called *failures to think of anything* for at least a week. Some people spent *decades* trying to think of things.

“Any questions?” said Harry.

Fred and George stared at each other.

“I can’t think of any.”

“Neither can I.”

Harry coughed gently. “You didn’t ask about your budget.”

Budget? they thought.

“I could just tell you the amount,” Harry said. “But I think *this* will be more *inspiring*.”

Harry's hands dipped into his robe, and brought forth —

Fred and George almost fell over, even though they were sitting down.

"Don't spend it for the sake of spending it," Harry said. On the stone floor in front of them gleamed an absolutely ridiculous amount of money. "Only spend it if awesomeness requires; and what awesomeness does require, don't hesitate to spend. If there's anything left over, just return it afterward, I trust you. Oh, and you get ten percent of what's there, regardless of how much you end up spending —"

"We *can't*!" blurted one of the twins. "We don't accept money for that sort of thing!"

(The twins never took money for doing anything illegal. Unknown to Ambrosius Flume, they were selling all of his merchandise at zero percent markup. Fred and George wanted to be able to testify — under Veritaserum if necessary — that they had not been profiteering criminals, just providing a public service.)

Harry frowned at them. "But I'm asking you to put in some real work here. A grownup would get paid for doing something like this, and it would *still* count as a favor for a friend. You can't just hire people for this sort of thing."

Fred and George shook their heads.

"Fine," Harry said. "I'll just get you expensive Christmas presents, and if you try returning them to me I'll burn them. Now you don't even *know* how much I'm going to spend on you, except, obviously, that it's going to be more than if you'd just taken the money. And I'm going to buy you those presents *anyway*, so think about *that* before you tell me *you can't think of anything awesome*."

Harry stood up, smiling, and turned to go while Fred and George were still gaping in shock. He strode a few steps away, and then turned back.

"Oh, one last thing," Harry said. "Leave Professor Quirrell out of whatever you do. He doesn't like publicity. I know it'd be easier to get people to believe weird things about the Defense Professor than anyone else, and I'm sorry to have to get in your way like that, but please, leave Professor Quirrell out of it."

And Harry turned again and took a few more steps —

Looked back one last time, and said, softly, "Thank you."

And left.

There was a long pause after he'd departed.

"So," said one.

"So," said the other.

"The Defense Professor doesn't like publicity, does he."

"Harry doesn't know us very well, does he."

"No, he doesn't."

"But we won't use his money for that, of course."

"Of course not, that wouldn't be right. We'll do the Defense Professor separately."

"We'll get some Gryffindors to write Skeeter, and say ..."

"... his sleeve lifted up one time in Defense class, and they saw the Dark Mark ..."

"... and he's probably teaching Harry Potter all sorts of dreadful things ..."

"... and he's the worst Defense Professor anyone remembers even in Hogwarts, he's not just *failing* to teach us, he's getting everything wrong, the complete opposite of what it should be ..."

"... like when he claimed that you could only cast the Killing Curse using love, which made it pretty much useless."

"I like that one."

"Thanks."

"I bet the Defense Professor likes it too."

"He does have a sense of humor. He wouldn't have called us what he did if he didn't have a sense of humor."

"But are we really going to be able to do Harry's job?"

"Harry said to discuss the problem before trying to solve it, so let's do that."

The Weasley twins decided that George would be the enthusiastic one while Fred doubted.

"It all seems sort of contradictory," said Fred. "He wants it to be ridiculous enough that everyone laughs at Skeeter and knows it's wrong, and he wants Skeeter to believe it. We can't do both things at the same time."

"We'll have to fake up some evidence to convince Skeeter," said George.

"Was that a solution?" said Fred.

They considered this.

"Maybe," said George, "but I don't think we should be all *that* strict about it, do you?"

The twins shrugged helplessly.

"So then the fake evidence has to be good enough to convince Skeeter,"

said Fred. "Can we really do that on our own?"

"We don't have to do it on our own," said George, and pointed to the pile of money. "We can hire other people to help us."

The twins got a thoughtful look on their face.

"That could use up Harry's budget pretty fast," said Fred. "This is a lot of money for us, but it's not a lot of money for someone like Flume."

"Maybe people will give discounts if they know it's for Harry," said George. "But most importantly of all, whatever we do, it has to be *impossible*."

Fred blinked. "What do you mean, *impossible*?"

"So impossible that we don't get in trouble, because no one believes we could have done it. So impossible that even Harry starts wondering. It has to be surreal, it has to make people doubt their own sanity, it has to be . . . *better than Harry*."

Fred's eyes were wide in astonishment. This happened sometimes, between them, but not often. "But why?"

"They were pranks. They were *all* pranks. The pie was a prank. The Remembrall was a prank. Kevin Entwhistle's cat was a prank. *Snape* was a prank. *We're* the best pranksters in Hogwarts, are we going to roll over and give up without a fight?"

"He's the Boy-Who-Lived," said Fred.

"And *we're* the Weasley twins! He's *challenging* us. He said we could do what he does. But I bet he doesn't think we'll ever be as good as *him*."

"He's right," said Fred, feeling rather nervous. The Weasley twins did *sometimes* disagree even when they had all the same information, but every time they did it seemed unnatural, like at least one of them must be doing something wrong. "This is *Harry Potter* we're talking about. He can do the impossible. We can't."

"Yes we can," said George. "And we have to be *more* impossible than him."

"But —" said Fred.

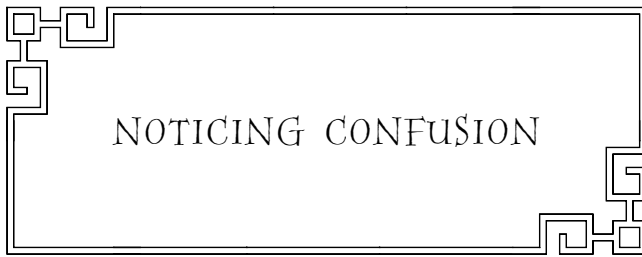
"It's what Godric Gryffindor would do," said George.

That settled it, and the twins snapped back into . . . whatever it was that was normal for them.

"All right, then —"

"— let's think about it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Professor Quirrell's office hours consisted of 11:40 to 11:55 AM on Thursday. That was for all of his students in all years. It cost a Quirrell point just to knock on the door, and if he didn't think your reason was worth his time, you would lose another fifty.

Harry knocked on the door.

There was a pause. Then a biting voice said, "I suppose you may as well come in, Mr. Potter."

And before Harry could touch the doorknob, the door slammed open, hitting the wall with a sharp crack that sounded like something might have broken in the wood, or the stone, or both.

Professor Quirrell was leaning back in his chair and reading a suspiciously old-looking book, bound in night-blue leather with silver runes on the spine. His eyes had not moved from the pages. "I am not in a good mood, Mr. Potter. And when I am not a good mood, I am not a pleasant person to be around. For your own sake, conduct your business quickly and depart."

A cold chill seeped from the room, as though it contained something that cast darkness the way lamps cast light, and which hadn't been fully shaded.

Harry was a bit taken aback. *Not in a good mood* didn't quite seem to cover it. What could be bothering Professor Quirrell this much . . . ?

Well, you didn't just walk out on friends when they were feeling down. Harry cautiously advanced into the room. "Is there anything I can do to help —"

"No," said Professor Quirrell, still not looking up from the book.

"I mean, if you've been dealing with idiots and want someone sane to talk to . . ."

There was a surprisingly long pause.

Professor Quirrell slammed the book shut and it vanished with a small whispering sound. He looked up, then, and Harry flinched.

"I suppose an intelligent conversation would be pleasant for *me* at this point," said Professor Quirrell in the same biting tone that had invited Harry to enter. "*You* are not likely to find it so, be warned."

Harry drew a deep breath. "I promise I won't mind if you snap at me. What happened?"

The cold in the room seemed to deepen. "A sixth-year Gryffindor cast a curse at one of my more promising students, a sixth-year Slytherin."

Harry swallowed. "What . . . sort of curse?"

And the fury on Professor Quirrell's face was no longer contained. "Why bother to ask an unimportant question like that, Mr. Potter? Our friend the sixth-year Gryffindor did not think it was important!"

"Are you *serious*?" Harry said before he could stop himself.

"No, I'm in a terrible mood today for no particular reason. *Yes I'm serious, you fool!* He didn't know. He *actually didn't know*. I didn't believe it until the Aurors confirmed it under Veritaserum. He is in his *sixth year at Hogwarts* and he cast a high-level Dark curse *without knowing what it did*."

"You don't mean," Harry said, "that he was *mistaken* about what it did, that he somehow read the wrong spell description —"

"All he knew was that it was meant to be directed at an enemy. He *knew* that was all he knew."

And that had been enough to cast the spell. "I do not understand how anything with that small a brain could walk upright."

"Indeed, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell.

There was a pause. Professor Quirrell leaned forward and picked up the silver inkwell from his desk, turning it around in his hands, staring at it as though wondering how he could go about torturing an inkwell to death.

"Was the sixth-year Slytherin seriously hurt?" said Harry.

“Yes.”

“Was the sixth-year Gryffindor raised by Muggles?”

“Yes.”

“Is Dumbledore refusing to expel him because the poor boy didn’t know?”

Professor Quirrell’s hands whitened on the inkwell. “*Do you have a point, Mr. Potter, or are you just stating the obvious?*”

“Professor Quirrell,” said Harry gravely, “all the Muggle-raised students in Hogwarts need a safety lecture in which they are told the things so ridiculously obvious that no wizardborn would ever think to mention them. Don’t cast curses if you don’t know what they do, if you discover something dangerous don’t tell the world about it, don’t brew high-level potions without supervision in a bathroom, the reason why there are underage magic laws, all the basics.”

“Why?” said Professor Quirrell. “Let the stupid ones die before they breed.”

“If you don’t mind losing a few sixth-year Slytherins along with them.”

The inkwell caught fire in Professor Quirrell’s hands and burned with a terrible slowness, hideous black-orange flames tearing at the metal and seeming to take tiny bites from it, the silver twisting as it melted, as though it were trying and failing to escape. There was a tinny shrieking sound, as though the metal were screaming.

“I suppose you are right,” Professor Quirrell said with a resigned smile. “I shall design a lecture to ensure that Muggleborns who are too stupid to live do not take anyone valuable with them as they depart.”

The inkwell went on screaming and burning in Professor Quirrell’s hands, tiny droplets of metal, still on fire, now dripping to the desk, as though the inkwell were crying.

“You’re not running away,” observed Professor Quirrell.

Harry opened his mouth —

“If you’re about to say you’re not scared of me,” said Professor Quirrell, “*don’t.*”

“You are the scariest person I know,” Harry said, “and one of the top reasons for that is your control. I simply can’t imagine hearing that you’d hurt someone you had not made a deliberate decision to hurt.”

The fire in Professor Quirrell’s hands winked out, and he carefully placed the ruined inkwell on his desk. “You say the nicest things, Mr. Potter. Have you been taking lessons in flattery? From, perhaps, Mr. Malfoy?”

Harry kept his expression blank, and realized one second too late that it

might as well have been a signed confession. Professor Quirrell didn't care what your expression looked like, he cared which states of mind made it likely.

"I see," said Professor Quirrell. "Mr. Malfoy is a useful friend to have, Mr. Potter, and there is much he can teach you, but I hope you have not made the mistake of trusting him with too many confidences."

"He knows nothing which I fear becoming known," said Harry.

"Well done," said Professor Quirrell, smiling slightly. "So what was your original business here?"

"I think I'm done with the preliminary exercises in Occlumency and ready for the tutor."

Professor Quirrell nodded. "I shall conduct you to Gringotts this Sunday." He paused, looking at Harry, and smiled. "And we might even make it a little outing, if you like. I've just had a pleasant thought."

Harry nodded, smiling back.

As Harry left the office, he heard Professor Quirrell humming a small tune. Harry was glad he'd been able to cheer him up.



That Sunday there seemed to be a rather large number of people whispering in the hallways, at least when Harry Potter walked past them.

And a lot of pointed fingers.

And a great deal of female giggling.

It had started at breakfast, when someone had asked Harry if he'd heard the news, and Harry had quickly interrupted and said that if the news was written by Rita Skeeter then he didn't want to *hear* about it, he wanted to read it in the paper himself.

It had then developed that not many students at Hogwarts got copies of the *Daily Prophet*, and that the copies which had not already been bought up from their owners were being passed around in some sort of complicated order and nobody really knew who had one at the moment . . .

So Harry had used a Quieting Charm and gone on to eat his breakfast, trusting to his seat-mates to wave off the many, many questioners, and doing his best to ignore the incredulity, the laughter, the congratulatory smiles, the pitying looks, the fearful glances, and the dropped plates as new people came down for breakfast and heard.

Harry was feeling *rather* curious, but it *really* wouldn't have done to spoil the artistry by hearing it secondhand.

He'd done homework in the safety of his trunk for the next couple of hours, after telling his dormmates to come get him if anyone found him an original newspaper.

Harry was still ignorant at 10 AM, when he'd left Hogwarts in a carriage with Professor Quirrell, who was in the front right, and currently slumped over in zombie-mode. Harry was sitting diagonally across, as far away as the carriage allowed, in the back left. Even so, Harry had a constant feeling of doom as the carriage rattled over a small path through a section of non-forbidden forest. It made it a bit hard to read, especially since the material was difficult, and Harry suddenly wished he was reading one of his childhood science fiction books instead —

"We're outside the wards, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell's voice from the front. "Time to go."

Professor Quirrell carefully disembarked from the carriage, bracing himself as he stepped down. Harry, on his own side, jumped off.

Harry was wondering exactly how they'd get there when Professor Quirrell said "Catch!" and threw a bronze Knut at him, and Harry caught it without thinking.

A giant intangible hook caught at Harry's abdomen and yanked him back, hard, only without any sense of acceleration, and an instant later Harry was standing in the middle of Diagon Alley.

(Excuse me, what? said his brain.)

(We just teleported, explained Harry.)

(That didn't used to happen in the ancestral environment, Harry's brain complained, and disoriented him.)

Harry staggered as his feet adjusted to the brick of the street instead of the dirt of the forest corridor they had been traversing. He straightened, still dizzy, with the bustling witches and wizards seeming to sway slightly, and the cries of the shopkeepers seeming to move around in his hearing, as his brain tried to place a world to be located in.

Moments later, there was a sort of sucking-popping sound from a few paces behind Harry, and when Harry turned to look Professor Quirrell was there.

"Do you mind —" said Harry, at the same time as Professor Quirrell said, "I'm afraid I —"

Harry stopped, Professor Quirrell didn't.

"— need to go off and set something in motion, Mr. Potter. As it has been thoroughly explained to me that I am responsible for anything whatsoever that happens to you, I'll be leaving you with —"

"Newsstand," Harry said.

"Pardon?"

"Or anywhere I can buy a copy of the *Daily Prophet*. Put me there and I'll be happy."

Shortly after, Harry had been delivered into a bookstore, accompanied by several quietly spoken, ambiguous threats. And the shopkeeper had gotten *less* ambiguous threats, judging by the way he had cringed, and how his eyes now kept darting between Harry and the entrance.

If the bookstore burned down, Harry was going to stick around in the middle of the fire until Professor Quirrell got back.

Meanwhile —

Harry took a quick glance around.

The bookstore seemed rather small and shoddy, with only four rows of bookcases visible, and the nearest shelf Harry's eyes had jumped to seemed to deal with narrow, cheaply bound books with grim titles like *The Massacre of Albania in the Fifteenth Century*.

First things first. Harry stepped over to the seller's counter.

"Pardon me," said Harry, "One copy of the *Daily Prophet*, please."

"Five Sickles," said the shopkeeper. "Sorry, kid, I've only got three left."

Five Sickles dropped onto the counter. Harry had the feeling he could have bargained him down a couple of points, but at this point he didn't really care.

The shopkeeper's eyes widened and he seemed to really notice Harry for the first time. "*You!*"

"*Me!*"

"Is it *true*? Are you *really* —"

"*Shut up!* Sorry, I've been waiting *all day* to read this in the original newspaper instead of hearing about it secondhand, so please just *hand it over*, all right?"

The shopkeeper stared at Harry for a moment, then wordlessly reached under the counter and passed over one folded copy of the *Daily Prophet*.

The headline read:

HARRY POTTER
SECRETLY BETROTHED
TO GINEVRA WEASLEY

Harry stared.

He lifted the newspaper off the counter, softly, reverently, like he was handling an original Escher artwork, and unbent it to read...

... about the evidence that had convinced Rita Skeeter.

... and some interesting further details.

... and yet more evidence.

Fred and George had cleared it with their sister first, surely? Yes, of course they had. There was a picture of Ginevra Weasley sighing longingly over what Harry could see, looking closely, was a photo of himself. That had to have been staged.

But *how* on *Earth*...?

Harry was sitting in a cheap folding chair, rereading the newspaper for the fourth time, when the door whispered softly and Professor Quirrell came back into the shop.

"My apologies for — *what* in Merlin's name are you reading?"

"It would seem," said Harry, awe in his voice, "that one Mr. Arthur Weasley was placed under the Imperius Curse by a Death Eater whom my father killed, thus creating a debt to House Potter, which my father demanded be repaid by the hand in marriage of the recently born Ginevra Weasley. Do people actually do that sort of thing around here?"

"How could Miss Skeeter *possibly* be fool enough to believe —"

And Professor Quirrell's voice cut off.

Harry had been reading the newspaper held vertically and unfolded, which meant that Professor Quirrell, from where he was standing, could see the text underneath the headline.

The look of shock on Professor Quirrell's face was a work of art almost on par with the newspaper itself.

"Don't worry," said Harry cheerfully, "it's all fake."

From elsewhere in the store, he heard the shopkeeper gasp. There was the sound of a stack of books falling over.

"Mr. Potter..." Professor Quirrell said slowly, "are you *sure* of that?"

"Quite sure. Shall we go?"

Professor Quirrell nodded, looking rather abstracted, and Harry folded the newspaper back up, and followed him out of the door.

For some reason Harry didn't seem to be hearing any street noises now.

They walked in silence for thirty seconds before Professor Quirrell spoke. "Miss Skeeter viewed the original proceedings of the restricted Wizengamot session."

"Yes."

"The *original proceedings of the Wizengamot*."

"Yes."

"I would have trouble doing that."

"Really?" said Harry. "Because if my suspicions are correct, this was done by a Hogwarts student."

"That is beyond impossible," Professor Quirrell said flatly. "Mr. Potter . . . I regret to say that this young lady expects to marry you."

"But *that* is improbable," said Harry. "To quote Douglas Adams, the impossible often has a kind of integrity which the merely improbable lacks."

"I see your point," Professor Quirrell said slowly. "But . . . no, Mr. Potter. It may be impossible, but I can *imagine* tampering with the Wizengamot proceedings. It is *unimaginable* that the Grand Manager of Gringotts should affix the seal of his office in witness to a false betrothal contract, and Miss Skeeter personally verified that seal."

"Indeed," said Harry, "you would expect the Grand Manager of Gringotts to get involved with that much money changing hands. It seems Mr. Weasley was greatly in debt, and so demanded an additional payment of ten thousand Galleons —"

"*Ten thousand* Galleons for a *Weasley*? You could buy the daughter of a Noble House for that!"

"Excuse me," Harry said. "I really have to ask at this point, do people actually do that sort of thing around here —"

"Rarely," said Professor Quirrell, with a frown on his face. "And not at all, I suspect, since the Dark Lord departed. I suppose that according to the newspaper, your father just paid it?"

"He didn't have any choice," said Harry. "Not if he wanted to fulfill the conditions of the prophecy."

"*Give me that*," said Professor Quirrell, and the newspaper leapt out of Harry's hand so fast that he got a paper cut.

Harry automatically put the finger in his mouth to suck on, feeling rather shocked, and turned to remonstrate with Professor Quirrell —

Professor Quirrell had stopped short in the middle of the street, and his eyes were flickering rapidly back and forth as an invisible force held the newspaper suspended before him.

Harry watched, gaping in open awe, as the newspaper opened to reveal pages two and three. And not much long after, four and five. It was like the man had cast off a pretense of mortality.

And after a troublingly short time, the paper neatly folded itself up again. Professor Quirrell plucked it from the air and tossed it to Harry, who caught it in sheer reflex; and then Professor Quirrell started walking again, and Harry automatically trudged after.

“No,” said Professor Quirrell, “that prophecy didn’t sound quite right to me either.”

Harry nodded, still stunned.

“The centaurs could have been put under an *Imperius*,” Professor Quirrell said, frowning, “*that* seems understandable. What magic can make, magic can corrupt, and it is not unthinkable that the Great Seal of Gringotts could be twisted to another’s hand. The Unspeakable could have been impersonated with Polyjuice, likewise the Bavarian seer. And with *enough* effort it might be possible to tamper with the proceedings of the Wizengamot. Do you have any idea how that was done?”

“I do not have one single plausible hypothesis,” said Harry. “I do know it was done on a total budget of forty Galleons.”

Professor Quirrell stopped short and whirled on Harry. His expression was now completely incredulous. “Forty Galleons will pay a competent ward-breaker to open a path into a home you wish to burglarize! Forty *thousand* Galleons *might* pay a team of the greatest professional criminals in the world to tamper with the proceedings of the Wizengamot!”

Harry shrugged helplessly. “I’ll remember that the next time I want to save thirty-nine thousand, nine hundred and sixty Galleons by finding the right contractor.”

“I do not say this often,” said Professor Quirrell. “I am impressed.”

“Likewise,” said Harry.

“And who is this incredible Hogwarts student?”

“I’m afraid I couldn’t say.”

Somewhat to Harry's surprise, Professor Quirrell made no objection to this.

They walked in the direction of the Gringotts building, thinking, for they were neither of them the sort of person who would give up on the problem without considering it for at least five minutes.

"I have a feeling," Harry said finally, "that we're coming at this from the wrong angle. There's a tale I once heard about some students who came into a physics class, and the teacher showed them a large metal plate near a fire. She ordered them to feel the metal plate, and they felt that the metal nearer the fire was cooler, and the metal further away was warmer. And she said, write down your guess for why this happens. So some students wrote down 'because of how the metal conducts heat', and some students wrote down 'because of how the air moves', and no one said 'this just seems impossible', and the real answer was that before the students came into the room, the teacher turned the plate around."

"Interesting," said Professor Quirrell. "That does sound similar. Is there a moral?"

"That your strength as a rationalist is your ability to be more confused by fiction than by reality," said Harry. "If you're equally good at explaining any outcome, you have zero knowledge. The students thought they could use words like 'because of heat conduction' to explain anything, even a metal plate being cooler on the side nearer the fire. So they didn't notice how confused they were, and that meant they couldn't be more confused by falsehood than by truth. If you tell me that the centaurs were under the *Imperius* Curse, I still have the feeling of something being not quite right. I notice that I'm still confused even after hearing your explanation."

"Hm," said Professor Quirrell.

They walked on further.

"I don't suppose," said Harry, "that it's possible to *actually* swap people into alternate universes? Like, this isn't our own Rita Skeeter, or they temporarily sent her somewhere else?"

"If *that* was possible," Professor Quirrell said, his voice rather dry, "would I still be *here*?"

And just as they were almost to the huge white front of the Gringotts building, Professor Quirrell said:

"Ah. Of *course*. I see it now. Let me guess, the Weasley twins?"

“*What?*” said Harry, his voice going up another octave in pitch. “*How?*”
 “I’m afraid I couldn’t say.”

“... That is *not* fair.”

“I think it is extremely fair,” said Professor Quirrell, and they entered through the bronze doors.



The time was just before noon, and Harry and Professor Quirrell were seated at the foot and head of a wide, long, flat table, in a sumptuously appointed private room with thoroughly cushioned couches and chairs along the walls, and soft curtains hanging everywhere.

They were about to eat lunch in Mary’s Place, which Professor Quirrell had said was known to him as one of the best restaurants in Diagon Alley, especially for — his voice had dropped meaningfully — *certain purposes*.

It was the nicest restaurant that Harry had ever been in, and it was really eating away at Harry that Professor Quirrell was treating *him* to the meal.

The first part of the mission, to find an Occlumency instructor, had been a success. Professor Quirrell, smiling evilly, had told Griphook to recommend the best he knew, and not worry about the expense, since Dumbledore was paying it; and the goblin had smiled in return. There might have been a certain amount of smiling on Harry’s part as well.

The second part of the plan had been a complete failure.

Harry was not allowed to take money out of his vault without Headmaster Dumbledore or some other school official present, and Professor Quirrell had not been given the vault key. Harry’s Muggle parents could not authorize it because they were Muggles, and Muggles had around the same legal standing as children or kittens: they were cute, so if you tortured them in public you could get arrested, but they weren’t *people*. Some reluctant provision had been made for recognizing the parents of Muggleborns as human in a limited sense, but Harry’s adoptive parents did not fall into that legal category.

It seemed that Harry was effectively an orphan in the eyes of the wizarding world. As such, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, or his designees *within* the school system, were Harry’s guardians until he graduated. Harry *could* breathe without Dumbledore’s permission, but only so long as the Headmaster did not specifically prohibit it.

Harry had then asked if he could simply *tell* Griphook how to diversify his investments beyond stacks of gold coins sitting in his vault.

Griphook had stared blankly and asked what ‘diversify’ meant.

Banks, it seemed, did not make investments. Banks stored your gold coins in secure vaults for an annual fee.

The wizarding world did not have a concept of stock. Or equity. Or corporations. Businesses were run by families out of their personal vaults.

Loans were made by rich people, not banks. Though Gringotts would witness the contract, for a fee, and enforce its collection, for a much larger fee.

Good rich people let their friends borrow money and pay it back whenever. *Bad* rich people charged you *interest*.

There was no secondary market in loans.

Evil rich people charged you annual interest rates of at least 20%.

Harry had stood up, turned away, and rested his head against the wall.

Harry had asked if he needed the Headmaster’s permission before he could start a bank.

Professor Quirrell had interrupted at this point, saying that it was time for lunch, and swiftly conducted a fuming Harry out of the bronze doors of Gringotts, through Diagon Alley, and to a fine restaurant called Mary’s Place, where a room had been reserved for them. The owner had looked shocked at seeing Professor Quirrell accompanied by Harry Potter, but had conducted them to the room without complaint.

And Professor Quirrell had quite deliberately announced that he would pay the bill, seeming to rather enjoy the look on Harry’s face.

“No,” said Professor Quirrell to the waitress, “we will not require menus. I will have the daily special accompanied by a bottle of Chianti, and Mr. Potter will have the Diracawl soup to start, followed by a plate of Roopo balls, and treacle pudding for dessert.”

The waitress, clad in robes that still looked severe and formal while being rather shorter than usual, bowed respectfully and departed, shutting the door behind her.

Professor Quirrell waved a hand in the direction of the door, and a bolt slid shut. “Note the bolt on the inside. This room, Mr. Potter, is known as Mary’s Room. It happens to be proof against all scrying, and I do mean *all*; Dumbledore himself could detect nothing of what happens here. Mary’s Room is used by two kinds of people. The first sort are engaged in illicit dalliances.

And the second sort lead interesting lives.”

“*Really*,” said Harry.

Professor Quirrell nodded.

Harry’s lips were parted in anticipation. “It would be a waste to just sit here and eat lunch, then, without doing anything special.”

Professor Quirrell grinned, then took out his wand and flicked it in the direction of the door. “Of course,” he said, “people who lead interesting lives take precautions more *thorough* than the dalliers. I have just sealed us in. Nothing will now pass in or out of this room — through the crack under the door, for example. And . . .”

Professor Quirrell then spoke no fewer than four different Charms, none of which Harry recognized.

“Even that does not *really* suffice,” said Professor Quirrell. “If we were doing anything of truly great import, it would be necessary to perform another twenty-three checks besides those. If, say, Rita Skeeter knew or guessed that we would come here, it is possible that she could be in this room wearing the true Cloak of Invisibility. Or she could be an Animagus with a tiny form, perhaps. There are tests to rule out such rare possibilities, but to perform all of them would be arduous. Still, I wonder if I should do them anyway, just so as not to teach you bad habits?” And Professor Quirrell tapped a finger on his cheek, looking abstracted.

“It’s fine,” Harry said, “I understand, and I’ll remember.” Though he was a little disappointed that they weren’t doing anything of truly great import.

“Very well,” Professor Quirrell said. He leaned back in his chair, smiling broadly. “You wrought quite well today, Mr. Potter. The basic notion was yours, I’m sure, even if you delegated the execution. I don’t think we’ll be hearing much more from Rita Skeeter after this. Lucius Malfoy will not be pleased with her failure. If she’s smart, she’ll flee the country the instant she realizes she’s been fooled.”

A sinking sensation began to dawn in Harry’s stomach. “Lucius was behind Rita Skeeter . . .?”

“Oh, you didn’t realize that?” said Professor Quirrell.

Harry hadn’t thought about what would happen to Rita Skeeter afterward. At all.

Not in the slightest.

But she would get fired from her job, *of course* she would be fired, she might

have children going through Hogwarts for all Harry knew, and now it was worse, much worse —

“Is Lucius going to have her killed?” Harry said in a barely audible voice. Somewhere in his head, the Sorting Hat was screaming at him.

Professor Quirrell smiled dryly. “If you have not dealt with journalists before, take it from me that the world gets a little brighter every time one dies.”

Harry jumped out of his chair with a convulsive movement, he had to find Rita Skeeter and warn her before it was too late —

“*Sit down*,” Professor Quirrell said sharply. “No, Lucius won’t kill her. But Lucius makes life *extremely* unpleasant for those who serve him ill. Miss Skeeter will flee and start her life over with a new name. *Sit down*, Mr. Potter; there is nothing you can do at this point, and you have a lesson to learn.”

Harry sat down, slowly. There was a disappointed, annoyed look on Professor Quirrell’s face that was doing more to stop him than the words.

“There are times,” Professor Quirrell said, his voice cutting, “when I worry that your brilliant Slytherin mind is simply wasted on you. Repeat after me. Rita Skeeter was a vile, disgusting woman.”

“Rita Skeeter was a vile, disgusting woman,” Harry said. He wasn’t comfortable saying it, but there didn’t seem to be any other possible actions, none at all.

“Rita Skeeter tried to destroy my reputation, but I executed an ingenious plan and destroyed *her* reputation first.”

“Rita Skeeter challenged me. She lost the game, and I won.”

“Rita Skeeter was an obstacle to my future plans. I had no choice but to deal with her if I wanted those plans to succeed.”

“Rita Skeeter was my enemy.”

“I cannot possibly get anything done in life if I am not willing to defeat my enemies.”

“I have defeated one of my enemies today.”

“I am a good boy.”

“I deserve a special reward.”

“Ah,” said Professor Quirrell, who had been grinning a benevolent smile for the last few lines, “I see I have succeeded in catching your attention.”

That was true. And while Harry felt like he was being railroaded into something — no, that wasn’t just a feeling, he *had* been railroaded — he couldn’t

deny that saying those things, and seeing Professor Quirrell's smile, *did* make him feel better.

Professor Quirrell reached into his robes, the gesture slow and deliberately significant, and drew forth . . .

. . . a *book*.

It was different from any book Harry had ever seen, the edges and corners visibly misshapen; *rough-hewn* was the phrase that came to mind, like it had been hacked out of a book mine.

"What is it?" breathed Harry.

"A diary," said Professor Quirrell.

"Whose?"

"That of a famous person." Professor Quirrell was smiling broadly.

"Okay . . ."

Professor Quirrell's expression became more serious. "Mr. Potter, one of the requisites for becoming a powerful wizard is an excellent memory. The key to a puzzle is often something you read twenty years ago in an old scroll, or a peculiar ring you saw on the finger of a man you met only once. I mention this to explain how I managed to remember this item, and the placard attached to it, after meeting you a good deal later. You see, Mr. Potter, over the course of my life, I have viewed a number of private collections held by individuals who are, perhaps, not quite deserving of all that they have —"

"You *stole* it?" Harry said incredulously.

"That is correct," said Professor Quirrell. "Very recently, in fact. I think you will appreciate this particular item much more than the vile little man who held it for no other purpose than impressing his equally vile friends with its rarity."

Harry was simply gaping now.

"But if you feel that my actions were incorrect, Mr. Potter, I suppose you needn't accept your special present. Though of course I shan't go to the trouble of stealing it *back*. So which is it to be?"

Professor Quirrell tossed the book from one hand to another, causing Harry to reach out involuntarily with a look of dismay.

"Oh," said Professor Quirrell, "don't worry about a little rough handling. You could toss this diary in a fireplace and it would emerge unscathed. In any case, I await your decision."

Professor Quirrell casually threw the book up into the air and caught it

again, grinning.

No, said Gryffindor and Hufflepuff.

Yes, said Ravenclaw. *What part of the word 'book' did you two not understand?*

The theft part, said Hufflepuff.

Oh, come on, said Ravenclaw, *you can't seriously ask us to say no and spend the rest of our life wondering what it was.*

It sounds like a net positive from a utilitarian standpoint, said Slytherin. *Think of it as an economic transaction which generates gains from trade, only without the trade part. Plus, we didn't steal it and it won't help anyone to have Professor Quirrell keep it.*

He's trying to turn you Dark! shrieked Gryffindor, and Hufflepuff nodded firmly.

Don't be a naive little boy, said Slytherin, *he's trying to teach you Slytherin.*

Yeah, said Ravenclaw. *Whoever owned the book originally was probably a Death Eater or something. It belongs with us.*

Harry's mouth opened, then halted that way, an agonized look on his face.

Professor Quirrell seemed to be quite enjoying himself. He had balanced the book on its corner, on one finger, and was keeping it upright while humming a little tune.

There came a knock at the door.

The book vanished back into Professor Quirrell's robes, and he rose up from his chair. Professor Quirrell started to walk over to the door —

— and staggered, suddenly lurching into the wall.

"It's all right," said Professor Quirrell's voice, which suddenly sounded a lot weaker than usual. "Sit down, Mr. Potter, it's just a dizzy spell. Sit down."

Harry's fingers gripped the edge of his chair, uncertain as to what he should do, what he *could* do. Harry couldn't even get too close to Professor Quirrell, not unless he wanted to defy that sense of Doom —

Professor Quirrell straightened, then, his breathing seeming a bit heavy, and opened the door.

The waitress came in, bearing a platter of food; and as she distributed the plates, Professor Quirrell walked slowly back to the table.

But by the time the waitress had bowed her way out, Professor Quirrell was sitting upright and smiling again.

Still, the brief episode of whatever-it-was had decided Harry. He couldn't say no, not after Professor Quirrell had gone to that much trouble.

“Yes,” Harry said.

Professor Quirrell held up a cautioning finger, then took out his wand again, locked the door again, and repeated three of the same Charms from earlier.

Then Professor Quirrell took the book back out of his robes and tossed it to Harry, who almost dropped it into his soup.

Harry shot Professor Quirrell a look of helpless indignation. You weren’t supposed to *do* that with books, enchanted or not.

Harry opened the book with ingrained, instinctive care. The pages seemed too thick, with a texture unlike either Muggle paper or wizarding parchment. And the contents were . . .

. . . blank?

“Am I supposed to be seeing —”

“Look nearer the beginning,” said Professor Quirrell, and Harry (again with that helpless, ingrained care) turned a block of pages back.

The lettering was obviously handwritten, and very hard to read, but Harry thought the words might be Latin.

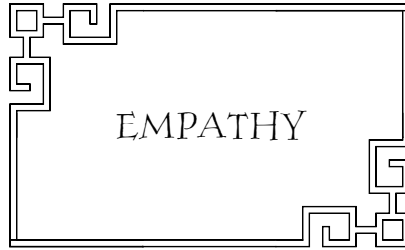
“What *is* this?” said Harry.

“That,” said Professor Quirrell, “is a record of the magical researches of a Muggleborn who never came to Hogwarts. He refused his letter, and conducted his own small investigations, which never did get very far without a wand. From the description on the placard, I expect that his name bears rather more significance to you than to me. That, Harry Potter, is the diary of Roger Bacon.”

Harry almost fainted.

Nestled up against the wall, where Professor Quirrell had stumbled, glistened the crushed remains of a beautiful blue beetle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



It wasn't every day you got to see Harry Potter beg.

"Pleaaaaase," whined Harry Potter.

Fred and George shook their heads again, smiling.

There was an agonized look on Harry Potter's face. "But I *told* you how I did the one with Kevin Entwhistle's cat, and Hermione and the vanishing soda, and I *can't* tell you about the Sorting Hat or the Remembrall or Professor Snape . . ."

Fred and George shrugged and turned to leave.

"If you ever do figure it out," said the Weasley twins, "be sure to let us know."

"*You're evil! You're both evil!*"

Fred and George firmly closed the door to the empty classroom behind them, and made sure to keep the grin on their faces for a while, just in case Harry Potter could see through doors.

Then they turned a corner and their faces sagged.

"I don't suppose Harry's guesses —"

"— gave you any ideas?" they said to each other at the same time, and then their shoulders slumped further.

Their last relevant memory was of Flume refusing to help them, though they couldn't remember *what* they'd asked him to do . . .

... but they must have looked elsewhere and found *someone* to help them do *something* illegal, or they wouldn't have agreed to be Obliviated afterward.

How had they *possibly* been able to get all that done on just forty Galleons?

At first they'd worried that they'd forged evidence so good that Harry actually *would* end up married to Ginny ... but they'd thought of that too, it seemed. The Wizengamot proceedings had been tampered with *again* to put them back the way they'd been originally, the fake betrothal contract had vanished from its dragon-guarded vault in Gringotts, and so on. It was pretty scary, actually. Most people now thought the *Daily Prophet* had just made the whole thing up for unguessable reasons, and the *Quibbler* had helpfully twisted the knife deeper with the next day's headline, HARRY POTTER SECRETLY BETROTHED TO LUNA LOVEGOOD.

Whoever they'd hired would tell them after the statute of limitations expired, they desperately hoped. But meanwhile it was awful, they'd pulled their greatest prank ever, maybe the greatest prank in the history of pranking, and they *couldn't remember how*. It was crazy, they'd been able to think of a way the *first* time, so why couldn't they see it now after *knowing* everything they'd done?

Their only consolation was that Harry didn't know they didn't know.

Not even Mum had questioned them about it, despite the obvious Weasley connection. Whatever had been done, it was far out of the reach of any Hogwarts student ... except possibly *one*, who, if certain rumors were true, might have done it by snapping his fingers. *Harry* had been questioned under Veritaserum, he'd told them ... with Dumbledore present and giving the Aurors scary looks. The Aurors had asked just enough to determine that Harry hadn't pulled the prank himself or disappeared anyone, and then gotten the heck out of Hogwarts.

Fred and George had wondered whether to feel insulted about Harry Potter being questioned by the Aurors for *their* prank, but the look on *Harry's* face, probably for exactly the same reason, made everything worth it.

Unsurprisingly, Rita Skeeter and the editor of the *Daily Prophet* had both vanished and were probably in another country by now. They *would've* liked to be able to tell their family about that part. Dad would have congratulated them, they thought, after Mum had finished killing them and Ginny had burned the remains.

But everything was still all right, they'd tell Dad someday, and mean-

while...

... meanwhile Dumbledore had happened to sneeze while passing them in the hallway, and a small package had accidentally dropped out of his pockets, and inside had been two matched wardbreaker's monocles of *incredible* quality. The Weasley twins had tested their new monocles on the "forbidden" third-floor corridor, making a quick trip to the magic mirror and back, and they hadn't been able to see *all* the detection webs clearly, but the monocles had shown a *lot* more than they'd seen the first time.

Of course they would have to be very careful never to get caught with the monocles in their possession, or they would end up in the Headmaster's office getting a stern lecture and maybe even threats of expulsion.

It was good to know that not everyone who got Sorted into Gryffindor grew up to be Professor McGonagall.



Harry was in a white room, windowless, featureless, sitting before a desk, facing an expressionless man in formal robes of solid black.

The room was screened against detection, and the man had performed exactly twenty-seven spells before saying so much as "Hello, Mr. Potter."

It was oddly appropriate that the man in black was about to try reading Harry's mind.

"Prepare yourself," the man said tonelessly.

A human mind, Harry's Occlumency book had said, was only exposed to a Legilimens along certain *surfaces*. If you failed to defend your surfaces, the Legilimens would go *through* and be able to access any part of you which their own mind was able to comprehend...

... which tended not to be much. Human minds, it seemed, were hard for humans to understand on any level but the shallowest. Harry had wondered if knowing lots of cognitive science could make him an incredibly powerful Legilimens, but repeated experience had *finally* driven into him the lesson that he needed to get a little less excited in his anticipations about this sort of thing. It wasn't as if any cognitive scientist understood humans well enough to make one.

To learn the counter, Occlumency, the first step was to imagine yourself to be a different person, pretending it as thoroughly as you could, immersing

yourself entirely in that alternate persona. You wouldn't always have to do that, but in the beginning, it was how you learned where your surfaces were. The Legilimens would try to read you, and you would feel it happening if you paid close enough attention, you would sense them trying to enter. And your job was to make sure that they always touched your imaginary persona and not the real one.

When you were good enough at that, you could imagine being a very *simple* sort of person, pretend to be a rock, and make a habit of leaving the pretense in place where all your surfaces were. That was a standard Occlumency barrier. Pretending to be a rock was hard to learn, but easy to do afterward, and the exposed surface of a mind was much shallower than its interior, so with enough practice you could keep it up as a background habit.

Or if you were a *perfect Occlumens*, you could race *ahead* of any probes, answering queries as fast as they were asked, so that the Legilimens would enter through your surfaces and see a mind indistinguishable from whoever you were pretending to be.

Even the best Legilimens could be fooled that way. If a perfect Occlumens claimed they were dropping their Occlumency barriers, there was no way to know if they were lying. Worse, you might not know you were dealing with a perfect Occlumens. They were rare, but the fact that they existed meant you couldn't trust Legilimency on *anyone*.

It was a sad commentary on how little human beings understood each other, how little any wizard comprehended the depths lying beneath the mind's surface, that you could fool the best human telepaths by pretending to be someone else.

But then human beings only understood each other in the first place by pretending. You didn't make predictions about people by modeling the hundred trillion synapses in their brain as separate objects. Ask the best social manipulator on Earth to build you an Artificial Intelligence from scratch, and they'd just give you a dumb look. You predicted people by telling *your* brain to act like theirs. You *put yourself in their place*. If you wanted to know what an angry person would do, you activated your own brain's anger circuitry, and whatever that circuitry output, that was your prediction. What did the neural circuitry for anger actually look like inside? Who knew? The best social manipulator on Earth might not know what neurons *were*, and neither might the best Legilimens.

Anything a Legilimens could *understand*, an Occlumens could *pretend* to be. It was the same trick either way — probably implemented by the same neural circuitry in both cases, a single set of control circuits for reconfiguring your own brain to act as a model of someone else's.

And so the race between telepathic offense and telepathic defense had been a decisive win for defense. Otherwise the entire magical world, maybe even the whole Earth, would have been a very different place . . .

Harry took a deep breath, and concentrated. There was a slight smile on his face.

For *once*, just *once*, Harry hadn't gotten shortchanged in the mysterious powers department.

After almost a month of work, and more on a whim than any real hunch, Harry had decided to make himself coldly angry and then try the book's Occlumency exercises again. At that point he'd mostly given up hope on that sort of thing, but it had still seemed worth a quick try —

He'd run through all the book's hardest exercises in two hours, and the next day he'd gone and told Professor Quirrell he was ready.

His dark side, it had turned out, was very, *very* good at pretending to be other people.

Harry thought of his standard trigger, from the first time he'd gone over entirely to his dark side . . .

Severus paused, looking quite pleased with himself. "And that will be . . . five points? No, let us make it an even ten points from Ravenclaw for backchat."

Harry's smile grew chillier, and he regarded the black-robed man who thought he was going to read Harry's mind.

And then Harry turned into someone else entirely, someone who had seemed appropriate to the occasion.

. . . in a white room, windowless, featureless, sitting before a desk, facing an expressionless man in formal robes of solid black.

Kimball Kinnison regarded the black-robed man who thought he was going to read the mind of a Second-Stage Lensman of the Galactic Patrol.

To say that Kimball Kinnison was confident of the outcome would be an understatement. He had been trained by Mentor of Arisia, the most powerful mind known to this or any other universe, and the mere wizard sitting across from him would see precisely what the Grey Lensman wanted him to see . . .

. . . the mind of the boy he was currently disguised as, an innocent child

named Harry Potter.

"I'm ready," said Kimball Kinnison in nervous tones that were exactly appropriate for an eleven-year-old boy.

"*Legilimens*," said the black-robed wizard.

There was a pause.

The black-robed wizard blinked, as if he'd seen something so shocking that it had been enough to make even *his* eyelids move. His voice wasn't quite toneless as he said, "The Boy-Who-Lived has a *mysterious dark side*?"

The heat slowly crept up into Harry's cheeks.

"Well," the man said. His face had now settled back into perfect calm. "Excuse me. Mr. Potter, it is good to know your advantages, but that is not the same as being wildly overconfident in them. You may indeed be able to learn Occlumency at eleven years of age. This astounds me. I had thought Mr. Dumbledore was pretending to be insane again. Your dissociative talent is so strong that I am surprised to find no other signs of childhood abuse, and you may become a perfect Occlumens in time. But there is a considerable difference between that and expecting to put up a successful Occlumency barrier on your first attempt. That is merely ridiculous. Did you feel anything as I read your mind?"

Harry shook his head, now blushing furiously.

"Then pay closer attention next time. The goal is not to create a perfect image on your first day of lessons. The goal is to learn where your surfaces are. Prepare yourself."

Harry tried to pretend to be Kimball Kinnison again, tried to pay more attention, but his thoughts were a little scattered and he was suddenly aware of all the things he shouldn't be thinking about . . .

Oh, this was going to suck.

Harry gritted his teeth. At least the instructor would be Obliviated afterward.

"*Legilimens*."

There was a pause —



. . . in a white room, windowless, featureless, sitting before a desk, facing an expressionless man in formal robes of solid black.

It was their fourth day, on a Sunday evening. When you paid this much, you got your sessions any darned time you wanted, never mind the concept of weekends.

"Hello, Mr. Potter," the telepath said tonelessly, having cast the full suite of privacy spells.

"Hello, Mr. Bester," Harry said wearily. "Let's just get the initial shock out of the way, shall we?"

"You managed to surprise me?" the man said, now sounding slightly interested. "Well then." He pointed his wand and stared into Harry's eyes. "*Legilimens.*"

There was a pause, and then the black-robed wizard jerked as if someone had touched him with a cattle prod.

"The Dark Lord is *alive*?" he choked. His eyes were suddenly wild. "*Dumbledore turns himself invisible and sneaks into girls' dorm rooms?*"

Harry sighed and looked down at his watch. In about another three seconds . . .

"So," the man said. He hadn't quite recovered his tonelessness. "You genuinely believe you're going to discover the secret rules of magic and become all-powerful."

"That's right," Harry said evenly, still looking at his watch. "I'm *that* overconfident."

"I wonder. It seems the Sorting Hat thinks you'll be the next Dark Lord."

"And *you* know I'm trying pretty hard *not* to be, and you saw that we already had a long discussion about whether you were willing to teach me Occlumency, and in the end you decided to do it, so can we just get this over with?"

"All right," said the man exactly six seconds later, same as last time. "Prepare yourself." He paused, and then said, his voice rather wistful, "Though I *do* wish I could remember that trick with the gold and silver."

Harry was finding himself very disturbed by how reproducible human thoughts were when you reset people back to the same initial conditions and exposed them to the same stimuli. It was dispelling illusions that a good reductionist wasn't supposed to have in the first place.

Harry was in a rather bad mood as he stomped out of his Herbology class the next Monday morning.

Hermione was seething alongside him.

The other children were still inside, a bit slow to assemble their things because they were gibbering excitedly to each other about Ravenclaw winning the year's second Quidditch match.

It seemed that last night after dinner, a girl had flown around on a broomstick for thirty minutes and then caught some sort of giant mosquito. There were other facts about what had happened during this match, but they were irrelevant.

Harry had missed this exciting sports event due to his Occlumency lesson, and also having a life.

He had then avoided all conversations in the Ravenclaw dorm, weren't Quieting Charms and magical trunks wonderful. He had eaten breakfast at the Gryffindor table.

But Harry couldn't avoid Herbology, and the Ravenclaws had talked about it before class, and after class, and *during class*, until Harry had looked up from the baby furcot whose diaper he was changing, and announced loudly that some of them were trying to learn about *plants* and Snitches didn't grow on anything so could they all *please* shut up about Quidditch. Everyone else present had given him shocked looks, except Hermione, who'd looked like she wanted to applaud, and Professor Sprout, who had awarded him a point for Ravenclaw.

A point for Ravenclaw.

One point.

The seven idiots on their idiot brooms playing their idiot game had earned *one hundred and ninety points* for Ravenclaw.

It seemed that Quidditch scores *added directly onto the House points total*.

In other words, catching a golden mosquito was worth 150 House points.

Harry couldn't even *imagine* what he would have to do to earn one hundred and fifty House points.

Besides, y'know, rescuing *a hundred and fifty Hufflepuffs*, or coming up with *fifteen ideas as good as putting protective shells on time machines*, or inventing *one thousand five hundred creative ways to kill people*, or being Hermione Granger for the *entire year*.

"We should kill them," Harry said to Hermione, who was walking beside

him with an equally offended air.

"Who?" said Hermione. "The Quidditch team?"

"I was thinking of everyone involved in any way with Quidditch anywhere, but the Ravenclaw team would be a start, yes."

Hermione's lips were pursed disapprovingly. "You *do* know that killing people is wrong, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry said.

"Okay, just checking," Hermione said. "Let's get the Seeker first. I've read some Agatha Christie mysteries, do you know how we can get her onto a train?"

"Two students plotting murder," said a dry voice. "How shocking."

From around a nearby corner strolled a man in lightly spotted robes, his greasy hair falling long and unkempt about his shoulders. Deadly danger seemed to radiate out from him, filling the hallway with improperly mixed potions and accidental falls and people dying in bed of what the Aurors would rule to be natural causes.

Without thinking about it at all, Harry stepped in front of Hermione.

There was an intake of breath from behind him, and then a moment later Hermione brushed past and stepped in front of *him*. "Run, Harry!" she said. "Boys shouldn't have to be in danger."

Severus Snape smiled mirthlessly. "Amusing. I request a moment of your time, Potter, if you can tear yourself away from your flirtations with Miss Granger."

Suddenly there was a very worried look on Hermione's face. She turned to Harry and opened her mouth, then paused, looking distressed.

"Oh, don't worry, Miss Granger," said Severus's silky voice. "I promise to return your beau unmaimed." His smile vanished. "Now Potter and I are about to go off and have a private conversation, just by ourselves. I hope it is clear that you are not invited, but just in case, consider that an order from a Hogwarts professor. I'm sure a good little girl like you won't disobey."

And Severus turned and walked back around the corner. "Coming, Potter?" his voice said.

"Um," Harry said to Hermione. "Can I just sort of go off and follow him and let *you* work out what I should say to make sure you're not all worried and offended?"

"No," Hermione said, her voice trembling.

Severus's laughter echoed from around the corner.

Harry bowed his head. "Sorry," he said lowly, "really," and he went off after the Potions Master.



"So," Harry said. There were no other sounds now but two pairs of legs, the long and the short, padding across a random stone corridor. The Potions Master was striding quickly but not too fast for Harry to keep up, and insofar as Harry could apply the concept of directionality to Hogwarts, they were moving away from the frequented areas. "What's this about?"

"I don't suppose you could explain," Severus said dryly, "why the two of you were plotting to murder Cho Chang?"

"I don't suppose *you* could explain," Harry said dryly, "in your capacity as an official of the Hogwarts school system, why catching a golden mosquito is deemed an academic accomplishment worthy of a hundred and fifty House points?"

A smile crossed Severus's lips. "Dear me, and I thought you were supposed to be perceptive. Are you truly so incapable of understanding your classmates, Potter, or do you dislike them too much to try? If Quidditch scores did not count toward the House Cup then none of them would care about House points at all. It would merely be an obscure contest for students like you and Miss Granger."

It was a shockingly good answer.

And that shock brought Harry's mind fully awake.

In retrospect it shouldn't have been surprising that Severus understood his students, understood them very well indeed.

He had been reading their minds.

And . . .

. . . the book said that a successful Legilimens was extremely rare, rarer than a perfect Occlumens, because almost no one had enough mental discipline.

Mental discipline?

Harry had collected stories about a man who routinely lost his temper in class and blew up at young children.

. . . but this same man, when Harry had spoken of the Dark Lord still being alive, had responded instantly and perfectly — reacting in precisely the

way that someone completely ignorant would react.

The man stalked about Hogwarts with the air of an assassin, radiating danger...

... which was exactly *not* what a real assassin should do. Real assassins should look like meek little accountants until they killed you.

He was the Head of House for proud and aristocratic Slytherin, and he wore a robe with spotted stains from bits of potions and ingredients, which two minutes of magic could have removed.

Harry noticed that he was confused.

And his threat estimate of the *Head of House Slytherin* shot up astronomically.

Dumbledore had seemed to think Severus was his, and there'd been nothing to contradict that; the Potions Master had been "scary but not abusive", as promised. So, Harry had reasoned earlier, this was Fellowship business. If Severus had been planning harm, surely he wouldn't have come to get Harry in front of Hermione, a witness, when he could have simply waited for some time when Harry was alone...

Harry quietly bit his lip.

"I once knew a boy who truly adored Quidditch," said Severus Snape. "He was an utter pillock. Just as you and I would expect, we two."

"What *is* this?" Harry said slowly.

"Patience, Potter."

Severus turned his head, and then glided with his assassin's bearing into a nearby opening in the corridor walls, a smaller and narrower hallway leading off.

Harry followed him, wondering if it would be smarter to simply run away.

They turned and made another turn, and came to a dead end, a simple blank wall. If Hogwarts had actually been built, rather than conjured or summoned or birthed or whatever, Harry would have had some sharp words for the architect about paying people to build hallways that didn't go anywhere.

"*Quietus*," said Severus, and a few other things as well.

Harry leaned back, folded his arms across his chest, and watched Severus's face.

"Looking me in the eyes, Potter?" said Severus Snape. "Your Occlumency lessons cannot have progressed far enough for you to block Legilimency. But then perhaps they have progressed far enough for you to detect it. Since I

cannot know otherwise, I will not risk trying.” The man smiled thinly. “And the same will hold for Dumbledore, I think. Which is why we are *now* having this little talk.”

Harry’s eyes widened involuntarily.

“To begin with,” Severus said, eyes glittering, “I should like you to promise not to speak of our conversations to *anyone*. So far as the school is concerned, we are discussing your Potions homework. Whether or not they believe that is unimportant. So far as Dumbledore and McGonagall are concerned, I am violating Draco Malfoy’s confidences in me, and neither of us think it proper to speak further of the particulars.”

Harry’s brain tried to calculate the ramifications and implications of this and ran out of swap space.

“Well?” said the Potions Master.

“All right,” Harry said slowly. It was hard to see how having a conversation and being unable to tell anyone could be more constraining than *not* having it, in which case you *also* couldn’t tell anyone the contents. “I promise.”

Severus was watching Harry intently. “You said once in the Headmaster’s office that you would not tolerate bullying or abuse. And so I wonder, Harry Potter. Just how much do you resemble your father?”

“Unless we’re talking about Michael Verres-Evans,” Harry said, “the answer is that I know very little about James Potter.”

Severus nodded, as though to himself. “There is a fifth-year Slytherin. A boy named Lesath Lestrange. He is being bullied by Gryffindors. I am . . . constrained, in my ability to deal with such situations. *You* could help him, perhaps. If you wished. I am not asking you for a favor, and will not owe you one. It is simply an opportunity to do as you will.”

Harry stared at Severus, thinking.

“Wondering if it’s a trap?” said Severus, a faint smile crossing his lips. “It is not. *It is* a test. Call it curiosity on my part. But Lesath’s troubles are real, as are my own difficulties in intervening.”

That was the trouble with other people knowing you were a good guy. Even if you knew they knew, you still couldn’t ignore the bait.

And if his father had protected students from bullies too . . . it didn’t matter if Harry knew why Severus had told him. It still made him feel warm inside, and proud, and made it impossible to walk away.

“Fine,” Harry said. “Tell me about Lesath. Why is he being bullied?”

Severus's face lost the faint smile. "You think there are *reasons*, Potter?"

"Perhaps not," Harry said quietly. "But the thought had occurred to me that he might have pushed some unimportant Mudblood girl down the stairs."

"Lesath Lestrange," Severus said, his voice now cold, "is the son of Bellatrix Black, the most fanatic and evil servant of the Dark Lord. Lesath is the acknowledged bastard of Rabastan Lestrange. Shortly after the Dark Lord's death, Bellatrix and Rabastan and Rabastan's brother Rodolphus were captured while torturing Alice and Frank Longbottom. All three are in Azkaban for life. The Longbottoms were driven insane by repeated Cruciatus and remain in St. Mungo's incurable ward. Is any of that a good reason to bully him, Potter?"

"It is no reason at all," Harry said, still quietly. "And Lesath himself has done no wrong that you know?"

The faint smile crossed Severus's lips again. "He is no more a saint than anyone else. But he has pushed no Mudblood girls down the stairs, not that I ever heard."

"Or saw in his mind," said Harry.

Severus's expression was chill. "I did not invade his privacy, Potter. I looked within the Gryffindors, rather. He is simply a convenient target for their little satisfactions."

A cold wash of anger ran down Harry's spine, and he had to remind himself that Severus might not be a trustworthy source of information.

"And you think," Harry said, "that an intervention by Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, might prove effective."

"Indeed," said Severus Snape, and told Harry when and where the Gryffindors were planning their next little game.



There is a main hallway running through the middle of Hogwarts's second floor on the north-south axis, and near the center of this hallway there is an opening into a short corridor which goes a dozen paces back before turning at a right angle, making an L-shape, and then goes a dozen paces more before it ends at a bright, wide window, looking out from three stories above upon the light drizzle falling over the east grounds of Hogwarts. Standing by the window you can hear nothing of the main hallway, and no one in the hallway would hear what went on by the window. If you think there is anything odd

about this, you haven't been in Hogwarts very long.

Four boys in red-trimmed robes are laughing, and a boy in green-trimmed robes is screaming and grabbing frantically onto the edges of the opened window with his hands, as the four boys make as though to push him out. It's just a joke, of course, and besides, a fall from that height wouldn't kill a wizard. All good fun. If you think there is anything odd about this —

"*What are you doing?*" says a sixth boy's voice.

The four boys in red-trimmed robes spin around with sudden starts, and the boy in green-trimmed robes frantically pushes himself away from the window and falls to the floor, face streaked with tears.

"Oh," says the most handsome of the boys in red-trimmed robes, sounding relieved, "it's *you*. Hey, Lessy, you know who this is?"

There isn't any answer from the boy on the floor, who's trying to get his sniffing under control, and the boy in the red-trimmed robes draws back his leg for a kick —

"*Stop it!*" shouts the sixth boy.

The boy in the red-trimmed robes wobbles as he aborts the kick. "Um," he says, "do *you* know who this is?"

The sixth boy's breathing sounds strange. "Lesath Lestrangle," he says, his breath coming in short pants, "and *he* didn't do anything to my parents, he was five years old."



Neville Longbottom stared at the four huge fifth-year bullies in front of him, trying very hard to control his trembling.

He should have just told Harry Potter no.

"Why are *you* defending him?" said the handsome one, slowly, sounding puzzled with the first hints of offense. "He's a *Slytherin*. And a *Lestrangle*."

"He's a boy who lost his parents," said Neville Longbottom. "I know how that is." He didn't know where the words had come from. It sounded too cool, like something Harry Potter would say.

The trembling went on, though.

"*Who* do you think *you are*?" said the handsome one, starting to sound angry.

I am Neville, the last scion of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Longbot-

tom —

Neville couldn't say it.

"I think he's a *traitor*," said one of the other Gryffindors, and there was a sudden sinking sensation in Neville's stomach.

He'd known it, he'd just known it. Harry Potter had been wrong after all. Bullies wouldn't stop only because Neville Longbottom told them to stop.

The handsome one took a step forward, and the three others followed.

"So that's how it is for you," Neville said, amazed at how steady his voice was. "It doesn't matter to you if it's Lesath Lestrangle or Neville Longbottom."

Lesath Lestrangle let out a sudden gasp, from where he was lying on the floor.

"Evil is evil," snarled the same boy who'd spoken before, "and if you're friends with evil, you're evil too."

The four took another step forward.

Lesath rose, wobbling, to his feet. His face was grey, and he took a few steps forward, and leaned against the wall, and didn't say anything. His eyes were fixed on the turn in the hallway, the way out.

"Friends," Neville said. Now his voice was going up a bit in pitch. "Yes, I have friends. One of them is the Boy-Who-Lived."

A couple of the Gryffindors looked suddenly worried. The handsome one didn't flinch. "Harry Potter isn't here," he said, his voice hard, "and if he was, I don't think he'd like to see a Longbottom defending a Lestrangle."

And the Gryffindors took another long step forward, and behind them, Lesath crept along the wall, waiting for his chance.

Neville swallowed, and raised his right hand with his thumb and forefinger pressed together.

He shut his eyes, because Harry Potter had made him promise not to peek. If this didn't work, he was never trusting anyone again.

His voice came out surprisingly clear, considering.

"Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres. Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres. Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres. By the debt that you owe me and the power of your true name I summon you, I open the way for you, I call upon you to manifest yourself before me."

Neville snapped his fingers.

And then Neville opened his eyes.

Lesath Lestrangle was staring at him.

The four Gryffindors were staring at him.

The handsome one started to chuckle, and that set off the other three.

"Was Harry Potter supposed to step around the corner or something?" said the handsome one. "Aw. Looks like you've been stood up."

The handsome one took a menacing step forward toward Neville.

The other three followed in lockstep.

"Ahem," said Harry Potter from behind them, leaning against the wall by the window, in the dead end of the hallway, where nobody could possibly have gotten to without being seen.

If watching people scream always felt this good, Neville could sort of understand why people became bullies.

Harry Potter stalked forward, placing himself between Lesath Lestrangle and the others. He swept his icy gaze across the boys in red-trimmed robes, and then his eyes came to rest on the handsome one, the ringleader. "Mr. Carl Sloper," said Harry Potter. "I believe I have comprehended this situation fully. If Lesath Lestrangle has ever committed a single evil himself, rather than being born to the wrong parents, the fact is not known to *you*. If I am mistaken in this, Mr. Sloper, I suggest you inform me at once."

Neville saw the fear and awe on the other boys' faces. He was feeling it himself. Harry had *claimed* it would all be a trick, but how could it be?

"But he's a *Lestrangle*," said the ringleader.

"He's a boy who *lost his parents*," Harry Potter said, his voice growing even colder.

This time all three of the other Gryffindors flinched.

"So," said Harry Potter. "You saw that Neville didn't want you tormenting an innocent boy on behalf of the Longbottoms. This failed to move you. If I tell you that the Boy-Who-Lived *also* thinks you are in the wrong, that what you did today was a terrible mistake, does that make a difference?"

The ringleader took a step toward Harry.

The others did *not* follow him.

"Carl," one of them said, swallowing. "Maybe we should go."

"They say you're going to be the next Dark Lord," the ringleader said, staring at Harry.

A grin crossed Harry Potter's face. "They also say I'm secretly betrothed to Ginevra Weasley and there's a prophecy about us conquering France." The smile faded. "Since you're determined to force the issue, Mr. Carl Sloper, let

me make things clear. *Leave Lesath alone.* I will know if you don't."

"So Lessy snarked to you," said the ringleader coldly.

"Sure," said Harry Potter dryly, "and he also told me what you did today after you left Charms class, in a private secluded place where no one could see you, with a certain Hufflepuff girl wearing a white ribbon in her hair —"

The ringleader's jaw dropped in shock.

"Eep," said one of the other Gryffindors in a high-pitched voice, and spun on his heels and ran around the corner. His footsteps rapidly pattered away and faded.

And then there were six.

"Ah," said Harry Potter, "there goes a slightly intelligent young man. The rest of you could stand to learn from Bertram Kirke's example, before you get into, shall we say, trouble."

"Are you threatening to snark on us?" said the handsome Gryffindor, his voice trying to be angry, and rather wavering. "Bad things happen to snarkers."

The other two Gryffindors started slowly moving back.

Harry Potter started laughing. "Oh, you did not just say that. Are you *really* trying to intimidate me? *Me?* Now honestly, do you think you're scarier than Peregrine Derrick, Severus Snape or for that matter You-Know-Who?"

Even the ringleader flinched at that.

Harry Potter raised his hand, fingers poised, and all three of the Gryffindors leapt backward, and one of them blurted "Don't — !"

"See," said Harry Potter, "this is where I snap my fingers and you become part of a hilariously amusing story that will be told with much nervous laughter at dinner tonight. But the thing is, people I trust keep telling me not to do that. Professor McGonagall told me I was taking the easy way out of everything and Professor Quirrell says I need to learn how to lose. So you remember that story where I let myself get beaten up by some older Slytherins? We could do that. You could bully me for a while and I could let you. Only you remember that part at the end where I tell my many, many friends inside this school not to do anything about it? This time we'll skip that part. So go ahead. Bully me."

Harry Potter stepped forward, his arms opened wide in invitation.

The three Gryffindors broke and ran, and Neville had to sidestep quickly to avoid getting run over.

There was silence, as their footsteps faded, and then more silence after that. And then there were three.

Harry Potter drew a deep breath, then exhaled. “Whew,” he said. “How are you doing, Neville?”

Neville’s voice came out in a high-pitched squeak. “Okay, *that* was really cool.”

A grin flashed across Harry Potter’s face. “*You* were pretty cool too, you know.”

Neville knew that Harry Potter was just saying that, trying to make him feel good, and it still started a warm glow inside his chest.

Harry turned toward Lesath Lestrangle —

“Are you okay, Lestrangle?” said Neville before Harry could open his mouth.

Now there was something you didn’t expect to find yourself saying, ever.

Lesath Lestrangle turned slowly, and stared at Neville, his face tight, no longer crying, tears glistening as they dried.

“You think you know how it is?” said Lesath, his voice high and shaking. “*You think you know?* My parents are in *Azkaban*, I try not to think about it and they always remind me, they think it’s *great* that Mother is there in the cold and the dark with the Dementors sucking away her life, I wish I was like Harry Potter, at least his parents aren’t hurting, my parents are always hurting, every second of every day, I wish I was like you, at least you can see your parents sometimes, at least you know they loved you, if Mother ever loved me the Dementors will have eaten that thought by now —”

Neville’s eyes were wide with shock. He hadn’t expected this.

Lesath turned to Harry Potter, whose eyes were full of horror.

Lesath flung himself on the floor in front of Harry Potter, touched his forehead to the ground, and whispered, “Help me, Lord.”

There was an awful silence. Neville couldn’t think of a single thing to say, and from the naked shock on Harry’s face, he couldn’t think of anything either.

“They say you can do anything, please, please my Lord, get my parents out of *Azkaban*, I’ll be your loyal servant forever, my life will be yours and my death as well, only please —”

“Lesath,” Harry said, his voice breaking, “Lesath, I can’t, I can’t really do things like that, it’s all just stupid tricks.”

“It’s *not!*” said Lesath, his voice high and desperate. “I *saw* it, the stories are true, you *can!*”

Harry swallowed. "Lesath, I set the whole thing up with Neville, we planned it all out in advance, ask him!"

They had, though Harry hadn't said *how* he was going to do any of it . . .

When Lesath looked up from the floor his face was ghastly, and his voice came out in a shriek that hurt Neville's ears. "*You son of a Mudblood! You could get her out, you just won't! I got down on my knees and begged you and you still won't help! I should have known, you're the Boy-Who-Lived, you think she belongs there!*"

"I can't!" Harry said, his voice as desperate as Lesath's. "It's not a question of what I want, I don't have the *power!*"

Lesath rose to his feet, and spat on the floor in front of Harry, and then turned and walked away. When he was around the corner the sound of his feet sped up, and as they faded Neville thought he heard a single sob.

And then there were two.

Neville looked at Harry.

Harry looked at Neville.

"Wow," Neville said quietly. "He didn't seem very grateful for being rescued."

"He thought I could help him," Harry said, his voice hoarse. "He had hope for the first time in years."

Neville swallowed, and said it. "I'm sorry."

"Wha?" said Harry, sounding totally confused.

"I wasn't grateful when you helped me —"

"Every single thing you said before was completely right," said the Boy-Who-Lived.

"No," Neville said, "it wasn't."

They simultaneously gave brief sad smiles, each condescending to the other.

"I know this wasn't real," said Neville, "I know I couldn't have done anything if you hadn't been here, but thanks for letting me pretend."

"Give me a break," said Harry.

Harry had turned from Neville, and was staring out the window at the gloomy clouds.

A completely ridiculous thought came to Neville. "Are you feeling guilty because you can't get Lesath's parents out of Azkaban?"

"No," said Harry.

A few seconds went by.

"Yes," said Harry.

"You're silly," said Neville.

"I am aware of this," said Harry.

"Do you have to do literally *anything* anyone asks you?"

The Boy-Who-Lived turned back and looked at Neville again. "*Do?* No. Feel guilty about not doing? Yes."

Neville was having trouble finding words. "Once the Dark Lord died, Bellatrix Black was literally the most evil person in the entire world and that was *before* she went to Azkaban. She tortured my mother and father into insanity because she wanted to find out what happened to the Dark Lord —"

"I know," Harry said quietly. "I get that, but —"

"No! You *don't*! She had a *reason* for doing that, and my parents were both Aurors! It's not even *close* to the worst thing she's ever done!" Neville's voice was shaking.

"Even so," said the Boy-Who-Lived, his eyes distant as they stared off into somewhere else, some other place that Neville couldn't imagine. "There might be some incredibly clever solution that makes it possible to save everyone and let them all live happily ever after, and if only I was smart enough I would have thought of it by now —"

"You have problems," said Neville. "You think you ought to be what Lesath Lestrangle thinks you are."

"Yeah," said the Boy-Who-Lived, "that pretty much nails it. Every time someone cries out in prayer and I can't answer, I feel guilty about not being God."

Neville didn't quite understand that, but . . . "That doesn't sound good."

Harry sighed. "I understand that I have a problem, and I know what I need to do to solve it, all right? I'm working on it."



Harry watched Neville leave.

Of course Harry hadn't said what the solution was.

The solution, obviously, was to hurry up and become God.

Neville's footsteps moved off, and soon could no longer be heard.

And then there was one.

"Ahem," said Severus Snape's voice from directly behind him.

Harry let out a small scream and instantly hated himself.

Slowly, Harry turned around.

The tall greasy man in the spotted robes was leaning against the wall in the same position Harry had occupied.

"A fine invisibility cloak, Potter," drawled the Potions Master. "Much is explained."

Oh, bloody crap.

"And perhaps I have been in Dumbledore's company too long," said Severus, "but I cannot help but wonder if that is *the* Cloak of Invisibility."

Harry immediately turned into someone who'd never heard of the Cloak of Invisibility and who was *exactly* as smart as Harry thought Severus thought Harry was.

"Oh, possibly," said Harry. "I trust you realize the implications, if it is?"

Severus's voice was condescending. "You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you, Potter? A rather clumsy try at fishing."

(Professor Quirrell had remarked over their lunch that Harry really needed to conceal his state of mind better than putting on a blank face when someone discussed a dangerous topic, and had explained about one-level deceptions, two-level deceptions, and so on. So either Severus *was* in fact modeling Harry as a one-level player, which made Severus himself two-level, and Harry's three-level move had been successful; or Severus was a four-level player and wanted Harry to *think* the deception had been successful. Harry, smiling, had asked Professor Quirrell what level *he* played at, and Professor Quirrell, also smiling, had responded, *One level higher than you.*)

"So you were watching this whole time," said Harry. "Disillusionment, I think it's called."

A thin smile. "It would have been foolish of me to take the slightest risk that you came to harm."

"And you wanted to see the results of your test firsthand," said Harry. "So. Am I like my father?"

A strange sad expression came over the man, one that looked foreign to his face. "I should sooner say, Harry Potter, that you resemble —"

Severus stopped short.

He stared at Harry.

"Lestrage called you a son of a Mudblood," Severus said slowly. "It didn't seem to bother you much."

Harry furrowed his eyebrows. "Not under those circumstances, no."

"You'd just helped him," Severus said. His eyes were intent on Harry. "And he threw it back in your face. Surely that isn't something you'd just forgive?"

"He'd just been through a pretty harrowing experience," Harry said. "And I don't think being rescued by first-years helped his pride much, either."

"I suppose it was easy enough to forgive," Severus said, and his voice was odd, "since Lestrane means nothing to you. Just some strange Slytherin. If it was a friend, perhaps, you would have felt far more injured by what he said."

"If he were a friend," Harry said, "all the more reason to forgive him."

There was a long silence. Harry felt, and he couldn't have said why or from where, that the air was filling up with a dreadful tension, like water rising, and rising, and rising.

Then Severus smiled, looking suddenly relaxed once more, and all the tension vanished.

"You are a very forgiving person," Severus said, still smiling. "I suppose your stepfather, Michael Verres-Evans, was the one who taught it to you."

"More like Dad's science fiction and fantasy collection," said Harry. "Sort of my fifth parent, really. I've lived the lives of all the characters in all my books, and all their mighty wisdom thunders in my head. Somewhere in there was someone like Lesath, I expect, though I couldn't say who. It wasn't hard to put myself in his shoes. And it was my books that told me what to do about it, too. The good guys forgive."

Severus gave a light, amused laugh. "I'm afraid I wouldn't know much about what good people do."

Harry looked at him. That was kind of sad, actually. "I'll lend you some novels with good people in them, if you like."

"I should like to ask your advice about something," Severus said, his voice casual. "I know of another fifth-year Slytherin who was being bullied by Gryffindors. He was wooing a beautiful Muggleborn girl, who came across him being bullied, and tried to rescue him. And he called her a Mudblood, and that was the end for them. He apologized, many times, but she never forgave him. Have you any thoughts for what he could have said or done, to win from her the forgiveness you gave Lestrane?"

"Erm," Harry said, "based on only that information, I'm not sure *he* was the main one who had a problem. I'd have told him not to date someone that incapable of forgiveness. Suppose they'd gotten married, can you imagine life

in that household?”

There was a pause.

“Oh, but she *could* forgive,” Severus said with amusement in his voice. “Why, afterward, she went off and became the girlfriend of the bully. Tell me, why would she forgive the bully, and not the bullied?”

Harry shrugged. “At a wild guess, because the bully had hurt someone *else* very badly, and the bullied had hurt *her* just a little, and to her that just felt far more unforgivable somehow. Or, not to put too fine a point on it, was the bully handsome? Or for that matter, rich?”

There was another pause.

“Yes to both,” said Severus.

“And there you have it,” said Harry. “Not that I’ve ever been through high school myself, but my books give me to understand that there’s a certain kind of teenage girl who’ll be outraged by a single insult if the boy is plain or poor, yet who can somehow find room in her heart to forgive a rich and handsome boy his bullying. She was shallow, in other words. Tell whoever it was that she wasn’t worthy of him and he needs to get over it and move on and next time date girls who are deep instead of pretty.”

Severus stared at Harry in silence, his eyes glittering. The smile had faded, and though Severus’s face twitched, it did not return.

Harry was starting to feel a bit nervous. “Um, not that I’ve got any experience in the area myself, obviously, but I think that’s what a wise adviser from my books would say.”

There was more silence and more glittering.

It was probably a good time to change the subject.

“So,” Harry said. “Did I pass your test, whatever it was?”

“I think,” Severus said, “that there should be no more conversations between us, Potter, and you would be exceedingly wise never to speak of this one.”

Harry blinked. “Would you mind telling me what I did wrong?”

“You offended me,” said Severus. “And I no longer trust your cunning.”

Harry stared at Severus, taken rather aback.

“But you have given me well-meant advice,” said Severus Snape, “and so I will give you true advice in return.” His voice was almost perfectly steady. Like a string stretched almost perfectly horizontal, despite the massive weight hanging from its middle, by a million tons of tension pulling at either end.

“You almost died today, Potter. In the future, never share your wisdom with anyone unless you know exactly what you are both talking about.”

Harry’s mind finally made the connection.

“*You* were that —”

Harry’s mouth snapped shut as the *almost died* part sank in, two seconds too late.

“Yes,” said Severus, “I was.”

And the terrible tension flooded back into the room like water pressurized at the bottom of the ocean.

Harry couldn’t breathe.

Lose. Now.

“I didn’t know,” Harry whispered. “I’m s —”

“No,” said Severus. Just that one word.

Harry stood there in silence, his mind frantically searching for options. Severus stood between him and the window, which was a real pity, because a fall from that height wouldn’t kill a wizard.

“Your books betrayed you, Potter,” said Severus, still in that voice stretched tight by a million tons of pull. “They did not tell you the one thing you needed to know. You cannot learn from stories what it is like to lose the one you love. That is something you could never understand without feeling it yourself.”

“My father,” Harry whispered. It was his best guess, the one thing that might save him. “My father tried to protect you from the bullies.”

A ghastly smile stretched across Severus’s face, and the man moved toward Harry.

And past him.

“Goodbye, Potter,” said Severus, not looking back on his way out. “We shall have little to say to each other from today on.”

And at the corner, the man stopped, and without turning, spoke one final time.

“Your father was the bully,” said Severus Snape, “and what your mother saw in him was something I never did understand until this day.”

He left.

Harry turned and walked toward the window. His shaking hands went onto the ledge.

Never give anyone wise advice unless you know exactly what you’re both talking about. Got it.

Harry stared out at the clouds and the light drizzle for a while. The window looked out on the east grounds, and it was afternoon, so if the sun was visible through the clouds at all, Harry couldn't see it.

His hands had stopped shaking, but there was a tight feeling in Harry's chest, like it was being compressed by metal bands.

So his father had been a bully.

And his mother had been shallow.

Maybe they'd grown up later. Good people like Professor McGonagall did seem to think the world of them, and it might not be *only* because they were heroic martyrs.

Of course, that was scant consolation when you were eleven and about to turn into a teenager, and wondering what sort of teenager you might become.

So very terrible.

So very sad.

Such an awful life Harry led.

Learning that his genetic parents hadn't been perfect, why, he ought to spend awhile moping about that, feeling sorry for himself.

Maybe he could complain to Lesath Lestrange.

Harry had read about Dementors. Cold and darkness surrounded them, and fear, they sucked away all your happy thoughts and in that absence all your worst memories rose to the surface.

He could imagine himself in Lesath's shoes, knowing that his parents were in Azkaban for life, that place from which no one had ever escaped.

And Lesath would be imagining himself in his mother's place, in the cold and the darkness and the fear, alone with all of her worst memories, even in her dreams, every second of every day.

For an instant Harry imagined his own Mum and Dad in Azkaban with the Dementors sucking out their life, draining away the happy memories of their love for him. Just for an instant, before his imagination blew a fuse and called an emergency shutdown and told him never to imagine that again.

Was it right to do that to anyone, even the second most evil person in the world?

No, said the wisdom of Harry's books, *not if there's any other way, any other way at all.*

And unless the wizarding justice system was as perfect as their prisons — and that sounded rather improbable, all things considered — somewhere in

Azkaban was a person who was entirely innocent, and probably more than one.

There was a burning sensation in Harry's throat, and moisture gathering in his eyes, and he wanted to teleport all of Azkaban's prisoners to safety and call down fire from the sky and blast that terrible place down to bedrock. But he couldn't, because he wasn't God.

And Harry remembered what Professor Quirrell had said beneath the starlight: *Sometimes, when this flawed world seems unusually hateful, I wonder whether there might be some other place, far away, where I should have been . . . But the stars are so very, very far away . . . And I wonder what I would dream about, if I slept for a long, long time.*

Right now this flawed world seemed unusually hateful.

And Harry couldn't understand Professor Quirrell's words, it might have been an alien that had spoken, or an Artificial Intelligence, something built along such different lines from Harry that his brain couldn't be forced to operate in that mode.

You couldn't leave your home planet while it still contained a place like Azkaban.

You had to stay and fight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



“Okay,” Harry said, swallowing. “Okay, Hermione, it’s enough, you can stop.”

The white sugar pill in front of Hermione still hadn’t changed shape or color at all, even though she was concentrating harder than Harry had ever seen, her eyes squeezed shut, beads of sweat on her forehead, hand trembling as it gripped the wand —

“Hermione, *stop!* It’s not going to work, Hermione, I don’t think we can make things that don’t exist yet!”

Slowly, Hermione’s hand relaxed its grasp on the wand.

“I thought I felt it,” she said in a bare whisper. “I thought I felt it start to Transfigure, just for a second.”

There was a lump in Harry’s throat. “You were probably imagining it. Hoping too hard.”

“I probably was,” she said. She looked like she wanted to cry.

Slowly, Harry took his mechanical pencil in his hand, and reached over to the sheet of paper with all the items crossed out, and drew a line through the item that said ‘ALZHEIMER’S CURE’.

They couldn’t have fed anyone a Transfigured pill. But Transfiguration, at least the kind they could do, didn’t enchant the targets — it wouldn’t Transfigure a regular broomstick into a flying one. So if Hermione had been able to make a pill at all, it would have been a *nonmagical* pill, one that worked for

ordinary material reasons. They could have secretly made pills for a Muggle science lab, let them *study* the pills and try to reverse-engineer them before the Transfiguration wore off . . . no one in either world would need to know that magic had been involved, it would just be another scientific breakthrough . . .

It hadn't been the sort of thing a wizard would think of, either. They didn't respect mere *patterns of atoms* that much, they didn't think of unenchanted *material* things as objects of power. If it wasn't magical, it wasn't interesting.

Earlier, Harry had *very* secretly — he hadn't even told Hermione — tried to Transfigure nanotechnology a la Eric Drexler. (He'd tried to produce a desktop nanofactory, of course, not tiny self-replicating assemblers, Harry wasn't insane.) It would have been godhood in a single shot if it'd worked.

"That was it for today, right?" said Hermione. She was slumped back in her chair, leaning her head against the back; and her face showed her tiredness, which was very unusual for Hermione. She liked to pretend she was limitless, at least when Harry was around.

"One more," Harry said cautiously, "but that one's small, plus it might actually work. I saved it for last because I was hoping we could end on an up note. It's real stuff, not like phasers. They've already made it in the laboratory, not like the Alzheimer's cure. And it's a generic substance, not specific like the lost books you tried to Transfigure copies of. I made a diagram of the molecular structure to show you. We just want to make it *longer* than it's ever been made before, and with all the tubes aligned, and the endpoints embedded in diamond." Harry produced a sheet of graph paper.

Hermione sat back up, took it, and studied it, frowning. "These are *all* carbon atoms? And Harry, what's the name? I can't Transfigure it if I don't know what it's called."

Harry made a disgusted face. He was still having trouble getting used to that sort of thing, it shouldn't matter what something was *named* if you knew what it *was*. "They're called buckytubes, or carbon nanotubes. It's a kind of fullerene that was discovered just this year. It's about a hundred times stronger than steel and a sixth of the weight."

Hermione looked up from the graph paper, her face surprised. "That's *real*?"

"Yeah," Harry said, "just hard to make the Muggle way. If we could get enough of the stuff, we could use it to build a space elevator all the way up to geosynchronous orbit or higher, and in terms of delta-v that's halfway to

anywhere in the Solar System. Plus we could throw out solar power satellites like confetti.”

Hermione was frowning again. “Is this stuff *safe*?”

“I don’t see why it wouldn’t be,” Harry said. “A buckytube is just a graphite sheet wrapped into a circular tube, basically, and graphite is the same stuff used in pencils —”

“I *know* what graphite is, Harry,” Hermione said. She brushed her hair back absentmindedly, her eyebrows furrowed as she stared at the sheet of paper.

Harry reached into a pocket of his robes, and produced a white thread tied to two small grey plastic rings at either end. He’d added drops of superglue where the thread met either ring, to make it all a single object that could be Transfigured as a whole. Cyanoacrylate, if Harry remembered correctly, worked by covalent bonds, and that was as close to being a “solid object” as you ever got in a world ultimately composed of tiny individual atoms. “When you’re ready,” Harry said, “try to Transfigure this into a set of aligned buckytube fibers embedded in two solid diamond rings.”

“All right . . .” Hermione said slowly. “Harry, I feel like I just missed something.”

Harry shrugged helplessly. *Maybe you’re just tired*. He knew better than to say it out loud, though.

Hermione laid her wand against one plastic ring, and stared for a while.

Two small circles of glittering diamond lay on the table, connected by a long black thread.

“It changed,” said Hermione. She sounded like she was trying to be enthusiastic but had run out of energy. “Now what?”

Harry felt a bit deflated by his research partner’s lack of passion, but did his best not to show it; maybe the same process would work in reverse to cheer her up. “Now I test it to see if it holds weight.”

There was an A-frame Harry had rigged up to do an earlier experiment with diamond rods — you could make solid diamond objects easily, using Transfiguration, they just wouldn’t last. The earlier experiment had measured whether Transfiguring a long diamond rod into a shorter diamond rod would allow it to lift a suspended heavy weight as it contracted, i.e., could you Transfigure against tension, which you in fact could.

Harry carefully looped one circle of glittering diamond over the thick metal hook at the top of the rig, then attached a thick metal hanger to the

bottom ring, and then started attaching weights to the hanger.

(Harry had asked the Weasley twins to Transfigure the apparatus for him, and the Weasley twins had given him an incredulous look, like they couldn't figure out what sort of prank he could *possibly* want that for, but they hadn't asked any questions. And their Transfigurations, according to them, lasted for around three hours, so Harry and Hermione still had a while left.)

"One hundred kilograms," Harry said about a minute later. "I don't think a steel thread this thin would hold that. It should go up much higher, but that's all the weight I've got."

There was a further silence.

Harry straightened up, and went back to their table, and sat down in his chair, and ceremoniously made a check mark next to 'Buckytubes'. "There," Harry said. "*That* one worked."

"But it's not really *useful*, Harry, is it?" Hermione said from where she was sitting with her head resting in her hands. "I mean, even if we gave it to a scientist they couldn't learn how to make lots of buckytubes from studying ours."

"They might be able to learn *something*," Harry said. "Hermione, *look* at it, that little tiny thread holding up all that weight, we just made something that no Muggle laboratory could make —"

"But any other witch could make it," Hermione said. Her exhaustion was coming into her voice, now. "Harry, I don't think this is working out."

"You mean our relationship?" Harry said. "Great! Let's break up."

That got a slight grin out of her. "I mean our research."

"Oh, Hermione, how *could* you?"

"You're sweet when you're mean," she said. "But Harry, this is nuts, I'm twelve, you're eleven, it's *silly* to think we're going to discover anything that no one's ever figured out before."

"Are you really saying we should give up on unraveling the secrets of magic after trying for less than one *month*?" Harry said, trying to put a note of challenge into his voice. Honestly he was feeling some of the same fatigue as Hermione. None of the *good* ideas ever worked. He'd made just one discovery worth mentioning, the Mendelian pattern, and he couldn't tell Hermione about it without breaking his promise to Draco.

"No," Hermione said. Her young face was looking very serious and adult. "I'm saying right now we should be *studying* all the magic that wizards already

know, so we can do this sort of thing after we graduate from Hogwarts.”

“Um . . .” Harry said. “Hermione, I hate to put it this way, but imagine we’d decided to hold off on research until later, and the first thing we tried after we graduated was Transfiguring an Alzheimer’s cure, and it *worked*. We’d feel . . . I don’t think the word *stupid* would adequately describe how we’d feel. What if there’s something else like that and it does work?”

“That’s not *fair*, Harry!” Hermione said. Her voice was trembling like she was on the verge of breaking out crying. “You can’t *put* that on people! It’s not our *job* to do that sort of thing, we’re *kids*!”

For a moment Harry wondered what would happen if someone told Hermione she had to fight an immortal Dark Lord, if she would turn into one of the whiny self-pitying heroes that Harry could never stand reading about in his books.

“Anyway,” Hermione said. Her voice shook. “I don’t want to keep doing this. I don’t believe children can do things that grownups can’t, that’s only in stories.”

There was silence in the classroom.

Hermione started to look a little scared, and Harry knew that his own expression had gotten colder.

It might not have hurt so much if the same thought hadn’t already come to Harry — that, while thirty might be old for a scientific revolutionary and twenty about right, while there were people who got doctorates when they were seventeen and fourteen-year-old heirs who’d been great kings or generals, there wasn’t really anyone who’d made the history books at eleven.

“All right,” Harry said. “Figure out how to do something a grownup can’t. Is that your challenge?”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Hermione said, her voice coming out in a frightened whisper.

With an effort, Harry wrenched his gaze away from Hermione. “I’m not angry at *you*,” Harry said. His voice was cold, despite his best efforts. “I’m angry at, I don’t know, everything. But I’m not willing to lose, Hermione. Losing isn’t always the right thing to do. I’ll figure out how to do something a grown wizard can’t do, and then I’ll get back to you. How’s that?”

There was more silence.

“Okay,” said Hermione, her voice wavering a little. She pushed herself up out of her chair, and went over to the door of the abandoned classroom they’d

been working in. Her hand went onto the doorknob. “We’re still friends, right? And if you can’t figure out anything —”

Her voice halted.

“Then we’ll study together,” Harry said. His voice was even colder now.

“Um, bye for now, then,” Hermione said, and she quickly went out of the room and shut the door behind her.

Sometimes Harry hated having a dark side, even when he was inside it.

And the part of him that had thought exactly the same thing as Hermione, that no, children *couldn’t* do what grownups couldn’t, was saying all the things that Hermione had been too frightened to say, like, *That’s one hell of a difficult challenge you just grabbed for yourself and boy are you going to end up with egg on your face this time and at least this way you’ll know you’ve failed.*

And the part of him that didn’t enjoy losing replied, in a very cold voice, *Fine, you can shut up and watch.*



It was almost lunchtime, and Harry didn’t care. He hadn’t even bothered grabbing a snack bar from his pouch. His stomach could stand a little starving.

The wizarding world was tiny, they didn’t think like scientists, they didn’t know science, they didn’t question what they’d grown up with, they hadn’t put protective shells on their time machines, they played Quidditch, all of magical Britain was smaller than a small Muggle city, the greatest wizarding school only educated up to the age of seventeen, *silly* wasn’t challenging that at eleven, *silly* was *assuming* wizards knew what they were doing and had already exhausted all the low-hanging fruit a scientific polymath would see.

Step One had been to make a list of every magical constraint Harry could remember, all the things you supposedly couldn’t do.

Step Two, mark the constraints that seemed to make the *least* sense from a scientific perspective.

Step Three, prioritize constraints that a wizard would be unlikely to question if they *didn’t* know science.

Step Four, come up with avenues for attacking them.



Hermione still felt a little shaky as she sat down next to Mandy at the Ravenclaw table. Hermione's lunch had two fruits (tomato slices and peeled tangerines), three vegetables (carrots, carrots, and more carrots), one meat (fried Diricawl drumsticks whose unhealthy coating she would carefully remove), and one little piece of chocolate cake that she would earn by eating the other parts.

It hadn't been as bad as Potions class, sometimes she still had *nightmares* about that. But this time *she* had made it happen and *she'd felt like its target*. Just for a moment, before the terrible cold darkness looked away and said it wasn't angry with her, because it hadn't wanted to scare her.

And she still had that feeling like she'd missed something earlier, something really important.

But they hadn't violated any of the rules of Transfiguration . . . had they? They hadn't made any liquids, any gases, they hadn't taken orders from the Defense Professor . . .

The *pill*! That had been something to be eaten!

. . . well, no, nobody would just eat a pill lying around, it hadn't *worked* actually, they could have just *Finite Incantatem*ed it if it had, but she would still have to tell Harry about that and make sure they didn't mention it in front of Professor McGonagall, in case they were never allowed to study Transfiguration again . . .

Hermione was starting to get a really sick feeling in her stomach. She pushed back her plate from the table, she couldn't eat lunch like this.

And she closed her eyes and began to mentally recite the rules of Transfiguration.

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

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

No, they really *shouldn't* have tried to Transfigure the pill, or they should've at least *realized* . . . she'd been so caught up in Harry's brilliant idea that she hadn't *thought* . . .

The sick feeling in Hermione's stomach was getting worse. There was a feeling in her mind of something hovering just on the edge of recognition, a perception about to invert itself, a young woman about to become a crone, a vase about to become two faces . . .

And she went on remembering the rules of Transfiguration.



Harry's knuckles had gone white on his wand by the time he stopped trying to Transfigure the air in front of his wand into a paperclip. It wouldn't have been safe to Transfigure the paperclip into gas, of course, but Harry didn't see any reason why it would be unsafe the other way around. It just wasn't supposed to be *possible*. But why not? Air was as real a substance as anything else...

Well, maybe that limitation *did* make sense. Air was disorganized, all the molecules constantly changing their relation to each other. Maybe you couldn't impose a new form on substance unless the substance was staying still long enough for you to master it, even though the atoms in solids were also constantly vibrating all the time...

The more Harry failed, the colder he felt, the clearer everything seemed to become.

All right. Next on the list.

You could only Transfigure whole objects as wholes. You couldn't Transfigure *half* a match into a needle, you had to Transfigure the *whole thing*. Back when Harry had been trapped in that classroom by Draco, it had been the reason he couldn't just Transfigure a thin cylindrical cross-section of the walls into sponge, and punch out a chunk of stone large enough for him to fit through the hole. He would have needed to impose a new form on the whole wall, and maybe a whole section of Hogwarts, just in order to change that little cross-section.

And that was *ridiculous*.

Things were made of atoms. Lots of little tiny dots. There *was* no contiguity, there *was* no solidity, just electromagnetic forces holding the little dots related to each other...



Mandy Brocklehurst paused with her fork on her way to her mouth. "Huh," she said to Su Li, sitting across from the now-empty space beside her, "what got into Hermione?"



Harry wanted to kill his eraser.

He'd been trying to change a single spot on the pink rectangle into steel, apart from the rest of the rubber, and the eraser wasn't cooperating.

It *had* to be a conceptual limitation, not a real one. *Had* to be.

Things were made of atoms, and every atom was a tiny separate thing. Atoms were held together by a quantum mist of shared electrons, for covalent bonds, or sometimes just magnetism at close ranges, for ionic bonds or van der Waals forces.

If it came down to that, the protons and neutrons inside the nuclei were tiny separate things. The quarks inside the protons and neutrons were tiny separate things! There simply *wasn't* anything in reality, the world-out-there, that corresponded to people's conceit of solid objects. It was all just little dots.

And free Transfiguration was all in the mind to begin with, wasn't it? No words, no gestures. Only the pure concept of form, kept strictly separate from substance, imposed on the substance, conceived of apart from its form. That and the wand and whatever made you a wizard.

The wizards couldn't transform parts of things, could only transform what their minds perceived as wholes, because they didn't *know in their bones* that it was all just atoms deep down.

Harry had focused on that knowledge as hard as he could, the *true fact* that the eraser was just a collection of atoms, everything was just collections of atoms, and the atoms of the little patch he was trying to Transfigure formed *just as valid* a collection as any other collection he cared to think about.

And Harry still hadn't been able to change that single part of the eraser, the Transfiguration wasn't going anywhere.

This. Was. Ridiculous.

Harry's knuckles were whitening on his wand again. He was *sick* of getting experimental results that *didn't make sense*.

Maybe the fact that *some* part of his mind was still thinking in terms of objects was stopping the Transfiguration from going through. He had thought of a collection of atoms that was an *eraser*. He had thought of a collection that was a *little patch*.

Time to kick it up a notch.

Harry pressed his wand harder against that tiny section of eraser, and tried to see through the illusion that nonscientists thought was reality, the world of desks and chairs, air and erasers and people.

When you walked through a park, the immersive world that surrounded you was something that existed inside your own brain as a pattern of neurons firing. The sensation of a bright blue sky wasn't something high above you, it was something in your visual cortex, and your visual cortex was in the back of your brain. All the sensations of that bright world were really happening in that quiet cave of bone you called your skull, the place where *you* lived and never, ever left. If you really wanted to say hello to someone, to the *actual person*, you wouldn't shake their hand, you'd knock gently on their skull and say "How are you doing in there?" That was what people were, that was where they really lived. And the *picture* of the park that you thought you were *walking through* was something that was visualized inside your brain as it processed the signals sent down from your eyes and retina.

It wasn't a *lie* like the Buddhists thought, there wasn't something terribly mystical and unexpected behind the veil of Maya, what lay beyond the illusion of the park was just the *actual park*, but it was all still *illusion*.

Harry wasn't sitting inside the classroom.

He wasn't looking at the eraser.

Harry was inside Harry's skull.

He was experiencing a processed picture his brain had decoded from the signals sent down by his retina.

The real eraser was somewhere else, somewhere that wasn't the picture.

And the real eraser wasn't like the picture Harry's brain had of it. The idea of the eraser as a *solid object* was something that existed only inside his own brain, inside the parietal cortex that processed his sense of shape and space. The real eraser was a collection of atoms held together by electromagnetic forces and shared covalent electrons, while nearby, air molecules bounced off each other and bounced off the eraser-molecules.

The real eraser was far away, and Harry, inside his skull, could never quite touch it, could only imagine ideas about it. But *his wand had the power*, it could change things out there in *reality*, it was only Harry's own preconceptions that were *limiting* it. Somewhere beyond the veil of Maya, the *truth* behind Harry's concept of "my wand" was touching the collection of atoms that Harry's mind thought of as "a patch on the eraser", and if that wand could change the collection of atoms that Harry considered "the whole eraser", there was absolutely no reason why it couldn't change the other collection too . . .

The Transfiguration still wasn't going through.

Harry's teeth clenched together, and he kicked it up *another* notch.

The concept Harry's mind had of the eraser as a single object was *obvious nonsense*.

It was a map that didn't and *couldn't* match the territory.

Human beings modeled the world using stratified levels of organization, they had *separate thoughts* about how countries worked, how people worked, how organs worked, how cells worked, how molecules worked, how quarks worked.

When Harry's brain needed to think about the eraser, it would think about the rules that governed erasers, like "erasers can get rid of pencil-marks". Only if Harry's brain needed to predict what would happen on the lower chemical level, only then would Harry's brain start thinking — as though it were a separate fact — about rubber molecules.

But that was all in the *mind*.

Harry's mind might have separate *beliefs* about rules that governed erasers, but there was no *separate law of physics* that governed erasers.

Harry's mind modeled reality using multiple levels of organization, with different beliefs about each level. But that was all in the *map*, the true territory wasn't like that, *reality itself* had only a *single* level of organization, the quarks, it was a unified low-level process obeying mathematically simple rules.

Or at least that was what Harry had believed before he'd found out about magic, but the eraser wasn't magical.

And even if the eraser *had* been magical, the idea that there could *really exist* a single solid eraser was *impossible*. Things like erasers *couldn't* be basic elements of reality, they were too big and complicated to be atoms, they *had* to be made of parts. You couldn't have things that were *fundamentally complicated*. The implicit belief that Harry's brain had in the eraser as a single object wasn't just *wrong*, it was a map-territory confusion, the eraser only existed as a separate concept in Harry's multi-level *model* of the world, not as a separate element of single-level reality.

... the Transfiguration *still wasn't happening*.

Harry was breathing heavily, failed Transfiguration was almost as tiring as successful Transfiguration, but *damned* if he'd give up now.

All right, screw this nineteenth-century garbage.

Reality wasn't atoms, it wasn't a set of tiny billiard balls bopping around. That was just another lie. The notion of atoms as little dots was just another

convenient hallucination that people clung to because they didn't want to confront the inhumanly alien shape of the underlying reality. No wonder, then, that his attempts to Transfigure based on that hadn't worked. If he wanted power, he had to abandon his humanity, and force his thoughts to conform to the true math of quantum mechanics.

There *were no particles*, there were just *clouds of amplitude* in a *multiparticle configuration space* and what his brain fondly imagined to be an eraser was nothing except a gigantic *factor* in a wavefunction that *happened to factorize*, it didn't have a separate existence any more than there was a particular solid factor of 3 hidden inside the number 6, if his wand was capable of *altering factors in an approximately factorizable wavefunction* then it should damn well be able to alter the slightly *smaller* factor that Harry's brain visualized as a patch of material on the eraser —



Hermione tore through the hallways, shoes pounding hard on the stone, breath coming in pants, the shock of adrenaline still racing through her blood.

Like a picture of a young woman turning into an old crone, like the cup becoming two faces.

What had they been doing?

What had they been doing?

She came to the classroom and her fingers slipped on the doorknob at first, too sweaty, she grabbed harder and the door opened —

— in a single flash of perception she saw Harry staring at a small pink rectangle on the table in front of him —

— as a few paces away the tiny black thread, almost invisible from this distance, supported all that weight —

“Harry get out of the classroom!”

Pure shock crossed Harry's face, and he stood up so fast he almost fell over, stopping only to grab the small pink rectangle from the table, and he tore out of the door, she'd already stepped aside, her wand was already in her hand coming up pointing at the thread —

“Finite Incantatem!”

And Hermione slammed the door shut again, just as the gigantic crash of a hundred kilograms of falling metal came from inside.

She was panting, gasping for air, she'd run all the way here without stopping, she was soaked in sweat and her legs and thighs burned like living flames, she couldn't have answered Harry's questions for all the Galleons in the world.

Hermione blinked, and realized that she had started to fall, and Harry had caught her, and was lowering her gently to sit on the floor.

"... healthy..." she managed to whisper.

"*What?*" said Harry, looking paler than she'd ever seen him.

"... are you, feeling, healthy..."

Harry started looking even more frightened as the question sank in. "I, I don't think I have any symptoms —"

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment. "Good," she whispered. "Catch, breath."

That took a while. Harry was still looking scared. That was good too, maybe it would teach him a lesson.

Hermione reached into the pouch Harry had bought her, whispered "water" through her parched throat, took out the bottle and drank in great huge gulps.

And then it was still a while before she could talk again.

"We broke the rules, Harry," she said in a hoarse voice. "We broke the rules."

"I..." Harry swallowed. "I still don't see how, I've been *thinking* but —"

"I asked if the Transfiguration was safe and *you answered me!*"

There was a pause.

"That's it?" Harry said.

She could have screamed.

"Harry, don't you get it?" she said. "It's made out of tiny fibers, what if it *unraveled*, who *knows* what could go wrong, *we didn't ask Professor McGonagall!* Don't you see what we were doing? We were experimenting with Transfiguration. We were *experimenting* with *Transfiguration!*"

There was another pause.

"Right..." Harry said slowly. "That's probably one of those things they don't even bother telling you *not* to do because it's too obvious. Don't test brilliant new ideas for Transfiguration by yourselves in an unused classroom without consulting any professors."

"You could have gotten us killed, Harry!" Hermione knew it wasn't fair, she'd made the mistake too, but she still felt angry at him, he always sounded so confident and that had dragged her unthinkingly along in his wake. "We

could have *spoiled Professor McGonagall's perfect record!*"

"Yes," said Harry, "let's not tell her about this, shall we?"

"We have to stop," Hermione said. "We have to stop this or we're going to get hurt. We're too young, Harry, we can't do this, not yet."

A weak grin crossed Harry's face. "Um, you're sort of wrong about that."

And he held out a small pink rectangle, a rubber eraser with a bright metal patch on it.

Hermione stared at it, puzzled.

"Quantum mechanics wasn't enough," Harry said. "I had to go all the way down to timeless physics before it took. Had to see the wand as enforcing a *relation* between separate past and future realities, instead of *changing* anything over time — but I did it, Hermione, I saw past the illusion of objects, and I bet there's not a single other wizard in the world who could have. Even if some Muggleborn knew about timeless formulations of quantum mechanics, it would just be a weird belief about strange distant quantum stuff, they wouldn't see that it was *reality*, accept that the world they knew was just a hallucination. I Transfigured *part* of the eraser without changing the *whole thing*."

Hermione raised her wand again, pointed it at the eraser.

For a moment anger crossed Harry's face, but he didn't make any move to stop her.

"*Finite Incantatem*," said Hermione. "Check with Professor McGonagall before you try it again."

Harry nodded, though his face was still a bit tight.

"And we still have to stop," said Hermione.

"*Why?*" said Harry. "Don't you see what this *means*, Hermione? Wizards *don't* know everything! There's too few of them, even fewer who know any science, they haven't exhausted the low-hanging fruit —"

"It's not *safe*," Hermione said. "If we *can* find out new things it's even *less* safe! We're *too young*! We made one big mistake already, next time we could just *die*!"

Then Hermione flinched.

Harry looked away from her, and started taking slow, deep breaths.

"Please don't try to do it alone, Harry," Hermione said, her voice trembling. "Please."

Please don't make me have to decide whether to tell Professor Flitwick.

There was a long pause.

"So you want us to study," Harry said. She could tell he was trying to keep the anger out of his voice. "Just study."

Hermione wasn't sure if she should say anything, but . . . "Like you studied, um, timeless physics, right?"

Harry looked back at her.

"That thing you did," Hermione said, her voice tentative, "it wasn't because of *our* experiments, right? You could do it because you'd read lots of books."

Harry opened his mouth, and then he shut it again. There was a frustrated look on his face.

"All right," Harry said. "How about this. We study, and if I think of anything that seems *really* worth trying, we'll try it after I ask a professor."

"Okay," Hermione said. She didn't fall over with relief, but only because she was already sitting down.

"Shall we get lunch?" Harry said cautiously.

Hermione nodded. Yes. Lunch sounded good. For real, this time.

She carefully began to push herself off the stone floor, wincing as her body screamed at her —

Harry pointed his wand at her and said "*Wingardium Leviosa*."

Hermione blinked as the huge weight on her legs diminished to something bearable.

A smile quirked across Harry's face. "You can *lift* something without being able to Hover it completely," he said. "Remember that experiment?"

Hermione smiled back helplessly, although she thought she ought to still be angry.

And she started walking back toward the Great Hall, feeling remarkably and wonderfully light on her feet, as Harry carefully kept his wand trained on her.

He only managed to keep it up for five minutes, but it was the thought that counted.



Minerva looked at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore gazed back inquiringly at her. "Did you understand any of that?" the Headmaster said, sounding bemused.

It had been the most complete and utter gibberish that Minerva could ever

remember hearing. She was feeling a bit embarrassed about having summoned the Headmaster to hear it, but she'd been given explicit instructions.

"I'm afraid not," Professor McGonagall said primly.

"So," Dumbledore said. The silver beard swung away from her, the old wizard's twinkling gaze looked elsewhere once more. "You suspect you might be able to do something that other wizards can't do, something we think is impossible."

The three of them stood within the Headmaster's private Transfiguration workroom, where the shining phoenix of Dumbledore's Patronus had told her to bring Harry, moments after her own Patronus had reached him. Light shone down through the skylights and illuminated the great seven-pointed alchemical diagram drawn in the center of the circular room, showing it to be a little dusty, which saddened Minerva. Transfiguration research was one of Dumbledore's great enjoyments, and she'd known how pressed for time he'd been lately, but not that he was *this* pressed.

And now Harry Potter was going to waste even more of the Headmaster's time. But she certainly couldn't blame *Harry* for that. He'd done the proper thing in coming to her to say that he'd had an idea for doing something in Transfiguration that was currently believed to be impossible, and she herself had done exactly what she'd been told to do: she'd ordered Harry to be quiet and not discuss anything with her until she had consulted the Headmaster and they'd finished moving to a secure location.

If Harry had started out by saying what *specifically* he thought he could do, she wouldn't have bothered.

"Look, I know it's hard to explain," Harry said, sounding a little embarrassed. "What it adds up to is that what you believe conflicts with what scientists believe, in a case where I'd genuinely expect scientists to know more than wizards."

Minerva would have sighed out loud, if Dumbledore hadn't seemed to be taking the whole thing very seriously.

Harry's idea stemmed from simple ignorance, nothing more. If you changed half of a metal ball into glass, the *whole ball* had a different Form. To change the part *was* to change the whole, and that meant removing the whole Form and replacing it with a different one. What would it even *mean* to Transfigure only half of a metal ball? That the metal ball *as a whole* had the same Form as before, but *half* that ball now had a different Form?

“Mr. Potter,” said Professor McGonagall, “what you want to do isn’t just impossible, it’s *illogical*. If you change half of something, you *did* change the whole.”

“Indeed,” said Dumbledore. “But Harry is the hero, so he may be able to do things that are logically impossible.”

Minerva would have rolled her eyes, if she hadn’t gone numb a long time ago.

“Supposing it *was* possible,” said Dumbledore, “can you think of any reason why the results would differ in any way from ordinary Transfiguration?”

Minerva frowned. The fact that the concept was literally unimaginable was presenting her with some difficulty, but she tried to take it at face value. A Transfiguration imposed on only half of a metal ball . . .

“Strange things happening at the interface?” said Minerva. “But that should be no different than Transfiguring the object as a whole, into a Form with two different parts . . .”

Dumbledore nodded. “That is my own thought as well. And Harry, if your theory is correct, it implies that what you want to do is *exactly* like any other Transfiguration, only applied to a part of the subject rather than the whole? No changes *at all*?”

“Yes,” Harry said firmly. “That’s the whole point.”

Dumbledore looked at her again. “Minerva, can you think of any reason whatsoever why that would be dangerous?”

“No,” said Minerva, after she had finished searching through her memory.

“Likewise myself,” said the Headmaster. “All right, then, since this ought to be exactly analogous to ordinary Transfiguration in all respects, and since we cannot think of any reason whatsoever why it would be dangerous, I think that the second degree of caution will suffice.”

Minerva was surprised, but she didn’t object. Dumbledore was by far her senior in Transfiguration, and he had tried literally thousands of new Transfigurations without ever choosing a degree of caution that was too low. He had used Transfiguration *in combat* and he was *still alive*. If the Headmaster thought the second degree was enough, it was enough.

That Harry was certainly going to fail was, of course, completely irrelevant.

The two of them started setting up the wards and detection webs. The most important web was the one that checked to make sure no Transfigured material had entered the air. Harry would be enclosed in a separate shell

of force with its own air supply just to be certain, only his wand allowed to leave the shield, and the interface tight. They were inside Hogwarts so they couldn't automatically Apparate out any material that showed signs of spontaneous combustion, but they could launch it out a skylight almost as fast, the windows all folded outward for exactly that reason. Harry himself would go out a different skylight at the first sign of trouble.

Harry watched them working, his face looking a little frightened.

"Don't worry," said Professor McGonagall in the middle of her running description, "this almost certainly won't be necessary, Mr. Potter. If we *expected* anything to go wrong you would not be allowed to try. It's just ordinary precautions for any Transfiguration no one has ever tried before."

Harry swallowed and nodded.

And a few minutes later, Harry was strapped into the safety chair and resting his wand against a metal ball — one that, based on his current test scores, should have been too large for him to Transfigure in less than thirty minutes.

And a few minutes after *that*, Minerva was leaning against the wall, feeling faint.

There was a small patch of glass on the ball where Harry's wand had rested.

Harry didn't say *I told you so*, but the smug look on his sweating face said it for him.

Dumbledore was casting analytic Charms on the ball, looking more and more intrigued by the moment. Thirty years had melted off his face.

"Fascinating," said Dumbledore. "It's exactly as he claimed. He simply Transfigured a part of the subject without Transfiguring the whole. You say it's really just a conceptual limitation, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry said, "but a deep one, just knowing it had to be a conceptual limitation wasn't enough. I had to suppress the part of my mind that was making the error and think instead about the underlying reality that scientists figured out."

"Truly fascinating," Dumbledore said. "I take it that for any other wizard to do the same would require months of study if they could do it at all? And may I ask you to partially Transfigure some other subjects?"

"Probably yes and of course," Harry said.

Half an hour later, Minerva was feeling equally bewildered, but considerably reassured about the safety issues.

It *was* the same, aside from being logically impossible.

"I believe that's enough, Headmaster," Minerva said finally. "I suspect partial Transfiguration is more tiring than the ordinary sort."

"Getting less so with practice," said the exhausted and pale boy, voice unsteady, "but yeah, you've got that right."

The process of extracting Harry from the wards took another minute, and then Minerva escorted him to a much more comfortable chair, and Dumbledore produced an ice-cream soda.

"*Congratulations*, Mr. Potter!" said Professor McGonagall, and meant it. She would have bet almost anything against that working.

"Congratulations indeed," said Dumbledore. "Even I did not make any original discoveries in Transfiguration before the age of fourteen. Not since the day of Dorotea Senjak has any genius flowered so early."

"Thanks," Harry said, sounding a little surprised.

"Nonetheless," Dumbledore said thoughtfully, "I think it would be most wise to keep this happy event a secret, at least for now. Harry, did you discuss your idea with any other person before you spoke to Professor McGonagall?"

There was silence.

"Um..." Harry said. "I don't want to turn anyone over to the Inquisition, but I did tell one other student —"

The word almost exploded from Professor McGonagall's lips. "*What?* You discussed a completely novel form of Transfiguration with a *student* before consulting a recognized authority? Do you have any idea how *irresponsible* that was?"

"I'm sorry," said Harry. "I didn't realize."

The boy looked appropriately frightened, and Minerva felt something inside her relax. At least Harry understood how foolish he'd been.

"You must swear Miss Granger to secrecy," Dumbledore said gravely. "And do not tell anyone else unless there is an extremely good reason for it, and they too have sworn."

"Ah... why?" Harry said.

Minerva was wondering the same thing. Once again the Headmaster was thinking too far ahead for her to keep up.

"Because you can do something that no one else will believe you can do," Dumbledore said. "Something completely unexpected. It may prove to be your critical advantage, Harry, and we must preserve it. Please, trust me in this."

Professor McGonagall nodded, her firm face showing nothing of her inner confusion. "Please do, Mr. Potter," she said.

"All right . . ." Harry said slowly.

"Once we have finished examining your materials," Dumbledore added, "you may practice partial Transfiguration, on glass to steel and steel to glass *only*, with Miss Granger to act as your spotter. Naturally, if either of you suspect any symptom of any form of Transfiguration sickness, inform a professor at once."

Just before Harry left the workroom, with his hand on the door handle, the boy turned back and said, "As long as we're here, have either of you noticed anything different about Professor Snape?"

"Different?" said the Headmaster.

Minerva didn't let her wry smile show on her face. Of course the boy was apprehensive about the 'evil Potions Master', since he had no way of knowing why Severus was to be trusted. It would have been odd to say the least, explaining to Harry that Severus was still in love with his mother.

"I mean, has his behavior changed recently in any way?" said Harry.

"Not that I have seen . . ." the Headmaster said slowly. "Why do you ask?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't want to prejudice your own observations by saying. Just keep an eye out, maybe?"

That sent a quiver of unease through Minerva in a way that no outright accusation of Severus could have.

Harry bowed to both of them respectfully, and took his leave.



"Albus," Minerva said after the boy had gone, "how did you *know* to take Harry seriously? I would have thought his idea merely impossible!"

The old wizard's face turned grave. "The same reason it must be kept secret, Minerva. The same reason I told you to come to me, if Harry made any such claim. Because it is a power that Voldemort knows not."

The words took a few seconds to sink in.

And then the cold shiver went down her spine, as it always did when she remembered.

It had started out as an ordinary job interview, Sybill Trelawney applying for the position of Professor of Divination.

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 WILL MARK HIM AS HIS EQUAL,
 BUT HE WILL 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.

Those dreadful words, spoken in that terrible booming voice, didn't seem to fit something like partial Transfiguration.

"Perhaps not, then," Dumbledore said after Minerva tried to explain. "I confess I had been hoping for something that would help in finding Voldemort's Horcrux, wherever he may have hidden it. But . . ." The old wizard shrugged. "Prophecies are tricky things, Minerva, and it is best to take no chances. The smallest thing may prove decisive if it remains unexpected."

"And what do you suppose he meant about *Severus*?" said Minerva.

"There I have no idea," sighed Dumbledore. "Unless Harry is making a move against Severus, and thought that an open question might be taken seriously where a direct allegation would be dismissed. And if that was indeed what happened, Harry correctly reasoned that I would not trust that it was so. Let us simply keep watch, without prejudice, as he asks."



AFTERMATH, 1:

"Um, Hermione?" Harry said in a very small voice. "I think I owe you a really, really, really big apology."



AFTERMATH, 2:

Alissa Cornfoot's eyes were slightly glazed as she gazed upon the Potions Master giving her class a stern lecture, holding up a tiny bronze bean and saying something about screaming puddles of human flesh. Ever since the start of this year she'd been having trouble listening in Potions. She kept staring at

their awful, mean, greasy professor and fantasizing about special detentions. There was probably something really *wrong* with her but she just couldn't seem to stop doing it —

“Ow!” Alissa said then.

Snape had just flicked the bronze bean unerringly at Alissa's forehead.

“Miss Cornfoot,” said the Potions Master, his voice cutting, “this is a delicate potion and if you cannot pay attention you will hurt your classmates, not just yourself. See me after class.”

The last four words didn't help her any, but she tried harder, and managed to get through the day without melting anyone.

After class, Alissa approached the desk. Part of her wanted to stand there meekly with her face abashed and her hands clasped penitently behind her back, just in case, but some quiet instinct told her this might be a *bad idea*. So instead she just stood there with her face neutral, in a posture that was very proper for a young lady, and said, “Professor?”

“Miss Cornfoot,” Snape said without looking up from the sheets he was grading, “I do not return your affections, I begin to find your stares disturbing, and you will restrain your eyes henceforth. Is that quite clear?”

“Yes,” said Alissa in a strangled squeak, and Snape dismissed her, and she fled the classroom with her cheeks flaming like molten lava.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



There'd been a sinking feeling in Hermione's stomach lately, every time she heard the other students talking about her and Harry. She'd been in a shower stall this morning when she'd overheard a conversation between Morag and Padma that had been the last straw piled on top of quite a lot of other straws.

She was starting to think that getting involved in a rivalry with Harry Potter had been a terrible mistake.

If she'd just *stayed away* from Harry Potter, she could have been Hermione Granger, the brightest academic star of Hogwarts, who was earning more points for Ravenclaw than anyone. She wouldn't have been *as* famous as the Boy-Who-Lived, but she would have been famous for *herself*.

Instead the Boy-Who-Lived had an academic rival, and her name happened to be Hermione Granger.

And worse, she had gone on a date with him.

The idea of getting into a Romance with Harry had seemed like an appealing idea at first. She'd read books like that, and if there was anyone in Hogwarts who was a candidate for the heroine's love interest it was obviously Harry Potter. Bright, funny, famous, sometimes scary...

So she'd forced Harry into going on a date with her.

And now *she* was *his* love interest.

Or worse, one of the options on his dinner menu.

She'd been in a shower stall that morning and just about to turn on the water, when she'd heard giggles coming from outside. And she'd heard Morag talking about how that Muggleborn girl probably wouldn't fight hard enough to win against Ginevra Weasley, and Padma speculating that Harry Potter might decide he wanted *both*.

It was like they didn't understand that GIRLS had options on their dinner menu and BOYS fought over them.

But that wasn't even the part that hurt, really. It was that when she scored 98 on one of Professor McGonagall's tests, the news wasn't that Hermione Granger had scored the highest in the class, the news was that Harry Potter's rival had scored seven more points than him.

If you got too close to the Boy-Who-Lived, you became part of his story. You didn't get your own.

And the thought had come to Hermione that she should just walk away, but that would've been too sad.

But she did want to get *back* what she'd accidentally given away by letting herself become known as Harry's rival. She wanted to be a separate person again instead of Harry Potter's third leg, was that too much to ask?

It was a hard trap to climb out of once you fell in. No matter how high you scored in class, even if you did something that deserved a special dinnertime announcement, it just meant you were rivaling Harry Potter again.

But she thought she'd come up with a way.

Something to do that *wouldn't* be seen as pushing up on the opposite end of Harry Potter's seesaw.

It would be hard.

It would go against her nature.

She would have to fight someone very evil.

And she would need to ask someone even *more* evil for help.

Hermione raised her hand to knock upon that terrible door.

She hesitated.

Hermione realized she was being *silly*, and raised her hand a bit higher.

She tried to knock again.

Her hand quite failed to touch the door.

And then the door swung open anyway.

"Dear me," said the spider, sitting in its web. "Was it really that hard to lose a single Quirrell point, Miss Granger?"

Hermione stood there with her hand raised, her cheeks growing pink. It *had* been.

"Well, Miss Granger, I shall be merciful," said the evil Professor Quirrell. "Consider it already lost. There, I have taken a hard choice from you. Are you not grateful?"

"Professor Quirrell," Hermione managed to say in a voice that squeaked a little. "I have a lot of Quirrell points, don't I?"

"You do indeed," said Professor Quirrell. "Though one less than you had before. Terrible, isn't it? Just think, if I don't like your reason for coming here, you could lose another fifty. Maybe I'd take them away one . . . by one . . . by one . . ."

Hermione's cheeks were going even redder. "You're really evil, did anyone ever tell you that?"

"Miss Granger," Professor Quirrell said gravely, "it can be dangerous to give people compliments like that when they have not been truly earned. The recipient might feel bashful and undeserving and want to do something worthy of your praise. Now what was it you wanted to talk to me about, Miss Granger?"



It was after lunch on Thursday afternoon, and Hermione and Harry were ensconced in a little library nook, with a *Quietus* field up so they could talk. Harry was lying stomach-down on the ground with his elbows resting on the floor and his head in his hands and his feet kicking up casually behind him. Hermione was occupying a stuffed chair much too large for her, like she was the Hermione center of a candy shell.

Harry had suggested that they could, as a first pass, read just the *titles* of all the books in the library, and then Hermione could read all the tables of contents.

Hermione had thought this was a brilliant idea. She'd never done that with a library before.

Unfortunately there was a slight flaw in this plan.

Namely, they were both Ravenclaws.

Hermione was reading a book called *Magical Mnemonics*.

Harry was reading a book called *The Skeptical Wizard*.

Each had thought it was just one special exception they would make only this one time, and neither had yet realized it was impossible for either of them to ever finish reading all the book titles no matter how hard they tried.

The quiet of their little nook was broken by two words.

“Oh, *no*,” Harry suddenly said out loud, sounding like the words had been torn out of him.

There was a bit more quiet.

“He *didn’t*,” Harry said, in the same voice.

Then she heard Harry start giggling helplessly.

Hermione looked up from her book.

“All right,” she said, “what *is* it?”

“I just found out why you never ask the Weasleys about the family rat,” Harry said. “It’s *really* awful and I shouldn’t be laughing and I’m a terrible person.”

“Yes,” Hermione said primly, “you are. Tell me too.”

“Okay, first the background. There’s a whole chapter in this book about Sirius Black conspiracy theories. You remember who that is, right?”

“Of course,” said Hermione. Sirius Black was a traitor, a friend of James Potter who had let Voldemort into the protected home of the Potters.

“So it turns out there were a number of, shall we say, *irregularities*, associated with Black going to Azkaban. He didn’t get a trial, and the Junior Minister in charge when the Aurors arrested Black was none other than Cornelius Fudge, who became our current Minister of Magic.”

That sounded a little suspicious to Hermione too, and she said as much.

Harry made a shrugging motion with his shoulders, as he lay on the floor looking at his book. “Suspicious things happen all the time, and if you’re a conspiracy theorist you can always find *something*.”

“But *no trial*?” said Hermione.

“It was right after the Dark Lord’s defeat,” Harry said, his voice serious as he said it. “Things were incredibly chaotic, and when the Aurors tracked down Black he was standing there laughing in a street ankle-deep in blood, with twenty eyewitnesses to recount how he’d killed a friend of my father’s named Peter Pettigrew plus twelve bystanders. I’m not saying I approve of Black not getting a trial. But these are wizards we’re talking about here, so it’s not really any more suspicious than, I don’t know, the sort of thing people point to when they want to argue over who shot John F. Kennedy. So anyway, Sirius Black

is the wizarding Lee Harvey Oswald. There's all sorts of conspiracy theories about who *really* betrayed my parents instead of him, and one of the favorites is Peter Pettigrew, and this is where it starts getting complicated."

Hermione listened, fascinated. "But how do you go from there to the Weasleys' *pet rat* —"

"Hold on," said Harry, "I'm getting there. Now, after Pettigrew's death it came out that he'd been a spy for the Light — not a double agent, just someone who snuck around and found things out. He'd been good at that since he was a teenager, even in Hogwarts he had a reputation for finding out all sorts of secrets. So the conspiracy theory is that Pettigrew became an unregistered Animagus while he was still in Hogwarts, an Animagus of something small that could scurry around and listen to conversations. The main problem being that successful Animagi are rare and doing it as a teenager would be really unlikely, so of course the conspiracy theory says that my father and Black were unregistered Animagi too. And in that conspiracy theory, Pettigrew himself killed the twelve bystanders, turned into his small Animagus form, and ran. So Michael Shermer says there are four additional problems with this. One, Black was the only one besides my parents who knew how to get through the wards around their house." (Harry's voice was a little hard as he said that.) "Two, Black was a more likely suspect to start with than Pettigrew, there's a rumor Black deliberately tried to get a student killed during his time at Hogwarts, and he was from this really nasty pureblood family, Bellatrix Black was literally his cousin. Three, Black was twenty times the fighting wizard that Pettigrew was, even if he wasn't as smart. The duel between them would have been like Professor Quirrell versus Professor Sprout. Pettigrew probably didn't even get a chance to draw his wand, let alone fake all the evidence the conspiracy theory requires. And four, Black was standing in the street *laughing*."

"But the *rat* —" said Hermione.

"Right," Harry said. "Well, to make a long story short, Bill Weasley decided that his little brother Percy's pet rat was Pettigrew's Animagus form —"

Hermione's jaw dropped.

"Yes," Harry said, "you wouldn't exactly expect Evil Pettigrew to be living a sad and furtive life as the pet rat of an enemy wizarding family, he'd either be with the Malfoys or, more likely, off in the Carribean after a bit of plastic surgery. Anyway, Bill knocks out his little brother Percy, stuns and grabs the rat, sends out all these emergency owl messages —"

“Oh, *no!*” Hermione said, the words torn out of her.

“— and somehow manages to gather Dumbledore, the Minister of Magic, and the Head Auror —”

“He *didn't!*” said Hermione.

“And of course when they get there they think he's crazy, but they use *Veritas Oculum* on the rat anyway, just to be sure, and what do they discover?”

She would've *died*. “A rat.”

“You win a cookie! So they dragged poor Bill Weasley off to St. Mungo's and it turned out to be a pretty standard schizophrenic break, it just happens to some people, especially young men around what we'd consider college age. Guy was convinced he was ninety-seven years old and had died and gone back in time to his younger self via train station. And he responded perfectly well to antipsychotics and is back to normal and everything's fine now, except people don't talk as much anymore about Sirius Black conspiracy theories, and you don't ever ask the Weasleys about the family rat.”

Hermione was giggling helplessly. It was really awful and she shouldn't be laughing and she was a terrible person.

“The thing I *don't* understand,” Harry said, after their giggles had died down, “is *why* Black would hunt down Pettigrew instead of running as fast as he could. He had to know the Aurors would be after him. I wonder if they got the reason out of Black before they took him to Azkaban? See, this is why people who are absolutely positively guilty still go through the legal system and get trials.”

Hermione had to agree with that.

Soon Harry was done with his book while Hermione was only halfway through hers — hers was a much more difficult book than Harry's, but she still felt embarrassed about that. And then she had to put *Magical Mnemonics* back on the shelf and drag herself away, because it was time for her to face the most dreaded class in Hogwarts, BROOMSTICK RIDING.

Harry tagged along as she walked there, even though his own class wasn't until an hour and a half later, like a fighter jet escorting a sad little propeller plane on its way to its own funeral.

The boy wished her goodbye in a quiet, sympathetic voice, and she walked onto the grassy fields of Doom.

And there was much shrieking and almost falling and horrible brushes with death and the ground in completely the *wrong place* and the sun getting

in her eyes and Morag buzzing her and Mandy thinking she was being *subtle* about always being near enough to catch her if she fell and she *knew* the other students were laughing at both of them but she never said anything to Mandy because she didn't actually want to die.

After ten million years the class ended, and she was back on the ground where she belonged until next Thursday. Sometimes she had nightmares about it always being Thursday.

Why everyone had to learn this, when they were just going to Apparate or Floo or Portkey everywhere once they grew up, was a complete and utter mystery to Hermione. Nobody actually needed to ride broomsticks as an adult, it was like being forced to play dodgeball in P.E.

At least Harry had the decency to be ashamed of being good at it.



It was a couple of hours later, and she was in a Hufflepuff study hall with Hannah, Susan, Leanne, and Megan. Professor Flitwick, surprisingly diffident for a teacher, had asked if she might possibly maybe help those four with their Charms homework for a while, even though they weren't Ravenclaws, and Hermione had felt so proud she'd almost *burst*.

Hermione took a piece of parchment, spilled a little bit of ink on it, tore it into four pieces, crumpled them, and tossed the pieces on the table.

She could have gotten it just from crumpling it, but doing all that made it more like garbage, and that helped when someone was first practicing the Disposal Charm.

Hermione sharpened her ears and eyes, and said, "Okay, try it."

"*Evert*o."

"*Evert*o."

"*Evert*o."

"*Evert*o."

Hermione didn't think she'd quite caught all the problems. "Can you all try it again?"

An hour later Hermione had concluded that (1), Leanne and Megan were sort of sloppy, but if you asked them to keep practicing something, they would, (2) Hannah and Susan were focused and driven to the point where you had to keep telling them to *slow down* and *relax* and *think* about things instead

of *trying* so hard — it was odd to think that those two would soon be *hers* — and (3) she liked helping Hufflepuffs, the whole study hall had a very cheerful atmosphere.

When she left for dinner, she found the Boy-Who-Lived reading a book while he waited to escort her. It made her feel flattered, and also a little worried because Harry didn't seem to really talk to *anyone* besides her.

"Did you know there's a girl in Hufflepuff who's a Metamorphmagus?" said Hermione as they headed toward the Great Hall. "She makes her hair really red, like stop-sign-red not Weasley red, and when she spilled hot tea on herself she turned into a black-haired boy until she got it under control again."

"Really? Cool," said Harry, sounding a bit distracted. "Um, Hermione, just to check, you know tomorrow is the last day to sign up for Professor Quirrell's armies, right?"

"Yes," Hermione said. "The armies of the evil Professor Quirrell." Her voice was a little angry, though Harry didn't know why, of course.

"Hermione," Harry said, his voice exasperated, "he's not evil. He's a little bit Dark and a whole lot Slytherin. It's not the same as being *evil*."

Harry Potter had too many words for things, that was his problem. He would have been better off if he'd just divided the universe into Good and Bad. "Professor Quirrell called me up in front of the whole class and told me to *shoot someone!*"

"He was right," Harry said, his face sober. "I'm sorry, Hermione, but he was. You should have shot *me*, I wouldn't have minded. You can't learn Battle Magic if you can't practice against real opponents using real spells. And now you're doing okay in sparring, aren't you?"

Hermione was only twelve, and so she knew, but she couldn't put it into words, she couldn't find the thing to say that would convince Harry.

Professor Quirrell had taken a young girl and called up that girl in front of everyone, and ordered her to open fire without provocation on a classmate.

It didn't *matter* if Professor Quirrell was right about her needing to learn it.

Professor McGonagall wouldn't ever have done that.

Professor Flitwick wouldn't ever have done that.

Maybe not even Professor Snape would have done that.

Professor Quirrell was *EVIL*.

But she couldn't find the words, and she knew that Harry would never

believe her.

“Hermione, I’ve talked to older students,” Harry said. “Professor Quirrell could be the *only* competent Defense Professor we get in all seven years at Hogwarts. Anything else we can learn later. If we want to study Defense, we have to do it *this year*. The students who sign up for the extracurricular stuff are going to be learning huge amounts, way beyond what the Ministry thinks first-years are supposed to study — did you know we’re going to be learning the Patronus Charm? In *January*?”

“The *Patronus Charm*?” Hermione said, her voice going up in surprise.

Her books said that was one of the brightest magics known, a weapon against the Darkest creatures, cast with pure positive emotions. It wasn’t something she’d expect the evil Professor Quirrell to teach — or arrange to be taught, since Hermione couldn’t imagine he could do the spell himself.

“Yes,” Harry said. “Students don’t usually learn the Patronus Charm until their fifth years or even later! But Professor Quirrell says the Ministry schedules were made up by talking Flobberworms, and the ability to cast the Patronus Charm depends on emotions more than magical strength. Professor Quirrell says that he thinks most students do *way* less than they can, and this year he’s going to prove it.”

There was the usual tone of awed worship that Harry’s voice had when he talked about Professor Quirrell, and Hermione gritted her teeth and kept walking.

“I already signed up, actually,” Hermione said, her voice a little quiet. “I did it this morning. For everything, just like you said.”

In for a penny, in for a pound was the usual expression.

Besides, she didn’t want to *lose*, and if she wanted to win she had to learn.

“So you *will* be in the armies, then?” Harry’s voice was suddenly enthusiastic. “That’s awesome, Hermione! I’ve already gotten my list of soldiers, but I’m sure Professor Quirrell will let me add one more, or trade —”

“I’m not joining *your* army.” Hermione’s voice was sharp. She knew it was a reasonable assumption but it *still* annoyed her.

Harry blinked. “Not Draco Malfoy’s, surely. So you want to be in the third army? Even though we don’t know who the general *is* yet?” Harry sounded surprised and a little wounded, and she couldn’t blame him, though of course she did blame him, since in fact it was all his fault. “But why not mine?”

“Think about it,” Hermione snapped, “and maybe you’ll work it out!”

And she sped up her stride and left Harry gaping behind her.



“Professor Quirrell,” Draco said in his most formal voice, “I must protest your appointment of Hermione Granger as the third general.”

“Oh?” said Professor Quirrell, leaning back in his chair in a casual and relaxed manner. “Protest away, Mr. Malfoy.”

“Granger is unfit for the position,” said Draco.

Professor Quirrell tapped a finger on his cheek thoughtfully. “Why yes, yes she is. Do you have any further protests?”

“Professor Quirrell,” said Harry Potter beside him, “with all due respect to Miss Granger’s many outstanding academic talents and the Quirrell points she has justly earned in your classes, her personality is not suited to military command.”

Draco had been relieved when Harry had agreed to accompany him to Professor Quirrell’s office. It wasn’t *just* that Harry was a gigantic blatant teacher’s pet where Professor Quirrell was concerned. Draco had also started to worry that Harry actually *was* friends with Granger, it had been a while now and he *still* hadn’t made his move . . . but this was more like it.

“I agree with Mr. Potter,” said Draco. “Appointing her as a general turns it into a farce.”

“Harshly put,” said Harry, “but I cannot bring myself to disagree with Mr. Malfoy. To be blunt, Professor Quirrell, Hermione Granger has around as much intent to kill as a bowl of wet grapes.”

“That,” said Professor Quirrell mildly, “is not a thing I would fail to notice myself. You are telling me nothing I do not already know.”

It was Draco’s turn to say something, but the conversation had suddenly hiccuped. That answer had *not* been in the possibilities he and Harry had brainstormed before coming here. What *did* you say after the teacher said that he knew everything you knew and he was still going to commit an obvious mistake?

The silence stretched.

“Is this some sort of plot?” Harry said slowly.

“Must everything I do be some sort of plot?” said Professor Quirrell. “Can’t I ever create chaos just for the sake of chaos?”

Draco almost choked.

"Not in your Battle Magic class," Harry said with calm certainty. "Other places, maybe, but not there."

Professor Quirrell slowly raised his eyebrows.

Harry gazed steadily back at him.

Draco shivered.

"Well then," Professor Quirrell said. "Neither of you seem to have considered a very simple question. Who could I appoint instead of Miss Granger?"

"Blaise Zabini," Draco said without hesitation.

"Any other suggestions?" said Professor Quirrell, sounding quite amused.

Anthony Goldstein and Ernie Macmillan, came the thought, before Draco's common sense kicked in and ruled out Mudbloods and Hufflepuffs no matter how aggressively they dueled. So instead Draco just said, "What's wrong with Zabini?"

"I see . . ." Harry said slowly.

"I *don't*," said Draco. "Why not Zabini?"

Professor Quirrell looked at Draco. "Because, Mr. Malfoy, no matter how hard he tries, he'll never be able to keep up with you or Mr. Potter."

The shock of it staggered Draco. "You can't believe *Granger* is going to —"

"He's gambling on her," Harry said quietly. "It's not guaranteed. The odds aren't even good. She'll probably never give us a good fight, and even if she does, it may take her months to learn. But she's the only one in our year with any chance at all of growing to beat us."

Draco's hands twitched but didn't clench into fists. Showing up as your supporter and then backing out was a classic undermining tactic, so Harry Potter *was* in it with Granger and *that* implied —

"But Professor," Harry went on smoothly, "I'm worried Hermione will be *miserable* as the general of an army. I'm speaking as her friend now, Professor Quirrell. The competition might be good for Draco and me, but what you're asking her to do isn't good for *her!*"

Never mind.

"Your friendship for Hermione Granger does you credit," Professor Quirrell said dryly. "Especially as you are able to be friends with Draco Malfoy at the same time. Quite a feat, that."

Harry suddenly looked a little nervous, meaning he probably felt a lot *more* nervous, and Draco silently swore to himself. Of course Harry wasn't

going to fool Professor Quirrell.

"And I doubt Miss Granger would appreciate your friendly concern," said Professor Quirrell. "She asked me for the position, Mr. Potter, I did not ask her."

Harry was quiet at this for a moment. Then he flashed Draco a quick look that mixed apology and warning, saying at the same time, *Sorry, I did my best and We'd better not press it any further.*

"As for her being miserable," Professor Quirrell went on, a slight smile now playing about his lips, "I suspect that she will have a much easier time with the rigors of her position than either of you suspect, and that she will put up a good fight much sooner than you think."

Harry and Draco both gasped in horror.

"You're not going to *advise* her, are you?" said Draco, utterly aghast.

"I never signed up to fight *you!*" said Harry.

The smile playing around Professor Quirrell's lips grew wider. "As a matter of fact, I *did* offer to share a few suggestions regarding Miss Granger's first battles."

"*Professor Quirrell!*" said Harry.

"Oh, don't worry," Professor Quirrell said. "She turned me down. Just as I expected."

Draco's eyes narrowed.

"Dear me, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell, "didn't anyone ever tell you it's rude to stare?"

"You're not going to secretly help her some *other* way, are you?" said Harry.

"Would I do that?" said Professor Quirrell.

"Yes," said Draco and Harry at the same time.

"I am wounded by your lack of trust. Well then, I promise not to help General Granger in any way that the two of you don't know about. And now I suggest that both of you be about your military affairs. November approaches, and swiftly."



Draco saw the implications before the door had closed all the way behind them on their way out of Professor Quirrell's office.

Harry had once spoken dismissively of "people stuff".

And now that was Draco's only hope.

Let him not realize, let him not realize . . .

"We should just attack the Granger girl first and get her out of our way," said Draco. "After we crush her, we can have our own contest without any distractions."

"Now that doesn't really seem fair to her, does it?" said Harry in a mild voice.

"What do *you* care?" said Draco. "She's your rival, right?" Then, with just the right note of suspicion in his voice, "Don't tell me you've started *really* liking her, after being her rival all this time . . ."

"Founders forbid," said Harry. "What can I say, Draco? I merely have a natural sense of justice. Granger does too, you know. She has a very firm grasp on good and evil, and she's probably going to attack evil first. Having a name like 'Malfoy' is just asking for it, you know."

DAMN IT!

"Harry," said Draco, sounding wounded and maybe a little superior, "don't you want to fight *fairly* against me?"

"You mean rather than attacking you after you've already lost some of your forces beating Granger?" said Harry. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe after I get bored with just winning I'll try that 'fair' thing."

"Maybe she'll attack *you*," Draco said. "*You're* her rival."

"But I'm her *friendly* rival," Harry said with an evil grin. "I bought her a nice birthday present and everything. You wouldn't go around sabotaging your friendly rival like that."

"What about sabotaging your *friend's* chance at a fair fight?" said Draco angrily. "I thought we were friends!"

"Let me rephrase that," said Harry. "*Granger* wouldn't sabotage a friendly rival. But that's because she has the killing intention of a bowl of wet grapes. *You* would. You *totally* would. And guess what, so would I."

DAMN IT!



If it had been a play, there would have been dramatic music.

The hero, impeccably turned out in green-trimmed robes and perfectly combed white-blonde hair, faced the villain.

The villain, leaning back in a simple wooden chair with her buckteeth clearly visible and stray chestnut curls drifting over her cheeks, faced the hero.

It was Wednesday, October 30th, and the first battle was coming up on Sunday.

Draco was standing in General Granger's office, a room the size of a small classroom. (*Why* each general's office was so large, Draco wasn't quite sure. A chair and a desk would have worked for him. He wasn't even clear on why the generals needed offices at all, his soldiers knew where to find him. Unless Professor Quirrell had deliberately arranged the huge offices for them as a sign of status, in which case Draco was all for it.)

Granger sat on the room's single chair like a throne, all the way on the other end of the office from where the door opened. There was a long oblong table stretched across the middle of the room between them, and four small circular tables scattered around the corners, but only that one single chair, all the way at the opposite end. The room had windows along one wall, and one beam of sunlight touched the top of Granger's hair like a glowing crown.

It would have been nice if Draco could have walked slowly forward. But there was a table in the way, and Draco had to go around it diagonally, and there was no good way to do that in a dramatic and dignified fashion. Had that been deliberate? If it had been his father, it surely would have been; but this was Granger, so surely not.

There was nowhere for him to sit, and Granger hadn't stood up, either.

Draco kept the outrage entirely off his face.

"Well, Mr. Draco Malfoy," Granger said once he stood before her, "you requested an audience with me and I have been so gracious as to grant it. What was your plea?"

Come with me to visit Malfoy Manor, my father and I would like to show you some interesting spells.

"Your rival, Potter, came to me with an offer," said Draco, putting a serious look on his face. "He doesn't mind losing to me, but would be humiliated if you won. So he wants to join with me and wipe you out immediately, not just in our first battle, all of them. If I won't do that, Potter wants me to hold back or harass you, while he launches an all-out attack on you as his first move."

"I see," Granger said, looking surprised. "And you're offering to help me against him?"

"Of course," said Draco smoothly. "I didn't think what he wanted to do to

you was fair.”

“Why, that’s very nice of you, Mr. Malfoy,” said Granger. “I’m sorry for how I spoke to you earlier. We should be friends. Can I call you Drakey?”

Alarm bells started to sound in Draco’s head, but there was a *chance* she meant it . . .

“Of course,” said Draco, “if I can call you Hermie.”

Draco was pretty sure he saw her expression flicker.

“Anyway,” Draco said, “I was thinking it would serve Potter right if we both attacked him and wiped him out.”

“But that wouldn’t be fair to Mr. Potter, would it?” said Granger.

“I think it’d be very fair,” Draco said. “He was planning to do it to you first.”

Granger was giving him a stern look that could possibly have intimidated him if he’d been a Hufflepuff instead of a Malfoy. “You think I’m pretty stupid, don’t you, Mr. Malfoy?”

Draco smiled charmingly. “No, Miss Granger, but I thought I’d at least *check*. So, what do you want?”

“Are you offering to *bribe* me?” said Granger.

“Sure,” said Draco. “Can I just slip you a Galleon and have you beat on Potter instead of me for the rest of the year?”

“Nope,” said Granger, “but you can offer me ten Galleons and have me attack both of you equally, instead of just you.”

“Ten Galleons is a lot of money,” Draco said cautiously.

“I didn’t know the Malfoys were poor,” said Granger.

Draco stared at Granger.

He was starting to get a strange feeling about this.

That particular reply didn’t seem like it should have come from this particular girl.

“Well,” said Draco, “you don’t get to be rich by wasting money, you know.”

“I don’t know if you know what a dentist is, Mr. Malfoy, but my parents are *dentists* and anything less than ten Galleons isn’t worth my time at all.”

“Three Galleons,” Draco said, more as a probe than anything else.

“Nope,” said Granger. “If you want an equal fight at all, I don’t believe that a Malfoy wants an equal fight less than he wants ten Galleons.”

Draco was starting to get a *very* strange feeling about this.

“No,” said Draco.

"No?" said Granger. "This is a limited time offer, Mr. Malfoy. Are you sure you want to risk a whole year of being miserably crushed by the Boy-Who-Lived? That would be pretty embarrassing for the House of Malfoy, wouldn't it?"

It was a very persuasive argument, one that was hard to refuse, but you didn't get to be rich by spending money when your heart told you it was a setup.

"No," said Draco.

"See you on Sunday," said Granger.

Draco turned and walked out of the office without another word.

That had been *not right*...

"Hermione," Harry said patiently, "we're *supposed* to be plotting against each other. You could even betray me and it wouldn't mean anything outside the battlefield."

Hermione shook her head. "It wouldn't be nice, Harry."

Harry sighed. "I don't think you're getting into the spirit of this at all."

It wouldn't be nice. She'd actually said that. Hermione didn't know whether to be insulted at what Harry thought of her, or worried about whether she really *did* sound like that much of a goody-two-shoes usually.

It was probably time to change the subject.

"Anyway, are you doing anything special for tomorrow?" said Hermione. "It's —"

Her voice cut off abruptly as she realized.

"Yes, Hermione," Harry said a little tightly, "what day is it?"

INTERLUDE:

There was a time when October 31st had been called Halloween in magical Britain.

Now it was Harry Potter Day.

Harry had turned down all the offers, even the one from Minister Fudge

which might have been good for future political favors and which he *really* should have gritted his teeth and taken. But to Harry, October 31st would always be The Dark Lord Killed My Parents Day. There should have been a quiet, dignified memorial service somewhere, and if there was one, he hadn't been invited.

Hogwarts got the day off to celebrate. Even the Slytherins didn't dare wear black outside their own dorm. There were special events and special foods and the teachers looked the other way if anyone ran through the hallways. It was the tenth anniversary, after all.

Harry spent the day in his trunk so as not to spoil it for anyone else, eating snack bars in place of meals, reading some of his sadder science fiction books (no fantasy), and writing a letter to Mum and Dad that was much longer than the ones he usually sent.

CHAPTER THIRTY



WORKING IN GROUPS, PART I

The day was Sunday, November 3rd, and soon the three great powers of their school year, Harry Potter, Draco Malfoy, and Hermione Granger, would begin their struggle for supreme dominance.

(Harry was slightly annoyed by the way the Boy-Who-Lived had been demoted from supreme dominance to one of three equal rivals just by entering the contest, but he expected to get it back soon.)

The battleground was a section of non-Forbidden forest, dense with trees, because Professor Quirrell thought that being able to see all the enemy forces was too boring even for your very first battle.

All the students who were not actually *in* a first-year army were camped out nearby and watching on screens that Professor Quirrell had set up. Except for three Gryffindors in their fourth year, who were currently sick and confined to healer's beds by Madam Pomfrey. Aside from that, everyone was there.

The students were dressed, not in their ordinary school robes, but in Muggle camouflage uniforms that Professor Quirrell had obtained somewhere and supplied in sufficient quantity and variety to fit everyone. It wasn't that students would have worried about stains and rips, that was what Charms were for. But as Professor Quirrell had explained to the surprised wizardborns, nice dignified clothing was not efficient for hiding in forests or dodging around trees.

And on each uniform's breast, a patch bearing the name and insignia of your army. A *small* patch. If you wanted your soldiers to wear, say, colored ribbons so that they could identify each other at a distance, and risk the enemy getting their hands on the ribbons, that was all up to you.

Harry had tried to get the name Dragon Army.

Draco had pitched a fit and said that would confuse everyone completely.

Professor Quirrell had ruled that Draco could lay prior claim to the name, if he wished.

So now Harry was fighting Dragon Army.

This probably wasn't a good sign.

For their insignia, instead of the too-obvious dragon's head breathing fire, Draco had elected to simply go with the fire. Elegant, understated, deadly: *This is what's left after we've passed*. Very Malfoy.

Harry, after considering alternate choices such as the 501st Provisional Battalion and Harry's Minions o' Doom, had decided that his army would be known by the simple and dignified appellation of the Chaos Legion.

Their insignia was a hand poised with fingers ready to snap.

It was *universally* agreed that this wasn't a good sign.

Harry had earnestly advised Hermione that the young boys serving under her were probably nervous about her being a girl with a reputation for being nice, and that she should pick something scary that would reassure them of her toughness and make them proud to be part of her army, like the Blood Commandos or something.

Hermione had named her army the Sunshine Regiment.

Their insignia was a smiley face.

And in ten minutes, they would be at war.

Harry stood in the bright forest clearing that was their assigned starting location, an area of open space with old and rotting tree stumps that had been cleared away for some unknown purpose, ground coated with a small scattering of blown leaves and the dried grey remnants of grass that had failed the test of summer's heat, and the sun shining down brilliantly from above.

Around him were the twenty-three soldiers that Professor Quirrell had assigned to him. Nearly all of Gryffindor had signed up, of course, and more than half of Slytherin, and less than half of Hufflepuff, and a handful of Ravenclaw. In Harry's army there were twelve Gryffindors and six Slytherins and four Hufflepuffs and one Ravenclaw besides himself . . . not that there was any

way to tell that by looking at the uniforms. No red, no green, no yellow, no blue. Just Muggle camouflage patterns, and a patch on the breast with the device of a hand poised to snap its fingers.

Harry looked upon his twenty-three soldiers, all wearing the same uniforms with no marks of group identity save that single patch.

And lo, Harry smiled, because he understood what this part of Professor Quirrell's master plan was about; and Harry was taking full advantage of it for his *own* purposes, too.

There was a legendary episode in social psychology called the Robbers Cave experiment. It had been set up in the bewildered aftermath of World War II, with the intent of investigating the causes and remedies of conflicts between groups. The scientists had set up a summer camp for 22 boys from 22 different schools, selecting them to all be from stable middle-class families. The first phase of the experiment had been intended to investigate what it took to *start* a conflict between groups. The 22 boys had been divided into two groups of 11 —

— and this had been quite sufficient.

The hostility had started from the moment the two groups had become aware of each others' existences in the state park, insults being hurled on the first meeting. They'd named themselves the Eagles and the Rattlers (they hadn't needed names for themselves when they thought they were the only ones in the park) and had proceeded to develop contrasting group stereotypes, the Rattlers thinking of themselves as rough-and-tough and swearing heavily, the Eagles correspondingly deciding to think of themselves as upright-and-proper.

The other part of the experiment had been testing how to resolve group conflicts. Bringing the boys together to watch fireworks hadn't worked at all. They'd just shouted at each other and stayed apart. What *had* worked was warning them that there might be vandals in the park, and the two groups needing to work together to solve a failure of the park's water system. A common task, a common enemy.

Harry had a strong suspicion Professor Quirrell had understood this principle very well indeed when he had chosen to create *three* armies per year.

Three armies.

Not *four*.

And definitely *not* segregated by House . . . except that no Slytherins had been assigned to Draco besides Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle.

It was things like this which reassured Harry that Professor Quirrell, despite his affected Dark atmosphere and his pretense of neutrality in the conflict between Good and Evil, was secretly backing Good, not that Harry would ever dare say that out loud.

And Harry had decided to take full advantage of Professor Quirrell's plan to define a group identity *his* way.

The Rattlers, once they'd met the Eagles, had started thinking of themselves as rough-and-tough, and they'd conducted themselves accordingly.

The Eagles had thought of themselves as good-and-proper.

And in that bright forest clearing, scattered around the old and rotting tree stumps, outlined in the sun shining down brilliantly from above, General Potter and his twenty-three soldiers were arranged in nothing remotely resembling a formation. Some soldiers stood, some soldiers sat, some stood on one leg just to be different.

It was the *Chaos* Legion, after all.

And if there wasn't a *reason* to stand in neat little lines, Harry had said disdainfully, there weren't going to be neat little lines.

Harry had divided the army into 6 squads of 4 soldiers each, each squad commanded by a Squad Suggester. All troops were under strict orders to disobey any orders they were given if it seemed like a good idea at the time, including that one . . . unless Harry or the Squad Suggester prefixed the order with "Merlin says", in which case you were supposed to actually obey.

The Chaos Legion's chief attack was to split up and run in from multiple directions, randomly changing vectors and firing the approved sleep spell as rapidly as you could rebuild the magical strength. And if you saw a chance to distract or confuse the enemy, you took it.

Fast. Creative. Unpredictable. Non-homogenous. Don't just obey orders, think about whether what you're doing *right now* makes sense.

Harry wasn't quite as sure as he'd pretended that this was the optimum of military efficiency . . . but he'd been given a golden opportunity to change how some students *thought about themselves*, and that was how he intended to use it.

Five minutes to wartime, according to Harry's watch.

General Potter walked (not marched) over to where his air force was waiting tensely, broomsticks already clutched firmly in their hands.

"All wings report in," said General Potter. They'd rehearsed this during their one training session on Saturday.

"Red Leader standing by," said Seamus Finnigan, who had no idea what it meant.

"Red Five standing by," said Dean Thomas, who'd waited his entire life to say it.

"Green Leader standing by," Theodore Nott said rather stiffly.

"Green Forty-One standing by," Tracey Davis said.

"I want you in the air the instant we hear the bell," said General Potter. "Do not engage, repeat, do not engage. Evade if under fire." (Of course you did *not* aim sleep spells at broomsticks; you fired a spell that gave a temporary red glow to whatever it hit. If you hit the broomstick or the rider, they were out of the war.) "Red Leader and Red Five, fly toward Malfoy's army as fast as you can, stay as high as you can while still seeing them, return the instant you know for sure what they're doing. Green Leader, do the same for Granger's army. Green Forty-One, fly above us and watch for any approaching broomsticks or soldiers, you and only you are authorized to fire. And remember, I didn't say 'Merlin says' for any of that, but we *do* really need the information. For Chaos!"

"For Chaos!" the four echoed with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

Harry expected Hermione to launch an immediate attack on Draco, in which case he'd move his troops into position and start supporting her, but only after she'd taken severe losses and caused some damage. He would frame it as a heroic rescue, if possible; it wouldn't do to have Sunshine thinking that Chaos wasn't their friend, after all.

But just in case she *didn't* . . . well, that was why the Chaos Legion was staying put until Green Leader reported back.

Draco's moves would be in his own self-interest. He would predictably ready his army to defend against Hermione; he might or might not realize that Harry had been lying about waiting to attack until after that battle finished. Harry had still put two broomsticks on Dragon Army, just in case they *were* doing something, and just in case Draco or Mr. Goyle or Mr. Crabbe was good enough to shoot a broomstick out of the sky.

But General Granger was the unpredictable one, and Harry couldn't move until he knew how she was moving.

In the heart of the forest, with shadow patterns dancing on the ground as leafy canopies swayed high above, General Malfoy stood where the trees were relatively sparser, and looked out on his troops with calm satisfaction. Six units of three troops each, the Aerial Unit of four (to which Gregory was assigned), and the Command Unit, which was himself and Vincent. They'd only drilled for a short time on the previous Saturday, but Draco was confident that he'd managed to explain the basics. Stay with your mates, watch their back and trust them to watch yours. Move as a single body. Obey orders and show no fear. Aim, fire, move, aim again, fire again.

The six units were formed up in a defensive perimeter around Draco, watchfully gazing outward into the forest. Back-to-back they stood, wands gripped low until they needed to strike.

They already looked remarkably like the Auror units whose training Draco had watched during his father's inspections.

Chaos and Sunshine weren't going to know what hit them.

"Attention," said General Malfoy.

The six units unfolded and spun toward Draco; the faces of his broomstick riders turned from where they stood with broomsticks already in hand.

Draco had decided to wait on demanding salutes until after they won their first battle, when Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs would be more willing to salute a Malfoy.

But his soldiers were already standing straight enough, especially the Gryffindors, that Draco wondered if he'd even needed to delay. Gregory had quietly listened, and reported back that Draco's volunteering to stand by Harry Potter in Defense class, that time when Professor Quirrell had taught Harry how to lose, had marked Draco as an acceptable commander. At least if you happened to be assigned to his army. *Not all Slytherins are alike; there are Slytherins, and then there are Slytherins* was what the Gryffindors in Draco's army were quoting to their Housemates.

Draco was frankly *astounded* at how incredibly *easy* that had been. Draco had protested at first about not being assigned any Slytherins, and Professor Quirrell had told him that if he wanted to be the first Malfoy to gain complete political control of the country, he needed to learn how to govern the other three-quarters of the population. It was things like this which reassured Draco that Professor Quirrell had a great deal more sympathy for the good guys than Professor Quirrell was letting on.

The actual battle wouldn't be easy, especially if Granger did attack the Dragons first. Draco had agonized over whether to commit all his forces against Granger immediately in a preemptive strike, but had worried that (1) Harry had been misleading him completely about what Granger was likely to do, and (2) Harry had been misleading him about waiting until after Granger's attack to join the battle.

Though Dragon Army had a secret weapon, three of them in fact, which might be enough to win even if they were attacked by both armies at once . . .

It was almost time, and that meant it was time for the pre-battle speech that Draco had composed and memorized.

"The battle is about to begin," Draco said. His voice was calm and precise. "Remember everything that I and Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle showed you. An army wins because it is disciplined and deadly. General Potter and the Chaos Legion will not be disciplined. Granger and the Sunshine Regiment will not be deadly. We are disciplined, we are deadly, we are Dragons. The battle is about to begin, and we are about to win it."



(EX TEMPORE SPEECH GIVEN BY GENERAL POTTER TO THE CHAOS LEGION, IMMEDIATELY BEFORE THEIR FIRST BATTLE, ON NOVEMBER 3RD, 1991, AT 2:56 PM:)

My troops, I'm not going to lie to you, our situation today is very grim. Dragon Army has never lost a single battle. And Hermione Granger . . . has a very good memory. The truth is, most of you are probably going to die. And the survivors will envy the dead. But we have to win this. We have to win this so that someday, our children can enjoy the taste of chocolate again. Everything is at stake here. Literally everything. If we lose, the whole universe just blinks out like a light bulb. And now I realize that most of you don't know what a light bulb is. Well, take it from me, it's bad. But if we have to go down, let's go down fighting, like heroes, so that as the darkness closes in, we can think to ourselves, *at least we had fun*. Are you afraid to die? I know I am. I can feel those cold shivers of fear like someone is pumping ice cream into my shirt. But I know . . . that history is watching us. It was watching us when we changed into our uniforms. It was probably taking pictures. And history, my troops, is written by the victors. If we win this, we can write our own

history. A history in which Hogwarts was founded by four renegade house elves. We can make everyone study that history, even though it isn't true, and if they don't answer the right way on our tests . . . they'll fail the class. Isn't that worth dying for? No, don't answer that. Some things are better left unknown. None of us know why we're here. None of us know why we're fighting. We just woke up in these uniforms in this mysterious forest, knowing only that there was no way to get our names and memories back except victory. The students in those other armies out there . . . they're just like us. They don't want to die. They're fighting to protect each other, the only friends they have left. They're fighting because they know they have families who'll miss them, even if they can't remember now. They may even be fighting to save the world. But we have a better reason to fight than they do. We fight because we like it. We fight to amuse eldritch monstrosities from beyond Space and Time. We fight because we're Chaos. Soon the final battle will begin, so let me say now, because I won't get a chance later, that it was an honor to be your commander, however briefly. Thank you, thank you all. And remember, your goal isn't just to cut down the enemy, it's to make them afraid.

A great booming gong echoed over the forest.
And the Sunshine Regiment began to march.

The tension rose and rose, as Harry and the nineteen other soldiers who remained waited for the aerial warriors to report back. It shouldn't take long, broomsticks were fast and the distances in the forest were not great —

Two broomsticks approached, at speed, from the direction of Draco's camp, and all the soldiers tensed. They weren't executing the maneuvers that were today's code for a *friendly* broomstick.

"*Scatter and fire!*" roared General Potter, and then suited action to words, scurrying off at top speed toward the forest cover; and then as soon as Harry was among the trees, he spun back, raised his wand, tried to seek out the broomstick in the sky —

"Clear!" shouted a voice. "They're heading back!"

Harry gave a mental shrug. There'd been no way to prevent Draco from obtaining that information, and he'd only learn that they'd been standing still.

And the Chaotics slowly emerged from the forest —

"Broomstick approaching from Granger's direction!" yelled another voice. "I think it's Green Leader, he did the dip and roll!"

Moments later Theodore Nott dived out of the sky and pulled up in the midst of the soldiers.

"Granger has divided her forces in two!" yelled Nott as he hovered on his broomstick. There was sweat staining his uniform, and all the reserve was gone from his voice. "She's attacking both armies! Two brooms covering each force, they pursued me halfway here!"

Divided her army, what on Earth —

A large force concentrating fire on a small force could deplete that force rapidly without taking much damage in return. If twenty soldiers faced ten soldiers, twenty sleep spells would be aimed at the ten soldiers with only ten sleep spells going the other way, so unless every one of those first sleep spells hit its target, the smaller force would lose more people than they could manage to take down with them. *Defeated in detail* was the military term for what happened when you divided your forces like that. What could Hermione *possibly* be thinking...

Then Harry realized.

She's being fair.

It was going to be a long year in Defense class.

"All right," Harry said loudly, so the army could hear. "We'll wait until the Red Wing reports in, and then we'll go cloud up some Sunshine."

Draco listened to the flyers' reports with his face calm, all his shock concealed inside. What could Granger *possibly* be thinking?

Then Draco realized.

It's a feint.

One of Sunshine's two forces would change direction, and both would converge on ... who?

Neville Longbottom marched through the forest toward the approaching Sunny force, occasionally glancing up at the sky for broomsticks. Beside him marched his squad comrades, Melvin Coote and Lavender Brown of Gryffindor, and Allen Flint of Slytherin. Allen Flint was their Squad Suggester, though Harry had first said to Neville, in private, that the position was his if he wanted it.

Harry had said quite a lot of things to Neville in private, starting with “You know, Neville, if you want to become as awesome as the imaginary Neville who lives in your head but isn’t allowed to do anything because you’re scared, then you really should sign up for Professor Quirrell’s armies.”

Neville was now *sure* the Boy-Who-Lived could read minds. There was just no other way Harry Potter could’ve known. Neville had never talked about that with *anyone*, or given any sign; and *other* people weren’t like that, not that Neville had ever noticed.

And Harry’s promise had come true, this *did* feel different from sparring in Defense class. Neville had hoped that sparring would fix everything that was wrong with him, and, well, it hadn’t. Even if he could fire a few spells at another student in class with Professor Quirrell watching to make sure nothing went wrong, even if he could dodge and fire back when it was *allowed* and everyone else was *expecting* it and they would stare at him funny if he *didn’t* do it, none of that was the same as being able to stand up for himself.

But being part of an *army*...

Something strange was stirring inside Neville, as he marched through the forest alongside his comrades, upon their uniforms an insignia of fingers poised to snap.

He was allowed to walk if he wanted to, but he just felt like marching.

Beside him, Melvin and Lavender and Allen all seemed to feel like marching too.

And Neville softly began to sing the Song of Chaos.

The tune was what a Muggle would have identified as John Williams’s Imperial March, also known as “Darth Vader’s Theme”; and the words Harry had added were easy to remember.

Doom doom doom
 Doom doom doom doom doom doom
 Doom doom doom
 Doom doom doom doom doom doom

DOOM doom DOOM
 Doom doom doom-doom-doom doom doom
 Doom doom-doom-doom doom doom
 Doom doom doom, doom doom doom.

By the second line the others had joined in, and soon you could hear the same soft chant coming from nearby parts of the forest.

And Neville marched alongside his fellow Chaos Legionnaires, strange feelings stirring in his heart, imagination becoming reality, as from his lips poured a fearful song of doom.



Harry stared at the bodies scattered across the forest. Something inside him felt a bit queasy, and he had to remind himself hard that they were only sleeping. There were girls among the fallen, and that made it a lot worse somehow, and he would have to be careful never to mention that in front of Hermione or the Aurors would find his remains stuffed into a *small* teapot.

Half of Sunshine army hadn't put up much of a fight against all of Chaos. The nine ground soldiers had run in screaming inarticulately with Simple Shields raised, circular screens to protect their faces and chests. But you couldn't fire and hold the shield at the same time, and Harry's soldiers had simply aimed for the legs. All but one of the Sunnies had fallen over as soon as the cries of "*Somnium!*" filled the air. That last one had dropped her shield and managed to take out one of Harry's soldiers before being hit by the second wave of sleep spells (the Sleep Hex was safe for multiple hits). The two Sunny broomsticks had been much harder to take down and had accounted for three Chaotics before being auraed by massed ground fire.

Hermione wasn't among the fallen. Draco must have gotten her and that was making Harry feel *angry* on some completely incomprehensible level, he wasn't sure if he was feeling protective toward Hermione, or cheated that he hadn't been the one to do it, or maybe *both*.

"All right," Harry said, raising his voice. "Let's everyone be clear on one thing, that wasn't a real fight. That was General Granger making a mistake in her first battle. Today's actual fight is with Dragon Army and it's not going to

be anything like this. It's going to be a lot more fun. Let's move out."



A broomstick fell out of the sky, approaching terrifyingly fast, and spun on its end and decelerated so hard you could almost hear the air screaming in protest, and came to a halt directly beside Draco.

It wasn't dangerous showing-off. Gregory Goyle simply *was* that good and he didn't waste time.

"Potter's coming," Gregory said with no trace of his usual fake drawl. "They've still got all four of their brooms, you want me to take them out?"

"No," Draco said sharply. "Fighting over their army gives them too much of an advantage, they'll fire on you from the ground and even you might not be able to dodge it all. Wait until the forces engage."

Draco had lost four Dragons in exchange for twelve Sunnies. Apparently General Granger actually *had* been that incredibly stupid, though she hadn't been among the attackers, so Draco hadn't gotten a chance to taunt her or ask her what in Merlin's name she had been thinking.

The true battle, they all knew, would be with Harry Potter.

"Prepare yourselves!" roared Draco at his troops. "Stay together with your mates, act as a unit, fire as soon as the enemy is in range!"

Discipline against Chaos.

It shouldn't be much of a fight.



The adrenaline was pumping and pumping into Neville's blood until he felt like he could hardly breathe.

"We're closing in," said General Potter in a voice barely loud enough to carry to the whole army. "Time to spread out."

Neville's comrades moved away from him. They would still support each other, but if you clustered together, the enemy would have a much easier time hitting you; fire aimed at one of your comrades might miss and get you instead. You would be a lot harder to hit if you spread out and moved as fast as you could.

The first thing General Potter had done, during their training session, was

get them to fire on each other when both sides were running fast, or both stood still and took time to aim, or one was moving and one was standing still — the reverse charm to the Sleep Hex was simple, though you weren't allowed to use it during real battles. General Potter had carefully recorded everything that happened, done some figuring and ciphering, and then announced that it made more sense for them to focus, not on slowing down to aim carefully, but on moving fast so they wouldn't get hit.

It still bothered Neville a little not to be marching side-by-side with his comrades, but the scary battlecries they'd learned were already thundering in his head and that made up for a lot.

This time, Neville silently vowed to himself, his voice was absolutely positively not going to squeak.

"Shields up," said General Potter, "power to forward deflectors."

"*Contego*," murmured the army, and the circular screens sprang into existence before their heads and chests.

A sharp taste filled Neville's mouth. General Potter wouldn't have ordered them to cast shields unless they were almost in range. Neville could see the uniformed shapes of Dragons moving through the dense screens of trees, and the Dragons would be seeing them as well —

"*Attack!*" came a cry from the distance, the voice of Draco Malfoy, and General Potter bellowed, "*Charge* —"

All the adrenaline in Neville's blood was unleashed, and his legs took over, sending him flying faster than he'd ever run before, straight toward the enemy, knowing without needing to look that all his comrades were doing the same.

"*Blood for the blood god!*" screamed Neville. "*Skulls for the skull throne! Ia! Shub-Niggurath! The enemy's gate is sideways!*"

There was a soundless impact as a sleep spell wasted itself against Neville's shield. If there'd been other spells fired, they hadn't hit.

Neville saw the brief look of fear on Wayne Hopkins's face, as he stood besides two Gryffindors Neville didn't recognize, and then —

— Neville dropped the Simple Shield and fired at Wayne —

— missed —

— his racing legs went *straight* past the enemy grouping and toward another three Dragons, their wands coming up on him, their mouths opening —

— not even thinking about it, Neville dived down to the forest floor just as three voices cried "*Somnium!*"

It hurt, hard stones and hard twigs digging into Neville as he rolled, it wasn't as bad as falling off his broomstick but he'd still hit the ground pretty hard, and then Neville, with sudden insight, lay still and closed his eyes.

"Stop that!" screamed a voice. "Don't shoot us, we're Dragons!"

With a flash of glorious satisfaction, Neville realized that he'd managed to get between two groups of Dragons just as one group had fired on him. Harry had talked about this as a tactic for making the enemy afraid to fire, but apparently it worked a bit better than that.

And not only that, the Dragons believed they'd *gotten* him, since they'd seen Neville fall just as they fired.

Neville counted to twenty inside his head, then opened his eyes a crack.

The three Dragons were very near him, heads spinning rapidly as cries of "*Somnium!*" and "*Skulls for the skull throne!*" filled the air around them. All three had Simple Shields up now.

Neville's wand was still in his hand, and it didn't take much effort to point it at one boy's boots and whisper "*Somnium.*"

Neville quickly closed his eyes and relaxed his hand as he heard the boy fall to the ground.

"*Where'd it come from?*" screamed Justin Finch-Fletchley's voice, and Neville heard rustles on the leafy forest floor, as of two Dragons spinning around looking for an enemy.

"*Reform ranks!*" bellowed Malfoy's voice. "*To me, everyone, don't let them scatter you!*"

Neville's ears heard the two Dragons actually jump over his prone body as they ran off.

Neville opened his eyes, pushed himself to his feet a bit painfully, and then pointed his wand and said the new charm that General Potter had taught them all. They couldn't do real illusion spells to confuse the enemy, but even at their age they could —

"*Ventriquo,*" whispered Neville, pointing the wand to one side of Justin and the other boy, and then yelled, "*For Cthulhu and glory!*"

Justin and the other boy stopped abruptly, turning their shields toward where Neville had moved his battlecry, and that was when multiple cries of "*Somnium!*" filled the air and the other boy dropped before Neville was finished aiming.

"*The last one's mine!*" yelled Neville, and then he started sprinting straight

toward Justin, who'd been mean to him until the older Hufflepuffs straightened him out. Neville was surrounded by his comrades and *that* meant —

"*Special attack, Chaotic Leap!*" howled Neville as he ran, and felt his body lighten, then lighten twice again, as his comrades got their wands turned toward him and quietly cast the Hover Charm, and Neville raised his left hand and snapped his fingers and then used his legs to push off the ground as hard as he could and *soared* through the air. Sheer shock painted Justin's face as Neville went *over* the other boy's shield and pointed his wand down at the form passing beneath him and cried "*Somnium!*"

Because he'd felt like it, that was why.

Neville didn't quite get his feet turned around properly and rather plowed into the ground as he landed, but two out of three of the other Chaos Legionnaires had managed to hold their wands on him throughout and he didn't hit very hard.

And Neville got to his feet, panting. He knew he should be moving, people were yelling "*Somnium!*" all over the place —

"*I am Neville, the last scion of Longbottom!*" screamed Neville to the sky above, holding his wand pointed straight up as though to challenge the blazing blue heaven itself, knowing that nothing after this day would ever be the same again. "*Neville of Chaos! Face me if you da —*"

(When Neville woke up afterward, he was told that Dragon Army had taken this as their cue to counterattack.)



The girl beside Harry slumped to the ground, taking the shot meant for him, and he could hear Mr. Goyle's distant gloating laugh as his broomstick blasted past them, cutting the air so hard it should have shattered in his wake.

"*Luminos!*" cried one of the boys next to Harry, who hadn't been able to rebuild the magical strength fast enough to do it earlier, and Mr. Goyle dodged it without a pause.

Chaos had only six soldiers left, now, and Dragon Army had two, and the only problem was that one of those soldiers was invincible, and the other one was using up three soldiers just to cover him inside his shield.

They'd lost more soldiers to Mr. Goyle than all the other Dragons put together, he was weaving and dodging through the air so fast that no one could

hit him, and he could *shoot people while he did that*.

Harry had thought of all sorts of ways to stop Mr. Goyle but none of them were *safe*, even using the Hover Charm to slow him down (it was a continuous beam and much easier to aim) wouldn't be safe because he might fall off the broomstick, throwing things in his way wouldn't be safe, and that was getting harder and harder to remember as Harry's blood froze over.

It's a game. You're not trying to kill him. Don't throw away all your future plans for a game...

Harry could *see* the pattern, he could *see* how Mr. Goyle was weaving, he could *see* how and when they all needed to fire in order to create a web of shots that Mr. Goyle wouldn't be able to dodge, but he just hadn't been able to *explain* it fast enough to his soldiers, they couldn't coordinate their shots well enough, and now they didn't have enough people left to do it —

I refuse to lose, not like this, not my whole army to one soldier!

Mr. Goyle's broomstick turned faster than anything should have been able to turn and started to angle in toward Harry and his surviving troops, he could sense the boy beside him tensing, getting ready to throw himself in front of his general.

SCREW THIS.

Harry's wand came up, focusing on Mr. Goyle, Harry's mind visualized the pattern, and Harry's lips opened and his voice screamed —

"Luminosluminosluminosluminosluminosluminosluminosluminosluminosluminosluminosluminos —"



When Harry's eyes opened again, he found himself resting in a comfortable position with his hands folded over his chest, holding his wand like a fallen hero.

Slowly, Harry sat up. His *magic* was aching, a strange sensation but not an entirely unpleasant one, much like the burn and lethargy that followed hard physical exercise.

"The general's awake!" cried a voice, and Harry blinked and focused in that direction.

Four of his soldiers held their wands on a shimmering prismatic hemisphere, and Harry realized that the battle wasn't over. Right... he hadn't been hit by

a Sleep Hex, just exhausted himself, so when he woke up, he was still in the game.

Harry suspected he was going to get a lecture from someone-or-other about not exhausting his magic to the point of unconsciousness over a children's game. But he hadn't hurt Mr. Goyle when he'd lost his temper, and that was the important thing.

Then Harry's mind clicked on another implication, and he looked down at the steel ring on his left hand's pinky finger, and almost swore out loud when he saw that the tiny diamond was missing and there was a marshmallow lying on the ground near where he'd fallen.

He'd sustained that Transfiguration for seventeen days, and would now need to start over.

Could've been worse. He could've done this fourteen days later, *after* Professor McGonagall had approved him to Transfigure his father's rock. That was one very good lesson to learn the easy way.

Note to self: Always remove ring from finger before completely exhausting magic.

Harry pushed himself up, making rather hard going of it. Using up your magic didn't exhaust your muscles, but dodging around trees certainly did.

He staggered over to the iridescent hemisphere that contained Draco Malfoy, who was holding his wand aloft to sustain the shield, and smiling coldly at Harry.

"Where's the fifth soldier?" said Harry.

"Um . . ." said a boy whose name Harry couldn't remember at the moment. "I fired a Sleep Hex at the shield and it bounced off and hit Lavender, I mean the angle shouldn't have been right but it did . . ."

Draco was smirking inside the shield.

"So let me guess," Harry said, looking Draco directly in the eyes, "those neat little trios are the formation used by professional magical militaries? Made up of trained soldiers who can easily hit moving targets if their own hands are steady, and who can combine their defensive powers so long as they stay together? Unlike *your* soldiers?"

The smirk had vanished from Draco's face, which was now hard and grim.

"You know," Harry said lightly, knowing that none of the others would understand the real message passing between them, "it just goes to show that you should always question everything you see your role models doing, and

ask why it's being done, and whether it makes sense in context for you to do it too. Don't forget to apply that advice to real life, by the way. And thanks for the slow-moving clustered targets."

Because Draco had already gotten that lecture, and, Harry suspected, discounted it out of suspicion that Harry was trying to shift his loyalties further away from pureblood tradition. Which of course Harry *was*. But this example would make an excellent excuse, next Saturday, to claim that questioning authority was a merely practical technique for real life. And Harry would also mention the experiments he'd run, first with individuals and then with groups, to check that his ideas about the importance of speed had actually been *correct*, by way of hammering home the point of Draco needing to keep an eye out at all times for chances to apply the methods in everyday practice.

"You haven't won *yet*, General Potter!" snarled Draco. "Maybe we'll run out of time, and Professor Quirrell will call it a draw."

A fair and worrisome point. The war only ended when Professor Quirrell, in his personal judgment, decided one army had won by practical real-world standards. There was no *formal* victory condition, Professor Quirrell had explained, because then Harry would figure out how to game the rules. Harry had to admit this was a fair cop.

And Harry couldn't blame Professor Quirrell for not calling an end, because it was plausible that the last soldier of Dragon Army could take out all five survivors of the Chaos Legion.

"All right," Harry said. "Does anyone know anything about General Malfoy's shield spell?"

It developed that Draco's shield was a version of the standard *Protego* which had several disadvantages, the most important of which was that the shield couldn't move with the caster.

The upside — or from Harry's perspective, downside — was that it was easier to learn, easier to cast, and much easier to sustain for long times.

They would need to hammer the shield with attack spells in order to bring it down.

And Draco could apparently exert some control over the angle of reflection at which the spells would bounce off.

The thought occurred to Harry that they could use Wingardium Leviosa to pile up heavy rocks on the shield until Draco couldn't sustain it against the pressure . . . but then the rocks might fall in afterward and hit Draco, and

injuring the enemy general for real was not among today's goals.

"So," said Harry. "Are there such things as specialized shield-piercing spells?"

There were.

Harry asked if any of his soldiers knew them.

No one did.

Draco was smirking again, inside his shield.

Harry asked if there was any sort of attack spell that *wouldn't* bounce.

Lightning bolts, it seemed, were usually absorbed by shields instead of bouncing off them.

... No one knew how to cast any sort of lightning-related spell.

Draco sniggered.

Harry sighed.

He quite deliberately laid his wand on the ground.

And Harry announced, with some weariness in his voice, that he would just go ahead and take down the shield himself, using some method that would remain mysterious; and everyone else was to fire on Draco as soon as his shield went down.

The Chaos Legionnaires looked nervous.

Draco looked calm, which was to say, controlled.

A thin, folded blanket came out of Harry's pouch.

Harry sat down next to the shimmering shield, and pulled the blanket over his head so no one could see what he did — except Draco, of course.

From Harry's pouch came a car battery and a set of jumper cables.

... it wasn't like he'd been about to leave the Muggle world to start a new era of magical research, and not take along any way of generating electricity.

Shortly after, the Chaos Legionnaires heard the sound of fingers snapping, followed by a crackling noise from beneath the blanket. The shield started glowing more brightly, and Harry's voice said, "Don't be distracted please, eyes on General Malfoy."

The strain was showing on Draco's face, along with the fury and annoyance and frustration.

Harry smiled up at him, and mouthed, *Tell you later*.

And that was when a spiral of green energy shot out of the forest and smashed into Draco's shield, which shrieked like pieces of sharp glass being rubbed together, and Draco staggered.

In sudden, frantic panic, Harry took the jumper cables off the battery and fed them into the pouch, then he fed the battery itself into the pouch, and then he tore off the blanket and grabbed his wand and stood up.

All of his soldiers were still there and glancing around frantically.

“*Contego*,” Harry said, and his soldiers followed suit, but Harry didn’t even know which direction the shield ought to be pointing in. “Did anyone see where that came from?” Shaken heads. “And General Malfoy, would you mind telling me if *you* got General Granger?”

“Why yes,” Draco said acidly, “I mind.”

Oh, hell.

Harry’s mind began calculating, Draco inside the shield, Draco worn out now to some degree, Harry worn out too, Hermione in the woods who-knew-where, Harry and four other Chaotics left . . .

“You know, General Granger,” Harry said out loud, “you really should’ve waited to attack until after I’d fought General Malfoy. You might’ve been able to get *all* the survivors.”

From somewhere came a girl’s high-pitched laughter.

Harry froze.

That wasn’t Hermione.

And that was when the dreadful, eerie, cheerful chant began to rise, coming from all around them.

*“Don’t be frightened, don’t be sad,
We’ll only hurt you if you’re bad . . .”*

“*Granger cheated!*” burst out Draco inside the shield. “She woke up her soldiers! Why doesn’t Professor Quirrell —”

“Let me guess,” Harry said, the sickness already churning in his stomach. He really hated losing. “It was a very easy battle, right? They dropped like flies?”

“Yes,” Draco said. “We got them all on the first shot —”

The look of horrified realization spread from Draco to the Chaos Legionnaires.

“No,” Harry said, “we didn’t.”

Camouflaged forms were appearing from among the trees.

“Allies?” Harry said.

“Allies,” Draco said.

“Good,” said General Granger’s voice, and a spiral of green energy blazed

out of the woods and shattered Draco's shield to splinters.



General Granger surveyed the battlefield with a definite feeling of satisfaction. She was down to nine Sunshine Soldiers, but that was probably enough to handle the last survivor of the enemy forces, especially when Parvati and Anthony and Ernie were already holding their wands on General Potter, whom she'd ordered taken alive (well, conscious).

It was Bad, she knew, but she'd really really *really* wanted to gloat.

"There's a trick, isn't there?" said Harry, the strain showing in his voice. "There *has* to be some trick. You can't just turn into a perfect general. Not on top of everything else. You're not that Slytherin! You don't write creepy poetry! *No one's that good at everything!*"

General Granger glanced around at her Sunshine Soldiers, and then looked back at Harry. Everyone was probably watching this on the screens outside.

And General Granger said, "I can do anything if I study hard enough."

"Oh now that's just bu—"

"Somnium."

Harry slumped to the ground in mid-sentence.

"SUNSHINE WINS," intoned the huge voice of Professor Quirrell, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere.

"Niceness has triumphed!" cried General Granger.

"*Hooray!*" shouted the Sunshine Soldiers. Even the Gryffindor boys said it, and they said it with pride.

"And what's the moral of today's battle?" said General Granger.

"We can do anything if we study hard enough!"

And the survivors of the Sunshine Regiment marched off toward the victory field, singing their marching song as they went:

Don't be frightened, don't be sad,
We'll only hurt you if you're bad,
And send you to a home that's true,
With new friends to watch over you,
Be sure to tell them you were sent
By Granger's Sunshine Regiment!

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



WORKING IN GROUPS, PART II

AFTERMATHS:

Harry paced backward and forward in his general's office, which made a wonderful room for pacing, it didn't have any other uses as far as he could tell.

How?

How?

Hermione shouldn't have won that battle! Not on her first try, not when she wasn't at all violent by her nature, automatically being a great military commander on top of everything else was too much even for *her*.

Had she read about the tactic in a military history book? But it hadn't been just that one tactic, she'd had her forces perfectly positioned to block any retreat, her troops had been better coordinated than his *or* Draco's...

Had Professor Quirrell broken his promise not to help her? Had he given her the diary of General Tacticus or something?

Harry was missing something here, something really important, and his mind went around and around in circles, and he still couldn't figure it out.

Finally Harry sighed. He wasn't getting anywhere on this, and he had to go learn the Breaking Drill Hex from Hermione or someone before the next battle — Professor Quirrell had explained to Harry, his voice amused but with a sharp undertone of warning, that “no magical items except the ones I give you” included Muggle technology no matter how much that *wasn't magic*. Plus Harry also needed to figure out how to bring down Mr. Goyle next time...

Battles counted for a lot of Quirrell points if you were a general, and Harry needed to get cracking if he wanted to win Professor Quirrell's Christmas wish.



In his private room at Slytherin, Draco Malfoy stared off into space, as though the wall in front of his desk was the most fascinating surface in the world.

How?

How?

In retrospect it had been an obvious sort of idea as cunning plots went, but Granger wasn't *supposed* to be cunning! She'd been too much of a Hufflepuff to use a Simple Strike Hex! Had Professor Quirrell been advising her despite his promise, or . . .

And then Draco finally did what he should have done much earlier.

What he should have done after the first time he met with Granger.

What Harry Potter had *told* him to do, *trained* him to do, and yet Harry had also warned Draco that it would take time to make his brain realize that the methods applied to real life, and Draco hadn't *understood* that until today. He could have avoided every single one of his mistakes if he'd just *applied* the things Harry had already *told* him —

Draco said out loud, "I notice that I am confused."

Your strength as a rationalist is your ability to be more confused by fiction than by reality . . .

Draco was confused.

Therefore, something he believed was fiction.

Granger should not have been able to do all that.

Therefore, she probably hadn't.

I promise not to help General Granger in any way that the two of you don't know about.

With sudden horrified realization, Draco swept papers out of the way, hunting through the mess on his desk, until he found it.

And there it was.

Right in the list of people and equipment assigned to each of the three armies.

Curse Professor Quirrell!

Draco had *read* it and he still hadn't *seen* it —



The afternoon sunlight poured down into the office of the Sunshine Regiment, illuminating General Granger in her chair as though she glowed with a golden aura.

"How long do you think it will take Malfoy to figure it out?" said General Granger.

"Not long," said Colonel Blaise Zabini. "He may have already. How long will it take Potter to figure it out?"

"Forever," said General Granger, "unless Malfoy tells him, or one of his own soldiers realizes. Harry Potter just doesn't think like that."

"Really?" said Captain Ernie Macmillan, looking up from one of the corner tables where he was being crushed at chess by Captain Ron Weasley. (They'd brought back all the other chairs after Malfoy had left, of course.) "I mean it seems kind of obvious to me. Who would try to come up with all the ideas just by themselves?"

"Harry," said Hermione, at exactly the same time Zabini said, "Malfoy."

"Malfoy thinks he's way better than everyone else," said Zabini.

"And Harry . . . doesn't really *see* most other people like that," said Hermione.

It was kind of sad, actually. Harry had grown up very, very alone. It wasn't that he went around thinking in words that only geniuses had a right to exist. It just wouldn't *occur* to him that anyone in Hermione's army besides Hermione could have any good ideas.

"Anyhow," Hermione said. "Captains Goldstein and Weasley, you're on duty for thinking up strategic ideas for our next battle. Captains Macmillan and Susan — sorry, I mean Macmillan and Bones — try to come up with some tactics we can use, also any training you think we should try. Oh, and congratulations on your marching song, Captain Goldstein, I think it was a big plus for *esprit de corps*."

"What're you doing?" said Susan. "And Colonel Zabini?"

Hermione stood up out of her chair, stretching. "I'll try to figure out what Harry Potter is thinking and Colonel Zabini will try to figure out what Draco

Malfoy might do, and both of us will join you again after we come up with something. I'm going to walk while I think. Zabini, you want to come along?"

"Yes, General," said Zabini stiffly.

It hadn't been meant as an order. Hermione sighed to herself a little. This was going to take some getting used to, and although Zabini's first idea had certainly worked, she wasn't *quite* sure that Professor Quirrell's quote mixture of positive and negative incentives unquote would be enough to keep the Slytherin fully on her side until December when traitors would be allowed for the first time . . .

She still had no idea what she was going to do with Professor Quirrell's Christmas wish, either. Maybe she'd just ask Mandy if she wanted anything, when the time came around.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



INTERLUDE: PERSONAL FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

But Headmaster,” Harry argued, some of his desperation leaking into his voice, “leaving all of my assets in one undiversified vault full of gold coins — it’s crazy, Headmaster! It’s like, I don’t know, doing Transfiguration experiments without consulting a recognized authority! You just don’t do that with money!”

From the lined face of the old wizard — underneath a festive holiday hat like a catastrophic automobile collision between cars of green and red cloth — a grave, sad look peered out at Harry.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” said Dumbledore, “and I do apologize, but allowing you control over your own finances would give you far too much independence of action.”

Harry’s mouth opened and no sound came out. He was, literally, speechless.

“I will permit you to withdraw five Galleons for Christmas presents,” said Dumbledore, “which is more than any boy your age should spend, but poses no threat, I think —”

“I can’t believe you just said that!” the words burst out of Harry’s mouth. “You *admit* to being that manipulative?”

“Manipulative?” said the old wizard, smiling slightly. “No, manipulative would be if I did *not* admit it, or if I had some deeper motive behind the

obvious. This is quite straightforward, Harry. You are not yet ready to play the game, and it would be foolish to allow you thousands of Galleons with which to upset the gameboard.”



The bright hustle and bustle of Diagon Alley had increased by a hundred-fold and redoubled as Christmas approached, with all the shops enshrouded in brilliant sorceries that flashed and sparkled as though the season’s spirit was about to blaze out of control and turn the whole area into a cheerful holiday crater. The streets were so crowded with witches and wizards in festive and *loud* clothing that your eyes were assaulted almost as severely as your ears; and it was clear, from the bewildering variety of the shoppers, that Diagon Alley was considered an international attraction. There were witches wrapped in giant swathes of cloth like toweled mummies, and wizards in formal top hats and bath-robos, and young children barely past toddling age who were decorated with lights that blazed almost as bright as the shops themselves, as their parents took them hand in hand through that magic wonderland and let them shriek to their heart’s content. It was the season to be merry.

And in the midst of all that light and cheer, a note of blackest night; a cold, dark atmosphere that cleared a few precious paces of distance even in the midst of all that crush.

“No,” said Professor Quirrell, with a look of grim revulsion, like he’d just bitten into food that not only tasted horrible but was morally repugnant to boot. It was the sort of grim face an ordinary person might make after biting into a meat pie, and discovering that it was rotten and had been made from kittens.

“Oh, come *on*,” Harry said. “You must have *some* ideas.”

“Mr. Potter,” Professor Quirrell said, his lips set in a thin line, “I agreed to act as your adult guardian on this expedition. I did not agree to advise you on your choice of presents. I don’t do Christmas, Mr. Potter.”

“How about Newtonmas?” Harry said brightly. “Isaac Newton actually *was* born on December 25th, unlike some other historical figures I could name.”

This failed to impress Professor Quirrell.

“Look,” said Harry, “I’m sorry, but I’ve got to do *something* special for Fred and George and I’ve got no idea of my options.”

Professor Quirrell made a thoughtful humming sound. “You could ask which family members they most dislike, and then hire an assassin. I know someone from a certain government-in-exile who is quite competent, and he would give you a discount on multiple Weasleys.”

“*This* Christmas,” Harry said, dropping his voice into a lower register, “give your friends the gift . . . of *death*.”

That made Professor Quirrell smile. It went all the way to his eyes.

“Well,” said Harry, “at least you didn’t suggest getting them a pet rat —” Harry’s mouth snapped shut, and he was regretting the words almost as soon as they were out of his mouth.

“Pardon me?” said Professor Quirrell.

“Nothing,” Harry said at once, “long dumb story.” And telling it seemed wrong somehow, maybe because Harry was afraid Professor Quirrell would have laughed even if Bill Weasley *hadn’t* been cured and everything put back to right . . .

And where had Professor Quirrell *been* that he’d never heard the story? Harry had gotten the impression that everyone in magical Britain knew.

“Look,” said Harry, “I’m trying to *solidify their loyalty to me*, you know? Make the Weasley twins my minions? Like the old saying goes: A friend isn’t someone you use once and then throw away, a friend is someone you use over and over again. Fred and George are two of the most useful friends I have in Hogwarts, Professor Quirrell, and I plan to use them over and over again. So if you’d help me be Slytherin here, and suggest something they might be *very* grateful for . . .” Harry’s voice trailed off invitingly.

You just had to pitch these things the right way.

They walked on for a good way before Professor Quirrell spoke again, his voice practically dripping with distaste. “The Weasley twins are using secondhand wands, Mr. Potter. They would be reminded of your generosity with every Charm they cast.”

Harry clapped his hands together in involuntary excitement. Just put the money on account at Ollivander’s, and tell Mr. Ollivander to never refund it — no, better yet, to send it to Lucius Malfoy if the Weasley twins didn’t show up before the start of their next school year. “That’s *brilliant*, Professor!”

Professor Quirrell did not look like he appreciated the compliment. “I suppose I can tolerate Christmas in *that* spirit, Mr. Potter, though only barely.” Then he smiled slightly. “Of course that will cost you fourteen Galleons, and

you only have five.”

“*Five* Galleons,” Harry said, with a sniff of outrage. “Just who does the Headmaster think he’s dealing with, anyway?”

“I think,” said Professor Quirrell, “that it simply did not occur to him to fear the consequences if you turned your ingenuity to the task of obtaining funds. Though you were wise to lose, rather than making it an explicit threat. Out of curiosity, Mr. Potter, what *would* you have done if I hadn’t turned away in boredom while you, in a fit of childish pique, counted out five Galleons worth of Knuts?”

“Well, the easiest way would’ve been to borrow money from Draco Malfoy,” said Harry.

Professor Quirrell chuckled briefly. “Seriously, Mr. Potter.”

Duly noted. “Probably I’d have done a few celebrity appearances. I wouldn’t resort to anything economically disruptive just for spending money.” Harry had checked, and he *would* be allowed to keep the Time-Turner while he went home for the holidays, so that his sleep cycle didn’t start to rotate. But then it was *also* possible that someone kept an eye out for magical day traders. The gold and silver trick would’ve taken work on the Muggle end, and seed funding, and the goblins might’ve gotten suspicious after the first cycle. And starting a real bank would be a *lot* of work . . . Harry hadn’t *quite* worked out any money-making methods that were fast *and* certain *and* safe, so he’d been very glad when Professor Quirrell had turned out to be so easily fooled.

“I do hope those five Galleons will be enough to last, since you counted them so carefully,” said Professor Quirrell. “I doubt the Headmaster shall be so eager to entrust me with your vault key a second time, once he discovers I’ve been tricked.”

“I’m sure you did your best,” Harry said with deep gratitude.

“Do you need any assistance finding a safe place to store all those Knuts, Mr. Potter?”

“Well, sort of,” said Harry. “Do you know of any good investment opportunities, Professor Quirrell?”

And the two of them walked on, in their tiny sphere of silence and isolation, through the brilliant and bustling crowds; and if you looked carefully, you would see that where they went, leafy boughs faded, and flowers withered, and children’s toys that played cheerful bells changed to lower and more ominous notes.

Harry *did* notice, but he didn't say anything, just smiled a little to himself. Everyone had their own way of celebrating the holidays, and the Grinch was as much a part of Christmas as Santa.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



COORDINATION PROBLEMS, PART I

The terrifying part was how fast the whole thing had spiraled out of control. “Albus,” Minerva said, not even trying to keep the worry out of her voice as the two of them entered the Great Hall, “something has to be done.”

The atmosphere at Hogwarts before Yuletide was usually bright and cheerful. The Great Hall had already been decorated in green and red, after a Slytherin and a Gryffindor whose Yule wedding had become a symbol of friendship transcending Houses and allegiances, a tradition almost as ancient as Hogwarts itself and which had even spread to Muggle countries.

Now the students eating dinner were glancing nervously over their shoulders, or sending vicious glares at other tables, or at some tables arguing heatedly. You could have described the atmosphere as *tense*, perhaps, but the phrase coming to Minerva’s mind was *fifth degree of caution*.

Take a school, into four Houses divided . . .

Now into each year, add three armies at war.

And the partisanship of Dragon and Sunshine and Chaos had spread beyond the first-years; they had become the armies for those who had no armies. Students were wearing armbands with insignia of fire or smile or upraised hand, and hexing each other in the corridors. All three first-year generals had told them to stop — even Draco Malfoy had heard her out and then nodded grimly — but their supposed followers hadn’t listened.

Dumbledore gazed out at the tables with a distant look. *"In every city,"* the old wizard quoted softly, *"the population has been divided for a long time past into the Blue and the Green factions . . . And they fight against their opponents knowing not for what end they imperil themselves . . . So there grows up in them against their fellow men a hostility which has no cause, and at no time does it cease or disappear, for it gives place neither to the ties of marriage nor of relationship nor of friendship, and the case is the same even though those who differ with respect to these colors be brothers or any other kin. I, for my part, am unable to call this anything except a disease of the soul . . ."*

"I'm sorry," said Minerva, "I don't —"

"Procopius," said Dumbledore. "They took their chariot-racing very seriously, in the Roman Empire. Yes, Minerva, I agree that something must be done."

"Soon," Minerva said, her voice lowering even further. "Albus, I think it must be done before Saturday."

On Sunday, most students would leave Hogwarts to stay the holiday with their families; Saturday, then, was the final battle of the three first-year armies that would determine the awarding of Professor Quirrell's thrice-cursed Christmas wish.

Dumbledore glanced over at her, studying her gravely. "You fear that the explosion will come then, and someone will be hurt."

Minerva nodded.

"And that Professor Quirrell will be blamed."

Minerva nodded again, her face tight. She had long since become wise in the ways that Defense Professors were fired. "Albus," Minerva said, "we cannot lose Professor Quirrell now, we *cannot*! If he but stays through January our fifth-years will pass their OWLs, if he stays through March our seventh-years will pass their NEWTs, he is remedying years of neglect in months, a whole generation will grow up able to defend themselves in spite of the Dark Lord's curse — you must stop the battle, Albus! Ban the armies now!"

"I am not sure the Defense Professor would take that kindly," said Dumbledore, glancing over toward the Head Table where Quirrell was drooling into his soup. "He did seem most attached to his armies, though when I agreed I thought there would be four in each year." The old wizard sighed. "A clever man, probably with the best of intentions; but perhaps not clever enough, I fear. And to ban the armies might also trigger the explosion."

“But then Albus, what will you *do*?”

The old wizard favored her with a benign smile. “Why, I shall plot, of course. It’s the new fashion in Hogwarts.”

And they had come too close to the Head Table for Minerva to say anything more.



The terrifying part was how fast the whole thing had spiraled out of control. The first battle in December had been . . . messy, or so Draco had heard. The second battle had been *deranged*.

And the next one would be *worse*, unless the three of them together succeeded in their last desperate attempt to stop it.

“Professor Quirrell, this is insanity,” Draco said flatly. “This isn’t Slytherin any more, it’s just . . .” Draco was at a loss for words. He waved his hands helplessly. “You can’t possibly do any real plots with all this stuff going on. Last battle, one of my soldiers faked his own suicide. We have *Hufflepuffs* trying to plot, and they think they can, but they *can’t*. Things just happen at random now, it doesn’t have anything to do with who’s cleverest, or which army fights best, it’s . . .” He couldn’t even describe it.

“I agree with Mr. Malfoy,” said Granger in the tones of someone who hadn’t ever expected to hear herself saying those words. “Allowing traitors isn’t working, Professor Quirrell.”

Draco had tried forbidding anyone in his army to plot except him, and that had just driven the plots underground, no one wanted to be left out when the soldiers in *other* armies got to plot. After miserably losing their last battle, he’d finally given in and revoked his decree; but by then his soldiers had already started setting their own personal plans in motion, without any sort of central coordination.

After being told all the plans, or what his soldiers claimed were their plans, Draco had tried to sketch a plot to win the final battle. It had required considerably more than three different things to go right, and Draco had used *Incendio* on the paper and *Everto* to vanish the ashes, because if Father had seen it he would have been disowned.

Professor Quirrell’s eyelids were half-closed, his chin resting on his hands as he leaned forward onto his desk. “And you, Mr. Potter?” said the Defense

Professor. "Are you likewise in agreement?"

"All we'd need to do is shoot Franz Ferdinand and we could start World War One," said Harry. "It's gone to complete chaos. I'm all for it."

"*Harry!*" said Draco in utter shock.

He didn't even realize until a second later that he'd said it at exactly the same time, and in exactly the same tone of indignation, as Granger.

Granger shot him a startled glance, and Draco carefully kept his face neutral. Oops.

"That's right!" said Harry. "I'm betraying you! Both of you! Again! Ha ha!"

Professor Quirrell was smiling thinly, though his eyes were still half-closed. "And why is that, Mr. Potter?"

"Because I think I can cope with the chaos better than Miss Granger or Mr. Malfoy," said the traitor. "Our war is a zero-sum game, and it doesn't matter whether it's easy or hard in an absolute sense, only who does better or worse."

Harry Potter was learning far too fast.

Professor Quirrell's eyes moved beneath their lids to regard Draco, and then Granger. "In truth, Mr. Malfoy, Miss Granger, I simply could not live with myself if I shut down the grand debacle before its climax. One of your soldiers has even become a quadruple agent."

"*Quadruple?*" said Granger. "But there's only three sides in the war!"

"Yes," said Professor Quirrell, "you'd think that, wouldn't you. I am not sure that there has ever in history been a quadruple agent, or any army with such a high fraction of real and pretended traitors. We are exploring new realms, Miss Granger, and we cannot turn back now."

Draco left the Defense Professor's office with his teeth gritting hard against each other, and Granger looking even more annoyed beside him.

"I can't believe you did that, Harry!" said Granger.

"Sorry," Harry said, not sounding sorry at all, his lips curved up in a merry smile of evil. "Remember, Hermione, it *is* just a game, and why should generals like us be the only ones who get to plot? And besides, what are the two of you going to do about it? Team up against me?"

Draco traded glances with Granger, knowing that his own face was as tight as hers. Harry had been relying, more and more openly and gloatingly, on Draco's refusal to make common cause with a Mudblood girl; and Draco was

beginning to get *sick* of having that used against him. If this kept up much longer he *was* going to ally with Granger just to crush Harry Potter, and see how much the son of a Mudblood liked *that*.



The terrifying part was how fast the whole thing had spiraled out of control.

Hermione stared at the parchment Zabini had given her, feeling utterly and completely helpless.

There were names, and lines connecting the names to other names, and some of the lines were in different colors and . . .

"Tell me," said General Granger, "is there anyone in my army who *isn't* a spy?"

The two of them weren't in the office but in another, deserted classroom, and they were alone; because, Colonel Zabini had said, it was now nearly certain that at least one of the captains was a traitor. Probably Captain Goldstein, but Zabini didn't know for sure.

Her question had put an ironic smile on the young Slytherin's face. Blaise Zabini always seemed a little disdainful of her, but he didn't seem to actively dislike her; nothing like the derision he held for Draco Malfoy, or the resentment he had developed for Harry Potter. She had worried at first about Zabini betraying her, but the boy seemed desperate to show that the other two generals were no better than him; and Hermione thought that while Zabini would probably be happy to sell her out to anyone *else*, he'd never let Malfoy or Harry win.

"Most of your soldiers *are* still loyal to you, I'm pretty sure," said Zabini. "It's just that no one wants to be left out of the fun." The scornful look on the Slytherin's face made it clear what he thought of people who didn't take plotting seriously. "So they think they can be double agents and secretly work for our side while pretending to betray us."

"And that would also go for anyone in the *other* armies who says they want to be *our* spy," Hermione said carefully.

The young Slytherin shrugged. "I think I did a good job of telling which ones really want to sell out Malfoy, I'm not sure *anyone* really wants to sell out Potter to you. But Nott is a sure bet for betraying Potter to Malfoy and since I had Entwhistle approach him supposedly on behalf of Malfoy and Entwhistle

really reports to us, that's almost as good —"

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment. "We're going to lose, aren't we?"

"Look," Zabini said patiently, "You're in the lead right now on Quirrell points. We just have to not lose this last battle *completely* and you'll have enough Quirrell points to win the Christmas wish."

Professor Quirrell had announced that the final battle would operate on a formal scoring system, which he'd been asked to do to avoid recriminations afterward. Each time you shot someone, the general of your army got two Quirrell points. A gong would ring through the battle area (they didn't know yet where they would be fighting, though Hermione was hoping for the forest again, where Sunshine did well) and its pitch would tell which army had won the points. And if anyone was faking being hit, the gong would ring out anyway, and then a double gong would ring later, after no fixed time, to hail the retraction. And if you called the name of an army, cried "For Sunshine!" or "For Chaos!" or "For Dragon!", it switched your allegiance to that army . . .

Even Hermione had been able to see the flaw in *that* set of rules. But Professor Quirrell had gone on to announce that if you'd been originally assigned to Sunshine, nobody could shoot you in the name of Sunshine — or rather, they could, but then Sunshine lost a single Quirrell point, symbolized by a triple gong. That prevented you from shooting your own soldiers for points, and discouraged suiciding before the enemy got you, but you could still shoot spies if you had to.

Right now, Hermione had two hundred and forty-four Quirrell points, and Malfoy had two hundred and nineteen, and Harry had two hundred and twenty-one; and there were twenty-four soldiers in each army.

"So we fight carefully," Hermione said, "and just try not to lose too badly."

"No," said Zabini. The young Slytherin's face was now serious. "The problem is, Malfoy and Potter both know that their only way to win is to combine and crush us, then fight it out on their own. So here's what I think we should do —"

Hermione left the classroom in something of a daze. Zabini's plan hadn't been the obvious one, it had been strange and complicated and layered and the sort of thing she would've expected Harry to come up with, not Zabini. It felt wrong just for her to be able to *understand* a plan like that. Young girls shouldn't be able to understand plans like that. The Hat would've Sorted her into Slytherin, if it'd seen that she could understand plans like that . . .

The awesome thing was how fast he'd been able to escalate the chaos once he started doing it deliberately.

Harry sat in his office; he'd been given the authority to order furniture from the house elves, so he'd ordered a throne, and curtains in a black and crimson pattern. Scarlet light like blood, mixed with shadow, poured over the floor.

Something in Harry felt like he'd finally come home.

Before him stood the four Lieutenants of Chaos, his most trusted minions, one of whom was a traitor.

This. This was what life should be like.

"We are gathered," said Harry.

"Let Chaos reign," chorused his four Lieutenants.

"My hovercraft is full of eels," said Harry.

"I will not buy this record, it is scratched," chorused his four Lieutenants.

"All mimsy were the borogroves."

"And the mome raths outgrabe!"

That concluded the formalities.

"How goes the confusion?" Harry said in a dry whisper like Emperor Palpatine.

"It goes well, General Chaos," said Neville in the tone he always used for military matters, a tone so deep that the boy often had to stop and cough. The Chaotic Lieutenant was neatly dressed in his black school robes, trimmed in the yellow of Hufflepuff House, and his hair was parted and combed in the usual look for an earnest young boy. Harry had liked the incongruity better than any of the cloaks they'd tried. "Our Legionnaires have begun five new plots since yesterday evening."

Harry smiled evilly. "Do any of them have a chance of working?"

"I don't think so," said Neville of Chaos. "Here's the report."

"Excellent," said Harry, and laughed chillingly as he took the parchment from Neville's hand, trying his best to make it sound like he was choking on dust. That brought the total to sixty.

Let Draco *try* to handle that. Let him *try*.

And as for Blaise Zabini . . .

Harry laughed again, and this time it didn't even take an effort to sound

evil. He really needed to borrow someone's pet Kneazle for his staff meetings, so he'd have a cat to stroke while he did this.

"Can the Legion stop making plots now?" said Finnigan of Chaos. "I mean, don't we have enough already —"

"No," Harry said flatly. "We can *never* have enough plots."

Professor Quirrell had put it perfectly. They were pushing the boundaries further, perhaps, than they had ever been pushed; and Harry wouldn't have been able to live with himself if he'd turned back now.

There came a knock at the door.

"That will be the Dragon General," Harry said, smiling with evil prescience. "He arrives precisely as I expected. Do show him in, and yourselves out."

And the four Lieutenants of Chaos shuffled out, casting dark looks at Draco as the enemy general entered into Harry's secret lair.

If he wasn't allowed to do this when he was older, Harry was just going to stay eleven forever.



The sun was dripping through the red curtains, sending rays of blood dancing across the floor from behind Harry Potter's grownup-sized cushioned chair, which he had covered in gold and silver glitter and insisted on referring to as his throne.

(Draco was beginning to feel a lot more confident that he'd done the right thing in deciding to overthrow Harry Potter before he could take over the world. Draco couldn't even *imagine* what it would be like to live under his rule.)

"Good evening, Dragon General," said Harry Potter in a chill whisper. "You have arrived just as I expected."

This was not surprising, considering that Draco and Harry had agreed on the meeting time in advance.

And it also wasn't evening, but by now Draco knew better than to say anything.

"General Potter," Draco said with as much dignity as he could manage, "you know that our two armies have to work together for *either* of us to win Professor Quirrell's wish, right?"

"Yesss," hissed Harry, like the boy thought he was a Parselmouth. "We

must cooperate to destroy Sunshine, and only then fight it out between us. But if one of us betrays the other earlier on, that one could gain an advantage in the later fight. And the Sunshine General, who knows all this, will try to trick each of us into thinking the other has betrayed them. And you and I, who know that, will be tempted to betray the other and pretend that it is Granger's trickery. And Granger knows *that*, as well."

Draco nodded. That much was obvious. "And . . . both of us *only* want to win, and there's no one else who'll punish either of us if we defect . . ."

"Precisely," said Harry Potter, his face now turning serious. "We are faced with a *true* Prisoner's Dilemma."

The Prisoner's Dilemma, according to Harry's teachings, ran thus: Two prisoners had been locked in separate cells. There was evidence against each prisoner, but only minor evidence, enough for a prison sentence of two years apiece. Each prisoner could opt to *defect*, betray the other, testify against them in court; and this would take one year off their own prison sentence, but add two years to the other's. Or a prisoner could *cooperate*, staying silent. So if both prisoners defected, each testifying against the other, they would serve three years apiece; if both cooperated, or stayed silent, they would serve two years each; but if one defected and the other cooperated, the defector would serve a single year, and the cooperator would serve four.

And both prisoners had to make their decision without knowing the other one's choice, and neither would be given a chance to change their decision afterward.

Draco had observed that if the two prisoners had been Death Eaters during the Wizarding War, the Dark Lord would have killed any traitors.

Harry had nodded and said that was *one* way to resolve the Prisoner's Dilemma — and in fact both Death Eaters would *want* there to be a Dark Lord for exactly that reason.

(Draco had asked Harry to stop and let him to think about this for a while before they continued. It had explained a *lot* about why Father and his friends had agreed to serve under a Dark Lord who often wasn't nice to them . . .)

In fact, Harry had said, this was pretty much the reason why people had governments — *you* might be better off if you stole from someone else, just like each prisoner would be individually better off if they defected in the Prisoner's Dilemma. But if *everyone* thought like that, the country would fall into chaos and everyone would be worse off, like what would happen if both prisoners

defected. So people let themselves be ruled by governments, just like the Death Eaters had let themselves be ruled by the Dark Lord.

(Draco had asked Harry to stop again. Draco had always taken for granted that ambitious wizards put themselves in power because they wanted to rule, and people let themselves be ruled because they were scared little Hufflepuffs. And this, on reflection, still seemed true; but Harry's perspective was fascinating even if it was wrong.)

But, Harry had continued afterward, the fear of a third party punishing you was not the *only* possible reason to cooperate in the Prisoner's Dilemma.

Suppose, Harry had said, you were playing the game against a magically produced identical copy of yourself.

Draco had said that if there were two Dracos, of course neither Draco would want anything bad to happen to the other one, not to mention that no Malfoy would let himself become known as a traitor.

Harry had nodded again, and said that this was yet *another* solution to the Prisoner's Dilemma — people might cooperate because they cared about each other, or because they had senses of honor, or because they wanted to preserve their reputation. Indeed, Harry had said, it was rather difficult to construct a *true* Prisoner's Dilemma — in real life, people usually cared about the other person, or their honor or their reputation or a Dark Lord's punishment or *something* besides the prison sentences. But suppose the copy had been of someone *completely* selfish —

(Pansy Parkinson had been the example they'd used)

— so each Pansy only cared what happened to *her* and not to the other Pansy.

Given that this was all Pansy cared about . . . and that there was no Dark Lord . . . and Pansy wasn't worried about her reputation . . . and Pansy either had no sense of honor or didn't consider herself obligated to the other prisoner . . . *then* would the rational thing be for Pansy to cooperate, or defect?

Some people, Harry said, claimed that the rational thing to do was for Pansy to defect against her copy, but Harry, plus someone named Douglas Hofstadter, thought these people were wrong. Because, Harry had said, if Pansy defected — not at random, but for what seemed to her like *rational reasons* — then the other Pansy would think exactly the same way. Two identical copies wouldn't decide different things. So Pansy had to choose between a world in which both Pansies cooperated, or a world in which both Pansies defected,

and she was better off if both copies cooperated. And if Harry had thought ‘rational’ people *did* defect in the Prisoner’s Dilemma, then he wouldn’t have done anything to spread that kind of ‘rationality’, because a country or a conspiracy full of ‘rational’ people would dissolve into chaos. You would tell your *enemies* about ‘rationality’.

Which had all *sounded* reasonable at the time, but *now* the thought was occurring to Draco that . . .

“*You* said,” Draco said, “that the rational solution to the Prisoner’s Dilemma is to cooperate. But of course *you* would want me to believe that, wouldn’t you?” And if Draco was fooled into cooperating, Harry would just say, *Ha ha, betrayed you again!* and laugh at him about it afterward.

“I wouldn’t fake your lessons,” Harry said seriously. “But I have to remind you, Draco, that I didn’t say you should just automatically cooperate. Not on a *true* Prisoner’s Dilemma like this one. What I said was that when you choose, you shouldn’t think like you’re choosing for just yourself, *or* like you’re choosing for everyone. You should think like you’re choosing for all the people who are *similar enough* to you that they’ll probably do the same thing you do for the same reasons. And also choosing the predictions made by anyone who knows you well enough to predict you accurately, so that you never have to regret being rational because of the correct predictions that other people make about you — remind me to explain about Newcomb’s Problem at some point. So the question you and I have to ask, Draco, is this: are we similar enough that we’ll probably do the *same thing* whatever it is, making our decisions in mostly the same way? Or do we know each other well enough to predict each other, so that *I* can predict whether you’ll cooperate or defect, and *you* can predict that I’ve decided to do the same thing I predict you’ll do, because *I* know that you can predict me deciding that?”

. . . and Draco could not help but think that since he had to strain just to understand *half* of that, the answer was obviously ‘No’.

“Yes,” said Draco.

There was a pause.

“I see,” said Harry, sounding disappointed. “Oh, well. I guess we’ll have to think of some other way, then.”

Draco hadn’t thought that was going to work.

Draco and Harry talked about it back and forth. They had both agreed much earlier that what they did on the battlefield would *not* count as broken

promises in real life — though Draco was a little angry about what Harry had done in Professor Quirrell's office, and said so.

But if the two of them couldn't rely on honor or friendship, that *did* leave the question of how to get their armies to work together on beating Sunshine, despite everything Granger might try to break them up. Professor Quirrell's rules didn't make it tempting to let Sunshine kill the other army's soldiers — that just increased the bar you had to pass yourself — but it did tempt each side to steal kills instead of acting like a single army would, or to shoot some of the other side's soldiers during the confusion of battle . . .



Hermione was walking back to Ravenclaw not really looking where she was going, her mind preoccupied with war and treachery and other age-inappropriate concepts, and she turned a corner and bumped straight into a grownup.

"Sorry," she said automatically, and then, entirely without thinking, "Eeeeeek!"

"Don't worry, Miss Granger," said the cheerful smile, set beneath the twinkling eyes, and above the silver beard, of the HEADMASTER OF HOGWARTS. "You are quite forgiven."

Her gaze was helplessly locked on the kindly face of the most powerful wizard in the world, who was also the Chief Warlock, who was also the Supreme Mugwump, who had gone insane years ago from the stress of fighting the Dark Lord, and numerous other facts that were popping up into her mind one after the other while her throat went on making little embarrassing squeaks.

"In fact, Miss Granger," said Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, "it is quite lucky that we bumped into each other. Why, I was just now wondering curiously what the three of you were thinking of asking for your wishes . . ."



Saturday dawned bright and clear and with the students speaking in hushed voices, as though the first to shout might set off the explosion.



Draco had hoped that they would be fighting in the upper levels of Hogwarts again. Professor Quirrell had said that real fights were more likely to take place in cities than forests, and fighting inside schoolrooms and corridors was supposed to simulate that, with ribbons to mark the allowed areas. Dragon Army had done well in those fights.

Instead, just as Draco had feared, Professor Quirrell had come up with something *special* for this battle.

The battleground was the Hogwarts Lake.

And not in boats, either.

They were fighting *underwater*.

The Giant Squid had been temporarily paralyzed; spells had been set in place to keep away the grindylows; Professor Quirrell had gone and talked to the merfolk; and all the soldiers had been issued *potions of underwater action* that allowed them to breathe, see clearly, talk to each other, and swim not quite as fast as a fast walk by kicking their legs.

A huge silver sphere hung in the center of the battleground, shining like a small underwater moon. It would help to provide a sense of direction — at first. The moon would slowly go into eclipse as the battle went on, and when it had gone entirely dark, the battle would end if it hadn't already.

War in water. You couldn't defend a perimeter, attackers could come at you from any direction, and even with the potion you couldn't see very far in the darkness of the lake.

And if you swam too far away from the action, you would start to glow after a while, and be easy to hunt down — ordinarily if an army scattered and ran instead of fighting, Professor Quirrell would just declare them defeated; but today they were working on a points system. Of course you still had some time *before* you started to glow, if you wanted to play assassin.

Dragon Army had been set low in the water at the start of the game; above and far away, the distant underwater moon shone. The murky water was mostly lit by *Lumos* Charms, though his soldiers would extinguish the lights as soon as they began maneuvers. There was no point in letting the enemy see you before you saw them.

Draco kicked his legs a few times, propelling him to a higher position from which he could gaze down at where his soldiers hovered in the water.

The conversations died down almost at once under Draco's icy glare, his soldiers looking up at him with gratifying expressions of fear and worry.

"Listen to me very carefully," said General Malfoy. His voice came out a little lower, a little burbly with bubbles, *libsten to me vebwy caerbfually*, but the sound traveled clearly. "There's only one way we can win this. We've got to march on Sunshine together with Chaos, and beat Sunshine. *Then* we fight it out with Potter and win. That's *got* to happen, understand? No matter what else goes on, that part *has* to happen that way —"

And Draco explained the plan he and Harry had come up with.

Astonished looks were exchanged among the soldiers.

"— and if any of *your* plots get in the way of that," finished Draco, "after we are out of the water, I will set you on *fire*."

There was a nervous chorus of yessirs.

"And everyone with secret orders, make sure you carry them out *to the letter*," said Draco.

Around half his soldiers *openly nodded*, and Draco marked them for death after he rose to power.

Of course all the private orders were fake, like one Dragon being told to offer a false traitor's commission to another Dragon, and the second Dragon being told in hushed confidence to report anything said by the first Dragon. Draco had told each Dragon that the whole war could depend on that one thing, and that he hoped they understood it was more important than the plans they'd previously made. With luck that would keep all the idiots happy, and maybe flush out a few spies to boot, if the reports didn't match the instructions.

Draco's real plan for winning against Chaos . . . well, it was simpler than the one he'd burned, but Father still wouldn't have liked it. Despite trying, though, Draco hadn't been able to think of anything better. It was a plot that couldn't *possibly* have worked against anyone except Harry Potter. In fact it had *been* Harry's plan originally, according to the traitor, though Draco had guessed that without being told. Draco and the traitor had just modified it a little . . .



Harry took a deep breath, feeling the water gurgle harmlessly in his lungs. They'd fought in the forest, and he hadn't gotten a chance to say it.

They'd fought in the corridors of Hogwarts, and he hadn't gotten a chance to say it.

They'd fought in the air, broomsticks issued to every soldier, and it still hadn't made sense to say it.

Harry had thought he wouldn't ever get to say those words, not while he was still young enough for them to be real . . .

The Chaos Legionnaires were looking at Harry in puzzlement, as their general swam with his feet pointing up toward the distant light of the surface, and his head pointed down toward the murky depths.

"*Why are you upside down?*" the young commander shouted at his army, and began to explain how to fight after you abandoned the privileged orientation of gravity.



A hollow, booming bell echoed through the water, and on the instant, Zabini and Anthony and five other soldiers struck out downward, into the murky depths of the lake. Parvati Patil, the only Gryffindor in the group, turned her head back for a moment and gave them all a cheery wave as she dived; and after a moment, Scott and Matt did the same. The rest just sank and vanished.

General Granger swallowed a lump in her throat as she watched them go. She was risking everything on this, dividing her army instead of just trying to take as many enemy soldiers with them as possible.

The thing to realize, Zabini had told her, was that no army would move until they had a plan that let them expect victory. Sunshine couldn't just plan to win themselves, they had to make both other armies *think* they would win until it was too late.

Ernie and Ron still looked like they were in shock. Susan was gazing after the disappearing soldiers with a calculating look. Her army, what was left of it, just looked bewildered, tracteries of light dappling on their uniforms as they all drifted just below the sunlit surface of the lake.

"*Now* what?" said Ron.

"Now we wait," said Hermione, loudly enough for all the soldiers to hear. It felt odd to talk with her mouth full of water, she kept feeling like she was committing some sort of horrible impoliteness at the dinner table and was about to drool all over herself. "All of us left here are going to get zapped, but that was going to happen anyway with Dragon and Chaos ganging up on us."

We've just got to take as many of them with us as we can."

"I've got a plan," said one of her Sunshine Soldiers . . . Hannah, her voice had been a little hard to recognize at first. "It's like all complicated, but I know how we can get Dragon and Chaos to start fighting each other —"

"Me too!" said Fay. "I've got a plan too! See, Neville Longbottom is secretly on our side —"

"*You* were talking to Neville?" said Ernie. "That's not right, *I* was the one who —"

Daphne Greengrass and a couple of other Slytherins who hadn't gone with Zabini were giggling helplessly as the cries of "No, wait, *I* was the one who got Longbottom" erupted from one soldier after another.

Hermione just looked at them all wearily.

"Okay," said Hermione when it had all died down, "does everyone get it? All your plots were faked by the Chaos Legion, or maybe some by Dragon. Anyone who *really* wanted to betray Harry or Malfoy went straight to me or Zabini, not you. Just go ahead and compare notes on all your secret plots and you'll see it for yourselves." She might not be as good at plotting as Zabini, but she could always understand what all her officers told her, that was why Professor Quirrell had made her the general. "So don't bother trying to do any plots when the other armies get here. Just fight, okay? Please?"

"But," said Ernie with shock on his face, "Neville is in *Hufflepuff*! You're saying he *lied* to us?"

Daphne was laughing so hard and so helplessly that the exhalations had turned her upside down in the water.

"I'm not sure *what* Longbottom is," said Ron darkly, "but I don't think he's a Hufflepuff any more. Not now that *Harry Potter's* got to him."

"Do you know," said Susan, "I *asked* him that, and Neville told me he had become a Chaos Hufflepuff?"

"*Anyway*," said Hermione in a loud voice. "Zabini took with everyone who we thought was a spy, so in *our* army we can stop watching each other quite so hard now, I hope."

"*Anthony* was a spy?" yelled Ron.

"*Parvati* was a spy?" gasped Hannah.

"Parvati was *totally* a spy," said Daphne. "She shopped at the spy shoe store and wore spy lipstick, and someday she's going to marry a nice spy husband and have a lot of little spies."

And then a gong sound echoed through the water, indicating that Sunshine had just scored two points.

This was shortly followed by the triple gong of Dragon losing a single point.

Traitors weren't allowed to kill generals, not after the disaster of the first battle in December when all three generals had been shot in the first minute. But with any luck...

"Aw," said Hermione. "It sounds like Mr. Crabbe is taking a little nap."



Like two shoals of fish, the armies swam along.

Neville Longbottom kicked his feet in slow, measured motions. Diving, always diving in whatever direction you happened to be moving. You wanted to show the enemy the smallest profile, present them with your head or your feet. So you were always diving, downward and head-first, and the enemy was always *down*.

Like every Chaos Legionnaire in the army, Neville's head was constantly rotating as he swam, looking up, down, around, to every side. Not just watching for Sunshine Soldiers, but watching for any sign that a Chaos Legionnaire had drawn their wand and was about to betray them. Usually traitors waited until the confusion of battle to make their move, but that early gong had put them all on guard.

... the truth was, Neville was feeling sad about that. In November he'd been a soldier in a united army, all of them pulling together and helping each other, and now they were all watching each other constantly for the first signs of betrayal. It might have been more fun for General Chaos, but it wasn't nearly as much fun for Neville.

The direction formerly known as 'up' was getting steadily brighter, as they came closer to the surface and Sunshine.

"Wands out," said General Chaos.

Neville's squad drew their wands, pointing them straight ahead toward the enemy, as their heads scanned around more rapidly. If there were Sunny traitors, the time was approaching for them to strike.

The other shoal of fish, Dragon Army, was doing the same thing.

"*Now!*" shouted the distant voice of the Dragon General.

“*Now!*” shouted General Chaos.

“*For Sunshine!*” shouted all the soldiers in both armies, and charged downward.



“*What?*” said Minerva involuntarily as she watched the screens from next to the lake, a cry echoed in many other places; all of Hogwarts was watching this battle as they had watched the first.

Professor Quirrell was laughing dryly. “I warned you, Headmaster. It is impossible to have rules without Mr. Potter exploiting them.”



For long precious seconds, as the forty-seven soldiers charged her own seventeen, Hermione’s mind went blank.

Why . . .

Then it all snapped into place.

Every time a soldier originally from Sunshine got shot by someone crying the name of Sunshine, she would lose a Quirrell point. When two Sunshine Soldiers were shot by either army, *both* enemy armies would be two points closer to overtaking her, it was the same gain only *shared*. And if anyone shot another soldier *not* in the name of Sunshine, that gong *wouldn’t* get lost in the confusion . . .

Hermione was suddenly very glad that Zabini hadn’t gone with the obvious plan of starting trouble between the other two armies while they attacked Sunshine.

It was still disheartening, though, that sense of your chances closing down, of hope being taken away.

Most of Hermione’s soldiers were still looking confused, but some had expressions of dawning horror as they got it.

“It’s all right,” Susan Bones said firmly. Heads turned to look at the Sunshine Captain. “Our job is the same, to take as many of them with us as we can. And remember, Zabini took away all the spies! We don’t have to stay on the lookout like *they* do!” The girl was smiling defiantly, provoking answering smiles from many of the other soldiers, even from Hermione herself. “It can

be like it was in November. We just have to keep our heads high, fight our best, and trust each other —”

Daphne shot her.



“*Blood for the blood god!*” shrieked Neville of Chaos, though since he was underwater it came out more like ‘Blubbled for the blubbled glub!’

Captain Weasley spun and raised his wand toward Neville and fired. But Neville was swimming *downward* toward him, wand pointed straight ahead, and that meant the Simple Shield could shelter Neville’s entire profile; if anyone shot him now, it wasn’t going to be Sunny Ron.

A grimly determined look came over Captain Weasley’s face, and he arrowed straight up toward Neville, mouthing the word *Contego*, though the shield wasn’t visible in the water.

The two enemy champions shot toward each other like arrows released from bows, each aimed to split the other down the middle. They had dueled many times before, but this time would pay for all.

(Far away by the lakeside, a hundred breaths were held.)

“*Rainbows and unicorns!*” roared the Sunshine Captain.

“*The Black Goat with a thousand young!*”

“*Do your homework!*”

Closer and yet closer, the two champions charged, neither willing to swerve, the first person to turn would present a vulnerable broadside and get shot, though if neither lost their nerve they would crash right into each other . . .

Falling straight down as the enemy rose straight up to meet him, hammer descending to meet anvil in a path neither was willing to leave . . .

“*Special attack, Chaotic Twist!*”

Neville saw the look of horror on Captain Weasley’s face as the Hover Charm caught him. They’d tested it before the battle had started; and just as Harry had suspected, *Wingardium Leviosa* became a whole new sort of weapon once everyone was swimming underwater.

“*Curse you, Longbottom!*” shrieked Ron Weasley, “*Can’t you ever fight without your dumb special attacks —*”

and by that time the Sunshine Captain had been spun around sideways and Neville shot him in the leg.

"I don't fight fair," said Neville to the sleeping form, "I fight like Harry Potter."



Granger: 237 / Malfoy: 217 / Potter: 220

It still hurt every time he had to shoot Hermione. Harry could hardly stand to look at the expression of peace that had come over her sleeping face, arms now drifting aimlessly as the curves of sunlight moved over her camouflage uniform and the cloud of her chestnut hair.

And if Harry had tried to duck out of being the one to shoot her . . . not only would Draco have known what it meant, *Hermione* would have been offended.

She's not dead, Harry said to his brain as his kicking feet pushed him away, *she's just resting. IDIOT.*

Are you sure? said his brain. *What if she's an ex-Hermione? Could we go back and check?*

Harry glanced back briefly.

See, she's fine, there are bubbles coming out of her mouth.

Could've been her last breath escaping.

Oh be quiet. Why are you being so paranoid-protective, anyway?

Er, first real friend we've ever had in our whole life? Hey, remember what happened to our pet rock?

Would you SHUT UP about that worthless lump of rubble, it wasn't even alive let alone sentient, that is like the most pathetic childhood trauma ever —

The two armies swiftly separated, becoming two shoals of fish once more.

General Granger had gone down seventeen points, and taken three Chaotics and two Dragons with her; and one Chaotic and two Dragons had been shot as traitors. So she'd lost net seven points, Harry had lost one, Draco had lost two; that put Sunshine twenty points up on Dragon, and seventeen points up on Chaos. Chaos could still win easily if they exterminated all twenty remaining Dragons. The wild card, of course, being those seven remaining Sunshine Soldiers . . .

. . . if you could call them that.

The two shoals swam uneasily next to each other, the soldiers in each army awaiting an order to call out their true allegiances, and attack . . .

“Everyone who got them,” Harry said loudly, “remember Special Orders One through Three. And don’t forget it’s Merlin Says on Three. Do not acknowledge.”

The trustworthy two-thirds of the army did not nod, and the other third just looked puzzled.

Special Order One: Don’t bother trying to call out any codewords in this battle, don’t expend effort on any plot not specially approved by the commander; just swim, shield, and fire.

Hermione and Draco had both been fighting their soldiers, trying to get them to stop plotting on their own all through December. Harry had egged his soldiers on and supported their plotting through the last two battles... while also telling them that at some *future* point he might ask them to put a plot or two on hold, to which they’d all readily agreed. So now, in this critical battle, they were happy to obey.

Neither Hermione or Draco could have given that order successfully, Harry was certain. It was the difference between your soldiers seeing you as an ally in their plotting, and seeing you as a spoilsport old fuddy-duddy who didn’t want them to have any fun. Imposition of order equaled escalation of chaos, and it also worked in reverse...

“There they are!” shouted someone, and pointed.

From the depths of the lake arose the forgotten ones, the ones who’d forsaken the last battle, the seven missing Sunshine Soldiers, glowing with the bright aura of cowards, now fading as they returned to battle.

The two shoals of fish wavered, pointing wands uneasily.

“Hold your fire!” shouted Harry, and a similar cry came from General Malfoy.

There was a moment of held breath.

Then the seven Sunshine Soldiers swam up to join Dragon Army.

There was a triumphant cheer from Dragon Army.

There were cries of dismay from a third of the Chaos Legion.

Some of the other two-thirds smiled, though they shouldn’t have.

Harry wasn’t smiling.

Oh, this is so completely not going to work...

But Harry hadn’t been able to think of anything better.

“Special Orders Two and Three still apply!” shouted Harry. “Fight!”

“*For the Chaos Legion!*” roared twenty Chaotic Legionnaires.

“*For Dragon Army!*” roared twenty Dragon Warriors and seven Sunshine Soldiers.

And the Chaotics dived straight downward, as all the traitors got ready to strike.



Granger: 237 / Malfoy: 220 / Potter: 226

Draco’s head darted around frantically, trying to weigh up what was happening; somehow, despite his greater forces, he’d *lost the initiative*. Four small Chaotic forces were being pursued by four larger Dragon forces, but because Draco’s forces were the ones trying to force an engagement, it meant that they had to *follow* where Chaos *ran*, and somehow that was producing concentrations of Chaotic force that would fire into the exposed sides of Dragon —

It was happening *again!*

“*Prismatic!*” shouted Draco, raising his wand, and that shield you could see even through the water, a sparkling multicolored flat wall wide enough to shield Draco and the five other Dragons with him from the Chaotic force that had just started firing on them as they swam past, and *that* let the other five Dragons turn *their* attentions back to the Chaotic force they’d been chasing —

There was a tense moment as sleep spell after sleep spell crashed into Draco’s Prismatic Wall, and Draco was hoping to Merlin that none of those four Chaotics had learned the Breaking Drill Hex —

Then there was the bell of a Dragon victory, and the Chaotic force spun head-for-foot and began swimming away; and Draco, his hands now shaking slightly, dropped the Prismatic Wall and lowered his wand.

Fighting in water was more exhausting even than fighting on broomsticks.

“*Do not pursue!*” Draco cried to his soldiers as they started to follow, then, “*Sonorus! REFORM ON ME!*”

The Dragon forces started converging on Draco, and the Chaotic forces spun around and began *pursuing* the Dragons on the instant — Draco swore out loud as he heard the bell of a Chaotic victory, someone hadn’t gotten their Simple Shield oriented right — and then the Dragon forces were in supporting range of each other and the Chaotics were moving back into the murky distance.

Somehow, despite their numerical superiority, the Dragons had scored

three times against the Chaotics and the Chaotics had scored four times back, and he'd heard one Dragon spy get executed. Either Harry Potter had thought of a lot of very good ideas very fast, or for some unimaginable reason he'd already spent a lot of time working out how to fight underwater. This wasn't working, and Draco needed to rethink things.

It looked like everyone was having trouble aiming while swimming, too, the battle might last long enough that time would be called... the distant underwater moon was only half full now, that wasn't good... he had to rethink things *fast*...

"What is it?" said Padma Patil, as she and her force swam over toward Draco.

Padma was his second-in-command; she was clever and powerful, and better yet, she hated Granger and saw Harry as a rival, which made her *trustworthy*. Working with Padma was making him realize the truth of the old adage that Ravenclaw was sister to Slytherin; Draco had been surprised when his father had told him it was an acceptable House for his future wife, but now he saw the sense of it.

"Wait until we're all here," Draco said. The truth was, he needed to catch his breath. That was the trouble with being the general *and* the most powerful wizard, you had to keep using magic.

Zabini came in next, commanding a force of two Sunnies and four Dragons, one of whom was Gregory keeping an eye on Zabini. Draco didn't trust Zabini. And neither Draco nor Zabini trusted the Sunnies enough to make them a majority of any unit; they were *supposed* to be loyal either to Draco directly, or to Granger who'd been fooled by the promise that the Dragons would be betrayed in the end after both forces had been depleted, just as Harry's more trusted Chaotics should've been fooled into not shooting at the Sunnies by the promise of their firing fake Sleep Hexes and switching to support Chaos later; but it was possible some of the Sunnies *were* loyal to Chaos and *weren't* firing real Sleep Hexes and that was why Dragon wasn't winning the way their numerical advantage should've let them win...

The next unit that approached was depleted, three soldiers holding wands on two other soldiers, who were swimming with empty hands.

Draco gritted his teeth. More traitor problems. He needed to talk to Professor Quirrell about having some way to *punish* traitors at least, conditions like these were *unrealistic*, in real life you tortured your traitors to death.

“General Malfoy!” shouted the commander of the problem unit as it swam up, a Ravenclaw boy named Terry. “We don’t know what to do — Cesi shot Bogdan, but Cesi says Kellah told him that Bogdan shot Specter —”

“I *didn’t*!” said Kellah.

“Yes you *did*!” shrieked Cesi. “General Malfoy, *she’s* the spy, I should’ve rea —”

“*Somnium*,” said Draco.

There was the triple bell of a one-point loss from Dragon, and then Kellah’s limp body began to float away in the water.

Draco *had* heard the word ‘recursion’ by this point, and he knew a Harry Potter plot when he saw one.

(Unfortunately Draco had *not* heard of autoimmune disorders, and the thought did *not* readily occur to him that a clever virus would begin its attack by creating symptoms of an autoimmune disorder so as to get the body to distrust its own immune system . . .)

“*General order!*” said Draco, raising his voice. “Nobody gets to shoot spies except myself, Gregory, Padma, and Terry. If anyone sees anything suspicious they come to one of *us*.”

And then —

There was the bell of Sunshine scoring two points.

“*What?*” said Draco and Zabini around the same time; their heads swiveled around. No one seemed to have gotten hit, and all the Sunshine soldiers were present and accounted for. (Except Parvati, who had been shot by some still-unknown traitor in Padma’s squad; and of course Padma had shot Parvati again in case she was faking, so it wasn’t her . . .)

“A Sunny traitor in Chaos?” said Zabini, sounding puzzled. “But all the ones I knew about were supposed to strike during Chaos’s attack on Sunshine —”

“No!” said Padma in a tone of sudden realization. “That was *Chaos* executing a spy!”

“*What?*” said Zabini. “But why —”

And Draco got it. *Damn it!* “Because Potter thinks he’s safe for how much he beats Sunshine, but not for how much he beats *us*! So he doesn’t want to lose a single point when he executes a traitor! *General order!* If you have to execute a traitor, call Sunshine first! And don’t forget to switch back to Dragon afterward —”

Granger: 253 / Malfoy: 252 / Potter: 252

Longbottom's body drifted chaotically through the water, arms and legs disarrayed. After Draco had finally got a hit in they'd all shot him *again* just to be sure.

Nearby was Harry Potter, now protected by a Prismatic Sphere, looking at them all grimly as the last sliver of crescent moon slowly diminished, somewhere far away. If Longbottom had managed to shoot one more soldier (Draco knew Harry was thinking), if the two Chaotics had managed to hold out just a little longer, they might have *won*...

After Draco had reformed his forces and struck out again, the ensuing battle and execution of spies in Sunshine's name had left Sunshine exactly one point ahead of Dragon and Chaos both. Once Harry had started doing it, Draco had been left with no choice but to follow suit.

But now they had General Chaos outnumbered three to one, the survivors of Dragon Army and the last remaining Sunny traitor: Draco, and Padma, and Zabini.

And Draco, who was no fool, had ordered Padma to take Zabini's wand after Longbottom had shot Gregory and fallen in turn to Draco. The boy had given him an insulted look, told Draco that he owed him for this, and handed it over.

That left Draco and Padma to take down General Chaos.

"I don't suppose you'd like to surrender?" said Draco, smiling as evilly as any smile he'd ever directed at Harry Potter.

"Sleep before surrender!" shouted General Chaos.

"Just so you know," said Draco, "Zabini doesn't actually *have* an older sister for you to rescue from Gryffindor bullies. But Zabini *does* have a mother who doesn't approve of Muggleborns like Granger, and I wrote her a few notes, and offered Zabini a few favors — nothing involving my father, just things *I* can do in school. And by the way, Zabini's mother doesn't approve of the Boy-Who-Lived, either. Just in case you still thought Zabini was really on your side."

Harry's face grew even grimmer.

Draco raised his wand, and began breathing rhythmically, building up strength for a Breaking Drill Hex. Granger's Prismatic Sphere was almost as

strong as Draco's now, and Harry's wasn't much weaker, where did those two find *time*?

"*Lagann!*" spoke Draco, putting everything he had into it, and the green spiral blazed out and Harry's shield shattered, and at almost the same moment —

"*Somnium!*" said Padma.



Granger: 253 / Malfoy: 252 / Potter: 254

Harry let out a long breath of relief, and not just because he didn't have to hold the Prismatic Sphere any more. His hand was shaking as he lowered his wand.

"You know," said Harry, "I was pretty worried there for a moment."

Special Order Two: If a Sunny traitor doesn't seem to be really shooting at you, fake being hit occasionally. Prefer targeting Dragons to Sunnies but go ahead and shoot Sunnies if you can't shoot Dragons.

Special Order Three: Merlin says do not shoot at Blaise Zabini or either Patil twin.

With a wide grin, Parvati Patil stripped the Transfigured patch off her uniform's insignia, and let it float away in the water.

"Gryffindors for Chaos," she said, and handed Zabini his wand back.

"Thank you *very* much," Harry said, and bowed sweepingly to the Gryffindor girl. "And thank *you* as well," bowing to Zabini. "You know, when you came to me with that plan, I wondered if you were brilliant or crazy, and I've decided that you're both. And by the way," Harry said, now turning as though to address Draco's body, "Zabini *does* have a cousin —"

"*Somnium,*" said Zabini's voice.



Granger: 255 / Malfoy: 252 / Potter: 254

And Harry Potter's body floated away, his expression of shock and horror quickly relaxing into sleep.

"On second thought," Parvati said cheerfully, "make that Gryffindors for Sunshine."

She started to laugh, more exhilarated than she'd ever been in her life, she'd *finally* gotten to assassinate and replace her twin sister and she'd wanted to do that since *forever*, and this had been *perfect*, it had all been *perfect* —

— and then her wand spun around in a lightning motion just as Zabini's wand turned to point at her.

"Wait!" said Zabini. "Do not shoot, do not resist. That's an order."

"*What?*" said Parvati.

"Sorry," said Zabini, looking not-quite-sincerely apologetic, "but I can't be totally *sure* you're for Sunshine. So I order you to let me shoot you."

"*Hold on!*" said Parvati. "We're only ahead of Chaos by one point! If you shoot me now —"

"I'll shoot you in the name of Dragon, *obviously*," said Zabini, now sounding a little superior. "Just because we tricked *them* into doing it, doesn't mean it won't work for us."

Parvati stared at him, her eyes narrowing. "General Malfoy said your mother doesn't like Hermione."

"I suppose," said Zabini, still with that superior smirk. "But some of us are more willing than Draco Malfoy to annoy a parent."

"And Harry Potter said you have a cousin —"

"Nope," said Zabini.

Parvati stared at him, trying to think, but she wasn't really good at plotting; Zabini'd said the plan was to secretly keep the scores of Chaos and Dragon as even as possible so they'd use Sunshine's name to execute their traitors instead of losing even a single point, and that had *worked* . . . but . . . she had the feeling she was missing something, she wasn't a Slytherin . . .

"Why don't *I* shoot *you* in the name of Dragon?" said Parvati.

"Because I outrank you," said Zabini.

Parvati had a bad feeling about this.

She stared at him for a long moment.

And then —

"*Somni* —" she started to say, and then realized she hadn't said *for Dragon*, and frantically cut herself off —



Granger: 255 / Malfoy: 254 / Potter: 254

“Hey, everyone,” said Blaise Zabini’s face on the screens, looking quite amused, “guess it’s all down to me.”

All by the lakeside, people were holding their breath.

Sunshine was ahead of Dragon and Chaos by exactly one point.

Blaise Zabini could shoot himself in the name of either Dragon or Chaos, or just leave things the way they were.

A series of chimes indicated that the last minute of time was running out.

And the Slytherin was smiling a strange, twisted smile, and casually toying with his wand, the dark wood barely visible in the dark water.

“You know,” said Blaise Zabini’s voice, in the tones of someone who’d been rehearsing the words for a while, “it’s just a game, really. And games are supposed to be *fun*. So how about if I just do whatever I feel like?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



COORDINATION PROBLEMS, PART II

Minerva and Dumbledore together had applied their combined talent to conjure the grand stage toward which Quirrell now slowly trudged; it was, at its core, sturdy wood, but the outer surfaces shone with glitter of marble inlaid with platinum and studded with gems of every House color. Neither she nor the Headmaster was any Founder of Hogwarts, but the conjuration only needed to last a few hours. Minerva ordinarily enjoyed the few occasions when she had the occasion to tire herself out on large Transfigurations; she should have enjoyed the many small chances for artistry, and the illusion of opulence; but this time she had done the work with the dreadful feeling of digging her own grave.

But Minerva was feeling a little better now. There'd been one brief moment when the explosion might've come; but Dumbledore had already been standing up and applauding warmly, and no one had proven foolish enough to riot in front of the Headmaster.

And the explosive mood had rapidly faded into a collective sentiment which might perhaps have been described by the phrase: *Give us a break!*

Blaise Zabini had shot himself in the name of Sunshine, and the final score had been 254 to 254 to 254.

Behind the stage, waiting to ascend, three children were glaring at each other in mingled fury and frustration. It didn't help that they were still damp from being fished out of the lake, and that the Warming Charms didn't seem quite enough to make up for the crisp December air, or maybe it was just their mood.

"That's *it*," said Granger. "I've *had* it! No more traitors!"

"I completely agree with you, Miss Granger," Draco said icily. "Enough is enough."

"And what do *you* two intend to do about it?" snapped Harry Potter. "Professor Quirrell already said he wouldn't ban spies!"

"We'll ban them *for* him," said Draco grimly. He hadn't even understood what he meant by the words as he said them, but the very act of speaking seemed to crystallize a plan —



The stage really was well done, at least for a temporary structure; the makers hadn't fallen into the usual pitfall of being impressed by their own illusion of wealth, and knew something about architecture and visual style. From where Draco stood, in the obvious place for him to stand, the watching students would see him haloed in the faint glitter of emeralds; and Granger, standing where Draco had subtly motioned her, would be haloed in Ravenclaw's sapphire. As for Harry Potter, Draco wasn't looking at him right now.

Professor Quirrell had . . . awakened, or whatever it was he did; and was leaning upon a platinum podium bare of all gems. With evident showmanship, the Defense Professor was carefully stacking and squaring those three envelopes containing the three parchments upon which the three generals had written their wishes, as all the students of Hogwarts watched, and waited.

Finally Professor Quirrell looked up from the envelopes. "Well," said the Defense Professor. "This is inconvenient."

A slight titter of laughter ran through the crowd, with a sharp undertone.

"I suppose you are all wondering what I will do?" said Professor Quirrell. "There is nothing for it; I shall have to do what is fair. Although first there was a little speech I wanted to make, and before even that, it appears to me that Mr. Malfoy and Miss Granger have something they wish to share."

Draco blinked, and then he and Granger traded rapid glances — *may I?* —

yes, go ahead — and Draco raised his voice.

“General Granger and I would both like to say,” Draco said in his most formal voice, knowing it was being amplified and heard, “that we will no longer accept the help of any traitors. And if, in any battle, we find that Potter has accepted traitors from either of our armies, we will join forces to crush him.”

And Draco shot a glance filled at malice at the Boy-Who-Lived. *Take that, General Chaos!*

“I agree completely with General Malfoy,” said Granger standing beside him, her high voice clear and strong. “Neither of us will use traitors, and if General Potter does, we will wipe him off the battlefield.”

There was a susurruration of surprise from the watching students.

“Very good,” said their Defense Professor, smiling. “It took the two of you long enough, but you are still to be congratulated on having thought of it before any other generals.”

It took a moment for this to soak in —

“In the future, Mr. Malfoy, Miss Granger, before you come to my office with any request, consider whether there is a way for you to accomplish it without my help. I will not deduct Quirrell points on this occasion, but next time you may expect to lose the full fifty.” Professor Quirrell wore an amused grin. “And what do you have to say about that, Mr. Potter?”

Harry Potter’s gaze went to Granger, then to Draco. His face appeared calm; though Draco was sure *controlled* would have been the better term.

Finally Harry Potter spoke, his voice level. “The Chaos Legion is still happy to accept traitors. See you on the battlefield.”

Draco knew the shock was showing on his own face; there were astonished murmurs from the watching students, and when Draco glanced at the front row he saw that even Harry’s Chaotics looked taken aback.

Granger’s face was angry, and getting angrier. “Mr. Potter,” she said in a sharp tone like she thought she was a teacher, “are you *trying* to be obnoxious?”

“Most certainly not,” Harry Potter said calmly. “I won’t make you do it every time. Beat me once, and I’ll stay beaten. But threats aren’t always enough, General of Sunshine. You did not ask me to join with you, but tried simply to impose your will; and sometimes you must actually defeat the enemy, to impose your will on him. You see, I am skeptical that Hermione Granger, the brightest academic star of Hogwarts, and Draco, son of Lucius, scion of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy, can work together to beat their

common foe, Harry Potter.” An amused smile crossed Harry Potter’s face. “Maybe I’ll just do what Draco tried with Zabini, and write a letter to Lucius Malfoy and see what *he* thinks about that.”

“*Harry!*” gasped Granger, looking absolutely aghast, and there were gasps from the audience as well.

Draco controlled the anger flushing through him. That had been a *stupid* move on Harry’s part, saying that in public. If Harry had simply *done* it, it might have worked, Draco hadn’t even thought about that, but *now* if Father did that it would look like he was playing into Harry’s hands —

“If you think my father, Lord Malfoy, can be manipulated by *you* that easily,” Draco said coldly, “you have a surprise coming, Harry Potter.”

And Draco realized as the words finished leaving his mouth that he’d just backed *his own father* squarely into the corner, more or less without even meaning to. Father probably *wasn’t* going to like this, not the tiniest bit, but now it would be impossible for him to say so . . . Draco would have to apologize for that, it *had* been an honest accident, but it was strange to think that he’d done it at all.

“Then go ahead and defeat the evil General Chaos,” Harry said, still looking amused. “I can’t win against both your armies — not if you *really* work together. But I wonder if perhaps I could break you up before then.”

“You won’t, and we’ll *crush* you!” said Draco Malfoy.

And beside him, Hermione Granger firmly nodded.

“Well,” said Professor Quirrell after the astounded silence had stretched for a while. “That was *not* how I expected that particular conversation to go.” The Defense Professor had a rather intrigued expression on his face. “Truthfully, Mr. Potter, I expected you to concede immediately and with a smile, then announce that you had long since worked out my intended lesson but had decided not to spoil it for others. Indeed, I planned my speech accordingly, Mr. Potter.”

Harry Potter just shrugged. “Sorry about that,” he said, and said nothing more.

“Oh, don’t worry,” said Professor Quirrell. “This, too, will serve.”

And Professor Quirrell turned from the three children, and straightened at the podium to address the whole watching crowd; his customary air of detached amusement dropped away like a falling mask, and when he spoke again his voice was amplified louder than it had been.

“If not for Harry Potter,” said Professor Quirrell, his voice as crisp and cold as December, “You-Know-Who would have won.”

The silence was instant, and total.



“Make no mistake,” said Professor Quirrell. “The Dark Lord *was* winning. There were fewer and fewer Aurors who dared face him, the vigilantes who opposed him were being hunted down. One Dark Lord and perhaps fifty Death Eaters were *winning* against a country of thousands. That is beyond ridiculous! There are no grades low enough for me to mark that incompetence!”

There was a frown on the face of Headmaster Dumbledore; and on the faces of the audience, puzzlement; and the utter silence went on.

“Do you understand now how it happened? You saw it today. I allowed traitors, and gave the generals no means to restrain them. You saw the result. Clever plots and clever betrayals, until the last soldier left on the battlefield shot himself! You cannot *possibly* doubt that all three of those armies could have been defeated by *any* outside foe that was unified within itself.”

Professor Quirrell leaned forward at the podium, his voice now filled with a grim intensity. His right hand stretched out, fingers open and spread. “Division is weakness,” said the Defense Professor. His hand closed into a tight fist. “Unity is strength. The Dark Lord understood that well, whatever his other follies; and he *used* that understanding to create the one simple invention that made him the most terrible Dark Lord in history. Your parents faced one Dark Lord. And fifty Death Eaters who were perfectly unified, knowing that any breach of their loyalty would be punished by death, that any slack or incompetence would be punished by pain. None could escape the Dark Lord’s grasp once they took his Mark. And the Death Eaters agreed to take that terrible Mark because they knew that once they took it, they would be *united*, facing a divided land. One Dark Lord and fifty Death Eaters would have defeated an entire country, by the power of the Dark Mark.”

Professor Quirrell’s voice was bleak and hard. “Your parents *could* have fought back in kind. They did not. There was a man named Yermly Wibble who called upon the nation to institute a draft, though he did not quite have vision enough to propose a Mark of Britain. Yermly Wibble knew what would happen to him; he hoped his death would inspire others. So the Dark Lord

took his family for good measure. Their empty skins inspired nothing but fear, and no one dared to speak again. And your parents would have faced the consequences of their despicable cowardice, if not for being saved by a one-year-old boy.” Professor Quirrell’s face showed full contempt. “A dramatist would have called that a *dei ex machina*, for they did nothing to earn their salvation. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named may not have deserved to win, but make no doubt of it, your parents deserved to lose.”

The voice of the Defense Professor rang forth like iron. “And know this: your parents have learned nothing! The nation is still fragmented and weak! How few decades passed between Grindelwald and You-Know-Who? Do you think *you* will not see the next threat in your own lifetimes? Will *you* repeat then the follies of your parents, when you have seen the results so clearly laid out before you this day? For I can tell you what your parents will do, when the day of darkness comes! I can tell you what lesson they have learned! They have learned to hide like cowards and do nothing while they wait for Harry Potter to save them!”

There was a wondering look in the eyes of Headmaster Dumbledore; and other students gazed up at their Defense Professor with bewilderment and anger and awe.

Professor Quirrell’s eyes were as cold now as his voice. “Mark this, and mark it well. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named wished to rule over this country, to hold it in his cruel grasp forever. But at least he wished to rule over a *living* country, and not a heap of ash! There have been Dark Lords who were mad, who wished only to make the world a vast funeral pyre! There have been wars in which one whole country marched against another! Your parents nearly lost against half a hundred, who thought to take this country alive! How quickly would they have been crushed by a foe more numerous than they, a foe that cared for nothing but their destruction? This I foretell: When the next threat rises, Lucius Malfoy will claim that you must follow him or perish, that your only hope is to trust in his cruelty and strength. And though Lucius Malfoy himself will believe it, this will be a lie. For when the Dark Lord perished, Lucius Malfoy did not unite the Death Eaters, they were shattered in an instant, they fled like whipped dogs and betrayed each other! Lucius Malfoy is not strong enough to be a true Lord, Dark or otherwise.”

Draco Malfoy’s fists were clenched white, there were tears in his eyes, and fury, and unbearable shame.

“No,” said Professor Quirrell, “I do not think it will be Lucius Malfoy who saves you. And lest you think that I speak on my own behalf, time will make clear soon enough that this is not so. I make you no recommendation, my students. But I say that if a whole country were to find a leader as strong as the Dark Lord, but honorable and pure, and take his Mark; then they could crush any Dark Lord like an insect, and all the rest of our divided magical world could not threaten them. And if some still greater enemy rose against us in a war of extermination, then only a united magical world could survive.”

There were gasps, mostly from Muggleborns; the students in green-trimmed robes looked merely puzzled. Now it was Harry Potter whose fists were clenched tight and trembling; and Hermione Granger beside him was angry and dismayed.

The Headmaster rose from his seat, his face now stern, saying no word as yet; but the command was clear.

“I do not say *what* threat will come,” said Professor Quirrell. “But you will not live all your lives in peace, not if the past history of the world is any guide at all to its future. And if you do in the future as you have seen three armies do this day, if you cannot throw aside your petty bickering and take the Mark of a single leader, then indeed you might wish that the Dark Lord had lived to rule over you, and regret the day that ever Harry Potter was born —”

“*Enough!*” bellowed Albus Dumbledore.

There was silence.

Professor Quirrell slowly turned his head to gaze at where Albus Dumbledore stood in the fury of his wizardry; their eyes met, and a soundless stress pressed down like weight upon all the students, as they listened not daring to move.

“You, too, failed this country,” said Professor Quirrell. “And you know the peril as well as I.”

“Such speeches are not for the ears of students,” said Albus Dumbledore in a dangerously rising voice. “Nor for the mouths of professors!”

Dryly, then, Professor Quirrell spoke: “There were many speeches made for the ears of adults, as the Dark Lord rose. And the adults clapped and cheered, and went home having enjoyed their day’s entertainment. But I will obey you, Headmaster, and make no further speeches if you do not like them. My lesson is simple. I will go on doing nothing about traitors, and we will see what students can do for themselves about that, when they do not wait for

professors to save them.”

And then Professor Quirrell turned back to his students, and his mouth quirked up in a wry grin that seemed to dissipate the dreadful pressure like a god blowing to scatter the clouds. “But do please be kind to the traitors up until now,” said Professor Quirrell. “They were just having fun.”

There was laughter, though it was nervous at first, and then it seemed to build, as Professor Quirrell stood there smiling wryly and some of the tension released itself.



Draco’s mind was still whirling through a thousand questions and a daze of horror, as Professor Quirrell prepared to open the envelopes in which the three had inscribed their wishes.

It had never before occurred to Draco that moon-traveling Muggles were a greater threat than the slow decline of wizardry, or that Father had proven himself too weak to stop them.

And even stranger, the obvious implication: Professor Quirrell believed that *Harry* could. The Defense Professor claimed to have made no recommendation, but he’d mentioned Harry Potter over and over in his speech; others would already be thinking the same thing as Draco.

It was ridiculous. The boy who had covered a stuffed chair in glitter and called it a throne —

The boy who faced down Snape and won, whispered a traitorous voice, *that boy could grow into a Lord strong enough to rule, strong enough to save us all* —

Harry had been *raised* by Muggles! He was practically a Mudblood himself, he wouldn’t fight against his adopted family —

He knows their arts, their secrets and their methods; he can take all of the Muggles’ science and use it against them, alongside our own power as wizards.

But what if he refuses? What if he’s too weak?

Then, said that inner voice, *it will have to be you, won’t it, Draco Malfoy?*

And then there was a renewed hush from the crowd, as Professor Quirrell opened the first envelope.

“Mr. Malfoy,” said Professor Quirrell, “your wish is for . . . Slytherin to win the House Cup.”

There was a puzzled pause from the watching audience.

“Yes, Professor,” said Draco in a clear voice, knowing that it was once again being amplified. “If you can’t do that, then something else for Slytherin —”

“I will not award House points unfairly,” said Professor Quirrell. He tapped a cheek, looking thoughtful. “Which makes your wish difficult enough to be interesting. Would you like to say anything about why, Mr. Malfoy?”

Draco turned from the Defense Professor, gazed out at the crowd from against that backdrop of platinum and emeralds. Not all of Slytherin had cheered for Dragon Army, there were anti-Malfoy factions who had expressed that dissatisfaction by supporting the Boy-Who-Lived, or even Granger; and those factions would be encouraged greatly by what Zabini had done. He needed to remind them that Slytherin meant Malfoy and Malfoy meant Slytherin —

“No,” said Draco. “They’re Slytherins, they’ll understand.”

There was some laughter from the audience, especially in Slytherin, even from some students who would have called themselves anti-Malfoy a moment earlier.

Flattery was a lovely thing.

Draco turned back to look at Professor Quirrell again, and was surprised to see an embarrassed look on Granger’s face.

“And for Miss Granger . . .” said Professor Quirrell. There was the sound of a tearing envelope. “Your wish is for . . . Ravenclaw to win the House Cup?”

There was considerable laughter from the audience, including a chuckle from Draco. He hadn’t thought Granger played that game.

“Well, um,” said Granger, sounding like she was suddenly stumbling over a memorized speech, “I meant to say, that . . .” She took a deep breath. “There were soldiers from every House in my army, and I don’t mean to slight any of them. But Houses should still count for something, too. It was sad when students in the same House were hexing each other just because they were in different armies. People should be able to rely on whoever’s in their House. That’s why Godric Gryffindor, and Salazar Slytherin, and Rowena Ravenclaw, and Helga Hufflepuff created the four Houses of Hogwarts in the first place. I’m the General of Sunshine, but even before that, I’m Hermione Granger of Ravenclaw, and I’m proud to be part of a House that’s eight hundred years old.”

“Well said, Miss Granger!” said Dumbledore’s booming voice.

Harry Potter was frowning, and something tickled at the edge of Draco’s

recognition.

“An interesting sentiment, Miss Granger,” said Professor Quirrell. “But there are times when it is good for a Slytherin to have friends in Ravenclaw, or for a Gryffindor to have friends in Hufflepuff. Surely it would be best if you could rely both on your friends in your House, and also your friends in your army?”

Granger’s eyes flicked briefly toward the watching students and teachers, and she said nothing.

Professor Quirrell nodded as though to himself, and then turned back to the podium, and took up and tore open the last envelope. Beside Draco, Harry Potter visibly tensed up as the Defense Professor drew forth the parchment. “And Mr. Potter wishes for —”

There was a pause as Professor Quirrell looked at the parchment.

Then, without any change of expression on Professor Quirrell’s face, the sheet of parchment burst into flames, and burned with a brief, intense fire that left only drifting black dust sprinkling down from his hand.

“Please confine yourself to the possible, Mr. Potter,” said Professor Quirrell, sounding very dry indeed.

There was a long pause; Harry, standing beside Draco, looked rather shaken.

What in Merlin’s name did he ask for?

“I do hope,” said Professor Quirrell, “that you prepared another wish, if I could not grant that one.”

There was another pause.

Harry drew a deep breath. “I didn’t,” he said, “but I already thought of another one.” Harry Potter turned to look out at the audience, and his voice firmed as he spoke. “People fear traitors because of the damage the traitor does directly, the soldiers they shoot or the secrets they tell. But that’s only part of the danger. What people do because they’re *afraid* of traitors also costs them. I used that strategy today against Sunshine and Dragon. I didn’t tell my traitors to cause as much direct damage as possible. I told them to act in the way that would create the most distrust and confusion, and make the generals do the most costly things to try and stop them from doing it again. When there are just a few traitors and a whole country opposing them, it stands to reason that what a few traitors do might be less damaging than what a whole country does to stop them, that the cure might be worse than the disease —”

“Mr. Potter,” said the Defense Professor, his voice suddenly cutting, “the lesson of history is that you are simply wrong. Your parents’ generation did too little to unify themselves, not too much! This whole country almost fell, Mr. Potter, though you were not there to see it. I suggest that you ask your dorm-mates in Ravenclaw how many of them have lost family to the Dark Lord. Or if you are wiser, do *not* ask! *Do* you have a wish to make, Mr. Potter?”

“If you don’t mind,” said the mild voice of Albus Dumbledore, “I should like to hear what the Boy-Who-Lived has to say. He has more experience than either of us at stopping wars.”

A few people laughed, but not many.

Harry Potter’s gaze moved to Dumbledore, and he looked considering for a moment. “I’m not saying you’re wrong, Professor Quirrell. In the last war, people didn’t act together, and a whole country almost fell to a few dozen attackers, and yes, that was pathetic. And if we make the same mistake next time, yes, that’ll be even more pathetic. But you never fight the same war twice. And the problem is, the enemy is *also* allowed to be smart. If you’re divided you’re vulnerable in one way; but when you try to unite, then you face other risks, and other costs, and the enemy will try to take advantage of those, too. You can’t stop thinking at just one level of the game.”

“Simplicity also has a great deal to commend it, Mr. Potter,” said the dry voice of the Defense Professor. “I do hope that you have learned something this day about the dangers of strategies more complicated than uniting your people and attacking your enemy. And if all this does not tie into your wish somehow, I shall be quite annoyed.”

“Yes,” said Harry Potter, “it was pretty difficult coming up with a wish to symbolize the costs of unity. But the problem of acting together isn’t just for wars, it’s something we have to solve all our lives, every day. If everyone is coordinating using the same rules, and the rules are stupid, then if *one* person decides to do things differently, they’re breaking the rules. But if *everyone* decides to do things differently, they can. It’s exactly the same problem of everyone needing to act together. But for the *first* person who speaks out, it seems like they’re going against the crowd. And if you thought that the only important thing was that people should always be unified, then you could never change the game, no matter how stupid the rules. So my own wish, to symbolize what happens when people unite in the wrong direction, is that in Hogwarts we should play Quidditch without the Snitch.”

“*WHAT?*” screamed a hundred voices in the crowd, as Draco’s jaw dropped.

“The Snitch ruins the whole game,” said Harry Potter. “Everything the other players do ends up being irrelevant. It would make overwhelmingly more sense to just buy a clock. It’s one of those incredibly stupid things you don’t notice just because you grew up with it, that people only do because everyone else is doing it —”

But by that point Harry Potter’s voice could no longer be heard, because the riot had started.



The riot ended around fifteen seconds later, after a gigantic spout of fire blasted out of the highest tower of Hogwarts to the sound of a hundred thunders. Draco hadn’t known Dumbledore could *do* that.

The students sat down again very carefully and quietly.

Professor Quirrell was laughing, without pause. “So be it, Mr. Potter. Your will be done.” The Defense Professor paused deliberately. “Of course, I only promised *one* cunning plot. And that is all that the three of you will get.”

Draco had been half-expecting the words earlier, but now they still came as a shock; Draco exchanged rapid glances with Granger, they would have been the obvious allies but their wishes were directly opposed —

“You mean,” said Harry, “we have to all agree on a wish?”

“Oh, that would be *far* too much to ask,” said Professor Quirrell. “The three of you have no common enemy, do you?”

And for one brief moment, so fast that Draco thought he might have imagined it, the Defense Professor’s eyes flicked in the direction of Dumbledore.

“No,” said Professor Quirrell, “I mean that I shall grant three wishes using a single plot.”

There was a confused silence.

“You can’t do that,” Harry said flatly from beside Draco. “Not even *I* can do that. Two of those wishes are mutually incompatible. It’s *logically impossible* —” and then Harry cut himself off.

“You’re a few years too young to tell me what I can’t do, Mr. Potter,” said Professor Quirrell, with a brief dry smile.

Then the Defense Professor turned back to the watching students. “Truthfully, I have no confidence in your ability to learn this day’s lesson. Go home,

and enjoy your time with your families, or what's left of them, while they still live. My own family is long since dead at the Dark Lord's hand. I shall see you all when classes resume."

In the speechless silence that resulted, Professor Quirrell already turning to walk off the stage, Draco heard the Defense Professor's voice say, quietly and no longer amplified, "But you, Mr. Potter, I would speak to now."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



COORDINATION PROBLEMS, PART III

They had gone to the Defense Professor's office, and Professor Quirrell had sealed the door before he leaned back in his chair and spoke.

The Defense Professor's voice was very calm, and that unnerved Harry a good deal more than if Professor Quirrell had been shouting.

"I am trying," said Professor Quirrell quietly, "to make allowances for the fact that you are young. That I myself, at the same age, was a quite extraordinary fool. You speak with adult style and meddle in adult games, and sometimes I forget that you are only a meddler. I hope, Mr. Potter, that your childish meddling has not just killed you, ruined your country, and lost the next war."

It was very hard for Harry to control his breathing. "Professor Quirrell, I said a good deal less than I wished to say, but I had to say something. Your proposals are extremely alarming to anyone who has the slightest familiarity with Muggle history over the last century. The Italian fascists, some very nasty people, got their name from the *fasces*, a bundle of rods bound together to symbolize the idea that unity is strength —"

"So the nasty Italian fascists believed that unity is stronger than division," said Professor Quirrell. Sharpness was beginning to creep into his voice. "Perhaps they also believed that the sky is blue, and advocated a policy of not dropping rocks on your head."

Reversed stupidity is not intelligence; the world's stupidest person may say the sun is shining, but that doesn't make it dark out . . . "Fine, you're right, that was an ad hominem argument, it's not wrong *because* the fascists said it. But Professor Quirrell, you can't have everyone in a country take the Mark of one dictator! It's a single point of failure! Look, I'll put it this way. Suppose the enemy just Imperiuses whoever controls the Mark —"

"Powerful wizards are not so easy to Imperius," said Professor Quirrell dryly. "And if you cannot find a worthy leader, you are in any case doomed. But worthy leaders do exist; the question is whether the people shall follow them."

Harry raked his hands through his hair in frustration. He wanted to call a time-out and make Professor Quirrell read *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* and then start the conversation over again. "I don't suppose that if I suggested democracy was a better form of government than dictatorship —"

"I see," said Professor Quirrell. His eyes closed briefly, then opened. "Mr. Potter, the stupidity of Quidditch is transparent to you because you did not grow up revering the game. If you had never heard of elections, Mr. Potter, and you simply *saw what is there*, what you saw would not please you. Look to our elected Minister of Magic. Is he the wisest, the strongest, the greatest of our nation? No; he is a buffoon who is owned in fee simple by Lucius Malfoy. Wizards went to the polls and chose between Cornelius Fudge and Tania Leach, who had competed with each other in a grand and entertaining contest after the *Daily Prophet*, which Lucius Malfoy also controls, decided that they were the only serious candidates. That Cornelius Fudge was genuinely selected as the best leader our country could offer is not a suggestion anyone could make with a straight face. It is no different in the Muggle world, from what I have heard and seen; the last Muggle newspaper I read mentioned that the previous President of the United States had been a retired movie actor. If you had not grown up with elections, Mr. Potter, they would be as transparently silly to you as Quidditch."

Harry sat there with his mouth open, struggling for words. "The point of elections isn't to produce the one best leader, it's to keep politicians scared enough of the voters that they don't go completely evil like dictators do —"

"The last war, Mr. Potter, was fought between the Dark Lord and Dumbledore. And while Dumbledore was a flawed leader who was losing the war, it is *ridiculous* to suggest that *any* of the Ministers of Magic elected during that

period could have taken Dumbledore's place! Strength flows from powerful wizards and their followers, not from elections and the fools they elect. That is the lesson of magical Britain's recent history; and I doubt that the next war will teach you a lesson any different. *If* you survive it, Mr. Potter, which you will *not* do unless you abandon the enthusiastic illusions of childhood!"

"If you think there are no dangers in the course of action you advocate," said Harry, and despite everything his voice was growing sharp, "then that, too, is childish enthusiasm."

Harry stared grimly into Professor Quirrell's eyes, who stared back without blinking.

"Such dangers," said Professor Quirrell coldly, "are to be discussed in offices like this one, not in speeches. The fools who elected Cornelius Fudge are not interested in complications and caution. Present them with anything more nuanced than a rousing cheer, and you will face your war alone. *That*, Mr. Potter, was your childish error, which Draco Malfoy would not have made even when he was eight years old. It should have been obvious even to *you* that you should have stayed silent, and *consulted with me first*, not spoken your worries before the crowd!"

"I am no friend of Albus Dumbledore," said Harry, a cold in his voice to match Professor Quirrell's. "But he is no child, and he did not seem to think my concerns were childish, nor that I should have waited to speak them."

"Oh," said Professor Quirrell, "so you take your cues from the Headmaster now, do you?" and stood up from behind his desk.



When Blaise turned the corner on the way to the office, he saw that Professor Quirrell was already leaning against the wall.

"Blaise Zabini," said the Defense Professor, straightening; his eyes were set like dark stones within his face, and his voice sent a shiver of fear down Blaise's spine.

He can't do anything against me, I just have to remember that —

"I believe," said Professor Quirrell, in a clear, cold voice, "that I have already guessed the name of your employer. But I would hear it from your own lips, and tell me also the price that bought you."

Blaise knew he was sweating under his robes, and that the moisture would

be already visible on his forehead. "I got a chance to show I was better than all three generals, and I took it. A lot of people hate me now, but there're also plenty of Slytherins who'll love me for it. What makes you think I'm —"

"You did not devise the plan of today's battle, Mr. Zabini. Tell me who did."

Blaise swallowed hard. "Well . . . I mean, in that case . . . then you already know who did, right? The only one who's that crazy is Dumbledore. And he'll protect me if you try to do anything."

"Indeed. Tell me the price." The Defense Professor's eyes were still hard.

"It's my cousin Kimberly," Blaise said, swallowing again and trying to control his voice. "She's real, and she's really being bullied, Potter checked that, he wasn't dumb. Only Dumbledore said that he'd nudged the bullies into doing it, just for the plan, and if I worked for *him* she'd be fine afterward, but if I *did* go with Potter, there was more trouble Kimberly could get into!"

Professor Quirrell was silent for a long moment.

"I see," Professor Quirrell said, his voice now much milder. "Mr. Zabini, should such an event occur again, you may contact me directly. I have my own ways of protecting my friends. Now, a final question: Even with all the power you took into your hands, forcing a tie would have been difficult. Did Dumbledore instruct you as to who should win otherwise?"

"Sunshine," said Blaise.

Professor Quirrell nodded. "As I thought." The Defense Professor sighed. "In your future career, Mr. Zabini, I do not suggest trying any plots that complicated. They have a tendency to fail."

"Um, I said that to the Headmaster, actually," Blaise said, "and he said that was why it was important to have more than one plot going at a time."

Professor Quirrell passed a weary hand across his forehead. "It's a wonder the Dark Lord didn't go mad from fighting *him*. You may go on to your meeting with the Headmaster, Mr. Zabini. I will say nothing of this, but if the Headmaster should somehow discover that we have spoken, remember my standing offer to give you what protection I can. You are dismissed."

Blaise didn't wait for any other word, just turned and fled.



Professor Quirrell waited for a time, and then said, "Go ahead, Mr. Potter."

Harry tore the Cloak of Invisibility off his head and stuffed into his pouch. He was trembling with so much rage he could hardly speak. “He *what*? He did *what*?”

“You should have deduced it yourself, Mr. Potter,” Professor Quirrell said mildly. “You must learn to blur your vision until you can see the forest obscured by the trees. Anyone who heard the stories about you, and who did not know that you were the mysterious Boy-Who-Lived, could easily deduce your ownership of an invisibility cloak. Step back from these events, blur away their details, and what do we observe? There was a great rivalry between students, and their competition ended in a perfect tie. That sort of thing only happens in stories, Mr. Potter, and there is one person in this school who thinks in stories. There was a strange and complicated plot, which you should have realized was uncharacteristic of the young Slytherin you faced. But there is a person in this school who deals in plots that elaborate, and his name is not Zabini. And I did warn you that there was a quadruple agent; you knew that Zabini was at least a triple agent, and you should have guessed a high chance that it was he. No, I will not declare the battle invalid. All three of you failed the test, and lost to your common enemy.”

Harry didn’t care about tests at this point. “Dumbledore *blackmailed* Zabini by *threatening his cousin*? Just to make our battle end in a tie? *Why*?”

Professor Quirrell gave a mirthless laugh. “Perhaps the Headmaster thought the rivalry was good for his pet hero and wished to see it continue. For the greater good, you understand. Or perhaps he was simply mad. You see, Mr. Potter, everyone knows that Dumbledore’s madness is a mask, that he is sane pretending to be insane. They pride themselves on that clever insight, and knowing the secret explanation, they stop looking. It does not occur to them that it is *also* possible to have a mask behind the mask, to be insane pretending to be sane pretending to be insane. And I am afraid, Mr. Potter, that I have urgent business elsewhere, and must depart; but I should strongly advise you not to take your cues from Albus Dumbledore when fighting a war. Until later, Mr. Potter.”

And the Defense Professor inclined his head with some irony, and then strode off in the same direction Zabini had fled, while Harry was still standing in open-mouthed shock.

AFTERMATH: HARRY POTTER.

Harry trudged slowly toward the Ravenclaw dorm, eyes unseeing of walls, paintings, or other students; he went up stairs and down ramps without slowing, speeding, or noticing where he trod.

It had taken him more than a minute after Professor Quirrell's departure to realize that his only source of information about Dumbledore being involved was (a) Blaise Zabini, who he would have to be an absolute gaping idiot to trust again, and (b) Professor Quirrell, who could have easily faked a plot in Dumbledore's style, and who might also think that a little student rivalry was a fine thing; and who had, if you stepped back and blurred out the details, just proposed turning the country into a magical dictatorship.

And it was also possible that Dumbledore *was* the one behind Zabini, and that Professor Quirrell had been sincerely trying to fight the Dark Mark in kind, and prevent the repetition of a performance he saw as pathetic. Trying to make sure that Harry didn't end up fighting the Dark Lord alone, while everyone else hid, frightened, trying to stay out of the line of fire, waiting for Harry to save them.

But the truth was . . .

Well . . .

Harry was sort of okay with that.

It was, he knew, the kind of thing that was supposed to make heroes resentful and bitter.

To heck with that. Harry was very much in favor of everyone else *staying out of danger* while the Boy-Who-Lived took down the Dark Lord by himself, plus or minus a small number of companions. If the next conflict with the Dark Lord got to the point of a Second Wizarding War that killed lots of people and embroiled a whole country, that would mean Harry had *already failed*.

And if afterward a war broke out between wizards and Muggles, it didn't matter who won, Harry would have already failed by letting it get that far. Besides, who said the societies couldn't peacefully integrate when the secrecy inevitably broke down? (Though Harry could hear Professor Quirrell's dry voice in his mind, asking him if he was a fool, and saying all the obvious things . . .) And if mages and Muggles couldn't live in peace, then Harry would combine magic and science and figure out how to evacuate all the wizards to

Mars or somewhere, instead of letting a war break out.

Because if it did come down to a war of extermination . . .

That was the thing Professor Quirrell hadn't realized, the one most important question he'd forgotten to ask his young general.

The real reason why Harry had no intention of being argued into endorsing a Light Mark, no matter *how* much it would help him in his fight against the Dark Lord.

One Dark Lord and fifty Marked followers had been a peril to all of magical Britain.

If all Britain took the Mark of a strong leader, they would be a peril to the whole magical world.

And if the whole wizarding world took a single Mark, they would be a danger to the rest of humanity.

No one knew quite how many wizards there were in the world. He'd done a few estimates with Hermione and come up with numbers in the rough range of a million.

But there were six billion Muggles.

If it came down to a final war . . .

Professor Quirrell had forgotten to ask Harry which side he would protect.

A scientific civilization, reaching outward, looking upward, knowing that its destiny was to grasp the stars.

And a magical civilization, slowly fading as knowledge was lost, still governed by a nobility that saw Muggles as not quite human.

It was a terribly sad feeling, but not one that held any hint of doubt.



AFTERMATH: BLAISE ZABINI.

Blaise strolled through the hallways with careful, self-imposed slowness, his heart beating wildly as he tried to calm down —

"Ahem," said a dry, whispering voice from a shadowy alcove as he passed.

Blaise jumped, but he didn't scream.

Slowly, he turned.

In that small, shadowy corner was a black cloak so wide and billowing that it was impossible to determine whether the figure beneath was male or

female, and atop the cloak a broad-brimmed black hat, and a black mist seemed to gather beneath it and obscure the face of whoever or whatever might lie beneath.

“Report,” whispered Mr. Hat and Cloak.

“I said just what you told me to,” said Blaise. His voice was a little calmer now that he wasn’t lying to anyone. “And Professor Quirrell reacted just the way you expected.”

The broad black hat tilted and straightened, as though the head below had nodded. “Excellent,” said the unidentifiable whisper. “The reward I promised you is already on its way to your mother, by owl.”

Blaise hesitated, but his curiosity was eating him alive. “Can I ask now why you want to cause trouble between Professor Quirrell and Dumbledore?” The Headmaster hadn’t had anything to do with the Gryffindor bullies that Blaise knew about, and besides helping Kimberly, the Headmaster had also offered to make Professor Binns give him excellent marks in History of Magic even if he turned in blank parchments for his homework, though he’d still have to attend class and pretend to hand them in. Actually Blaise would have betrayed all three generals for free, and never mind his cousin either, but he’d seen no need to say that.

The broad black hat cocked to one side, as if to convey a quizzical stare. “Tell me, friend Blaise, did it occur to you that traitors who betray so many times over often meet with ill ends?”

“Nope,” said Blaise, looking straight into the black mist under the hat. “Everyone knows that nothing *really* bad ever happens to students in Hogwarts.”

Mr. Hat and Cloak gave a whisperry chuckle. “Indeed,” said the whisper. “With the murder of one student five decades ago being the exception that proves the rule, since Salazar Slytherin would have keyed his monster into the ancient wards at a higher level than the Headmaster himself.”

Blaise stared at the black mist, now beginning to feel a little uneasy. But it ought to take a Hogwarts professor to do anything significant to him without setting off alarms. Quirrell and Snape were the only professors who’d do something like this, and Quirrell wouldn’t care about fooling *himself*, and Snape wouldn’t hurt one of his own Slytherins . . . would he?

“No, friend Blaise,” whispered the black mist, “I only wished to advise you never to try anything like this in your adult life. So many betrayals would certainly lead to at least one vengeance.”

“My *mother* never got any vengeance,” said Blaise proudly. “Even though she married *seven* husbands and every single one of them died mysteriously and left her lots of money.”

“Really?” said the whisper. “However did she persuade the seventh to marry her after he heard what happened to the first six?”

“I asked Mum that,” said Blaise, “and she said I couldn’t know until I was old enough, and I asked her how old was old enough, and she said, older than her.”

Again the whispery chuckle. “Well then, friend Blaise, my congratulations on having followed in your mother’s footsteps. Go, and if you say nothing of this, we will not meet again.”

Blaise backed uneasily away, feeling an odd reluctance to turn his back.

The hat tilted. “Oh, come now, little Slytherin. If you were truly the equal of Harry Potter or Draco Malfoy, you would have already realized that my hinted threats were just to ensure your silence before Albus. Had I intended to harm, I would not have hinted; had I said nothing, *then* you should have worried.”

Blaise straightened, feeling a little insulted, and nodded to Mr. Hat and Cloak; then turned decisively and strode off toward his meeting with the Headmaster.

He’d been hoping to the very end that someone *else* would show up and give him a chance to sell out Mr. Hat and Cloak.

But then Mum hadn’t betrayed seven different husbands at the *same time*. When you looked at it *that* way, he was still doing better than her.

And Blaise Zabini went on walking toward the Headmaster’s office, smiling, content to be a quintuple agent —

For a moment the boy stumbled, but then straightened, shaking off the odd feeling of disorientation.

And Blaise Zabini went on walking toward the Headmaster’s office, smiling, content to be a quadruple agent.



AFTERMATH: HERMIONE GRANGER.

The messenger didn’t approach her until she was alone.

Hermione was just leaving the girl's bathroom where she sometimes hid to think, and a bright shining cat leapt out of nowhere and said, "Miss Granger?"

She let out a little shriek before she realized the cat had spoken in Professor McGonagall's voice.

Even so she hadn't been frightened, only startled; the cat was bright and brilliant and beautiful, glowing with a white silver radiance like moon-colored sunlight, and she couldn't imagine being scared.

"What are you?" said Hermione.

"This is a message from Professor McGonagall," said the cat, still in the Professor's voice. "Can you come to my office, and not speak of this to anyone?"

"I'll be there right away," said Hermione, still surprised, and the cat leapt and vanished; only it didn't vanish, it traveled away somehow; or that was what her mind said, even though her eyes just saw it disappear.

By the time Hermione had got to the office of her favorite professor, her mind was all a-whirl with speculations. Was there something wrong with her Transfiguration scores? But then why would Professor McGonagall say not to tell anyone? It was probably about Harry practicing his partial Transfiguration . . .

Professor McGonagall's face looked worried, not stern, as Hermione seated herself in front of the desk — trying to keep her eyes from going to the nest of cubbyholes containing Professor McGonagall's homework, she'd always wondered what sort of work grownups had to do to keep the school running and whether they could use any help from her . . .

"Miss Granger," said Professor McGonagall, "let me start by saying that I already know about the Headmaster asking you to make that wish —"

"He *told* you?" blurted Hermione, startled. The Headmaster had said no one else was supposed to know!

Professor McGonagall paused, looked at Hermione, and gave a sad little chuckle. "It's good to see Mr. Potter hasn't corrupted you too much. Miss Granger, you aren't supposed to *admit* anything just because I say I know. As it happens, the Headmaster did *not* tell me, I simply know him too well."

Hermione was blushing furiously now.

"It's fine, Miss Granger!" said Professor McGonagall hastily. "You're a Ravenclaw in your first year, nobody expects you to be a Slytherin."

That *really* stung.

"Fine," said Hermione with some acerbity, "I'll go ask Harry Potter for

Slytherin lessons, then.”

“That *wasn't* what I wanted to . . .” said Professor McGonagall, and her voice trailed off. “Miss Granger, I’m worried about this *because* young Ravenclaw girls shouldn’t have to be Slytherins! If the Headmaster asks you to get involved in something you’re not comfortable with, Miss Granger, it really is all right to say no. And if you’re feeling pressured, please tell the Headmaster that you would like me to be there, or that you would like to ask me first.”

Hermione’s eyes were very wide. “Does the Headmaster do things that are wrong?”

Professor McGonagall looked a little sad at that. “Not on purpose, Miss Granger, but I think . . . well, it probably *is* true that sometimes the Headmaster has trouble remembering what it’s like to be a child. Even when he was a child, I’m sure he must have been brilliant, and strong of mind and heart, with courage enough for three Gryffindors. Sometimes the Headmaster asks too much of his young students, Miss Granger, or isn’t careful enough not to hurt them. He is a good man, but sometimes his plotting can go too far.”

“But it’s *good* for students to be strong and have courage,” said Hermione. “That’s why you suggested Gryffindor for me, wasn’t it?”

Professor McGonagall smiled wryly. “Perhaps I was only being selfish, wanting you for my own House. Did the Sorting Hat offer you — no, I should not have asked.”

“It told me I might go anywhere but Slytherin,” said Hermione. She’d *almost* asked why she wasn’t good enough for Slytherin, before she’d managed to stop herself . . . “So I *have* courage, Professor!”

Professor McGonagall leaned forward over her desk. The worry was showing plainer on her face now. “Miss Granger, it’s not about courage, it’s about what’s healthy for young girls! The Headmaster is drawing you into his plots, Harry Potter is giving you his secrets to keep, and now you’re making alliances with Draco Malfoy! And I promised your mother that you would be safe at Hogwarts!”

Hermione just didn’t know what to say to that. But the thought was occurring to her that Professor McGonagall might not have been warning her if she’d been a boy in Gryffindor instead of a girl in Ravenclaw and *that* was, well . . . “I’ll try to be good,” she said, “and I won’t let anyone tell me otherwise.”

Professor McGonagall pressed her hands over her eyes. When she took

them away, her lined face looked very old. “Yes,” she said in a whisper, “you would have done well in my House. Stay safe, Miss Granger, and be careful. And if you are ever worried or uncomfortable about anything, please come to me at once. I won’t keep you any longer.”



AFTERMATH: DRACO MALFOY.

Neither of them really wanted to do anything complicated that Saturday, not after fighting a battle earlier. So Draco was just sitting in an unused classroom and trying to read a book called *Thinking Physics*. It was one of the most fascinating things that Draco had ever read in his life, at least the parts he could understand, at least when the *accursed idiot* who refused to let his books out of his sight could manage to *shut up* and let Draco *concentrate* —

“Hermione Granger is a *Muuuudblood*,” sang Harry Potter from where he sat at a nearby desk, reading a far more advanced book of his own.

“I know what you’re trying to do,” said Draco calmly without looking up from the pages. “It’s not going to work. We’re still ganging up and crushing you.”

“A *Maaaalfoy* is working with a *Muuuudblood*, what will all your father’s *frieeends* think —”

“They’ll think Malfoys aren’t as easily manipulated as *you* seem to believe, *Potter!*”

The Defense Professor was crazier than Dumbledore, no future savior of the world could ever be this *childish* and *undignified* at any age.

“Hey, Draco, you know what’s really going to suck? *You* know that Hermione Granger has two copies of the magical allele, just like you and just like me, but all your classmates in Slytherin don’t know that and *yoooouuu*’re not allowed to *explaaaaain* —”

Draco’s fingers were whitening where they gripped the book. Being beaten and spat upon couldn’t possibly require this much self-control, and if he didn’t get back at Harry soon, he was going to do something incriminating —

“So what *did* you wish the first time?” said Draco.

Harry didn’t say anything, so Draco looked up from his book, and felt a twinge of malicious satisfaction at the sad look on Harry’s face.

“Um,” Harry said. “A lot of people asked me that, but I don’t think Professor Quirrell would have wanted me to talk about it.”

Draco put a serious look on his own face. “You can talk about it with *me*. It’s probably not important compared to the other secrets you’ve told me, and what else are friends for?” *That’s right, I’m your friend! Feel guilty!*

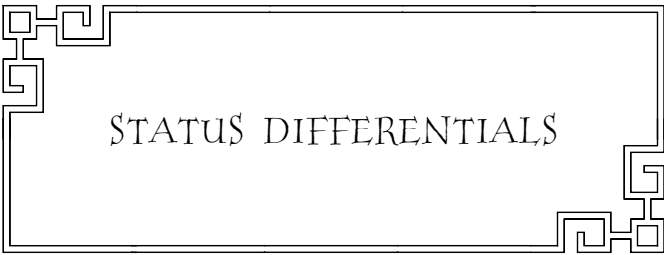
“It wasn’t really all that interesting,” Harry said with obviously artificial lightness. “Just, *I wish Professor Quirrell would teach Battle Magic again next year.*”

Harry sighed, and looked back down at his book.

And said, after another few seconds, “Your father’s probably going to be pretty upset with you this Christmas, but if you promise him that you’ll betray the Mudblood girl and wipe out her army, everything will go back to being all right, and you’ll still get your Christmas presents.”

Maybe if he and Granger asked Professor Quirrell extra politely and used some of their Quirrell points, the two of them would be allowed to do something more interesting to General Chaos than putting him to sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



STATUS DIFFERENTIALS

Wrenching disorientation, that was how it felt to walk out of Platform Nine and Three-Quarters into the rest of Earth, the world that Harry had once thought was the only real world. People dressed in casual shirts and pants, instead of the more dignified robes of wizards and witches. Scattered bits of trash here and there around the benches. A forgotten smell, the fumes of burned gasoline, raw and sharp in the air. The ambiance of the King's Cross train station, less bright and cheerful than Hogwarts or Diagon Alley; the people seemed smaller, more afraid, and likely would have eagerly traded their problems for a dark wizard to fight. Harry wanted to cast *Scourgify* for the dirt, and *Everto* for the garbage, and if he'd known the spell, a Bubble-Head Charm so he wouldn't have to breathe the air. But he couldn't use his wand, in this place...

This, Harry realized, must be what it felt like to go from a First World country to a Third World country.

Only it was the Zeroth World which Harry had left, the wizarding world, of Cleansing Charms and house elves; where, between the healer's arts and your own magic, you could hit one hundred and seventy before old age really started catching up with you.

And nonmagical London, Muggle Earth, to which Harry had temporarily returned. This was where Mum and Dad would live out the rest of their lives,

unless technology leapfrogged over wizardry's quality of life, or something deeper in the world changed.

Without even thinking about it, Harry's head turned and his eyes darted behind him to see the wooden trunk that was scurrying after him, unnoticed by any Muggles, the clawed tentacles offering quick confirmation that, yes, he hadn't just imagined it all . . .

And then there was the other reason for the tight feeling in his chest.

His parents didn't know.

They didn't know *anything*.

They didn't know . . .

"Harry?" called a thin, blonde woman whose perfectly smooth and unblemished skin made her look a good deal younger than thirty-three; and Harry realized with a start that it *was* magic, he hadn't known the signs before but he could see them now. And whatever sort of potion lasted that long, it must have been terribly dangerous, because most witches didn't do that to themselves, they weren't that desperate . . .

There was water gathering in Harry's eyes.

"*Harry?*" yelled an older-looking man with a paunch gathering about his stomach, dressed with ostentatious academic carelessness in a black vest thrown over a dark grey-green shirt, someone who would always be a professor anywhere he went, who would certainly have been one of the most brilliant wizards of his generation, if he'd been born with two copies of that gene, instead of zero . . .

Harry raised his hand and waved to them. He couldn't speak. He couldn't speak at all.

They came over to him, not running, but at a steady, dignified walk; that was how fast Professor Michael Verres-Evans walked, and Mrs. Petunia Evans-Verres wasn't about to walk any faster.

The smile on his father's face wasn't very wide, but then his father never was given to huge smiles; it was, at least, as wide as Harry had ever seen it, wider than when a new grant came in, or when one of his students got a position, and you couldn't ask for a wider smile than that.

Mum was blinking hard, and she was trying to smile but not doing a very good job.

"So!" said his father as he came striding up. "Made any revolutionary discoveries yet?"

Of course Dad thought he was joking.

It hadn't hurt quite so much when his parents didn't believe in him, back when no one *else* had believed in him either, back when Harry hadn't *known* how it felt to be taken seriously by people like Headmaster Dumbledore and Professor Quirrell.

And that was when Harry realized that the Boy-Who-Lived only existed in magical Britain, that there wasn't any such person in Muggle London, just a cute little eleven-year-old boy going home for Christmas.

"Excuse me," Harry said, his voice trembling, "I'm going to break down and cry now, it doesn't mean there was anything wrong at school."

Harry started to move forward, and then stopped, torn between hugging his father and hugging his mother, he didn't want either one to feel slighted or that Harry loved them more than the other —

"You," said his father, "are a very silly boy, Mr. Verres," and he gently took Harry by the shoulders and pushed him into the arms of his mother, who was kneeling down, tears already streaking her cheek.

"Hello, Mum," Harry said with his voice wavering, "I'm back." And he hugged her, amid the noisy mechanical sounds and the smell of burned gasoline; and Harry started crying, because he knew that nothing *could* go back, least of all him.



The sky was completely dark, and stars were coming out, by the time they negotiated the Christmas traffic to the university town that was Oxford, and parked in the driveway of the small, dingy-looking old house that their family used to keep the rain off their books.

As they walked up the brief stretch of pavement leading to the front door, they passed a series of flower-pots holding small, dim electric lights (dim since they had to recharge themselves off solar power during the day), and the lights lit up just as they passed. The hard part had been finding motion sensors that were waterproof and triggered at just the right distance . . .

In Hogwarts there were real torches like that.

And then the front door opened and Harry stepped into their living-room, blinking hard.

Every inch of wall space is covered by a bookcase. Each bookcase has six shelves,

going almost to the ceiling. Some bookshelves are stacked to the brim with hardcover books: science, math, history, and everything else. Other shelves have two layers of paperback science fiction, with the back layer of books propped up on old tissue boxes or two-by-fours, so that you can see the back layer of books above the books in front. And it still isn't enough. Books are overflowing onto the tables and the sofas and making little heaps under the windows...

The Verres household was just as he'd left it, only with more books, which was also just how he'd left it.

And a Christmas tree, naked and undecorated just two days before Christmas Eve, which threw Harry briefly before he realized, with a warm feeling blossoming in his chest, that of course his parents had *waited*.

"We took the bed out of your room to make room for more bookcases," said his father. "You can sleep in your trunk, right?"

"*You* can sleep in my trunk," said Harry.

"That reminds me," said his father. "What *did* they end up doing about your sleep cycle?"

"Magic," Harry said, making a beeline for the door that opened upon his bedroom, just in case Dad *wasn't* joking...

"That's not an explanation!" said Professor Verres-Evans, just as Harry shouted, "*You used up all the open space on my bookcases?*"



Harry had spent December 23rd shopping for Muggle things that he couldn't just Transfigure; his father had been busy and had said that Harry would need to walk or take the bus, which had suited Harry just fine. Some of the people at the hardware store had given Harry questioning looks, but he'd said with an innocent voice that his father was shopping nearby and was very busy and had sent him to get some things (holding up a list in carefully adult-looking half-illegible handwriting); and in the end, money was money.

They had all decorated the Christmas tree together, and Harry had put a tiny dancing fairy on top (two Sickles, five Knuts at Gambol & Japes).

Gringotts had readily exchanged Galleons for paper money, but they didn't seem to have any simple way to turn larger quantities of gold into tax-free, unsuspecting Muggle money in a numbered Swiss bank account. This had rather spiked Harry's plan to turn most of the money he'd self-stolen into a

sensible mix of 60% international index funds and 40% Berkshire Hathaway. For the moment, Harry had diversified his assets a little further by sneaking out late at night, invisible and Time-Turned, and burying one hundred golden Galleons in the backyard. He'd always always *always* wanted to do that anyway.

Some of December 24th had been spent with the Professor reading Harry's books and asking questions. Most of the experiments his father had suggested were impractical, at least for the moment; of those remaining, Harry had done many of them already. ("Yes, Dad, I checked what happened if Hermione was given a changed pronunciation and she didn't know whether it was changed, that was the very first experiment I did, Dad!")

The last question Harry's father had asked, looking up from *Magical Draughts and Potions* with an expression of bewildered disgust, was whether it all made sense if you were a wizard; and Harry had answered no.

Whereupon his father had declared that magic was unscientific.

Harry was still a little shocked at the idea of pointing to a section of *reality* and calling it unscientific. Dad seemed to think that the conflict between his intuitions and the universe meant that the universe had a problem.

(Then again, there were lots of physicists who thought that quantum mechanics was weird, instead of quantum mechanics being normal and them being weird.)

Harry had shown his mother the healer's kit he'd bought to keep in their house, though most of the potions wouldn't work on Dad. Mum had stared at the kit in a way that made Harry ask whether Mum's sister had ever bought anything like that for Grandpa Edwin and Grandma Elaine. And when Mum still hadn't answered, Harry had said hastily that she must have just never thought of it. And then, finally, he'd fled the room.

Lily Evans probably *hadn't* thought of it, that was the sad thing. Harry knew that other people had a tendency to not-think about painful subjects, in the same way they had a tendency not to deliberately rest their hands on red-hot stove burners; and Harry was starting to suspect that most Muggleborns rapidly acquired a tendency to not-think about their family, who were all going to die before they reached their first century anyway.

Not that Harry had any intention of letting *that* happen, of course.

And then it was late in the day on December 24th and they were driving off for their Christmas Eve dinner.



The house was huge, not by Hogwarts standards, but certainly by the standards of what you could get if your father was a distinguished professor trying to live in Oxford. Two stories of brick gleaming in the setting sun, with windows on top of windows and one tall window that went up much further than glass should go, that was going to be one huge living room . . .

Harry took a deep breath, and rang the doorbell.

There was a distant call of “Honey, can you get it?”

This was followed by a slow patter of approaching steps.

And then the door opened to reveal a genial man, of fat and rosy cheeks and thinning hair, in a blue button-down shirt straining slightly at the seams.

“Dr. Granger?” Harry’s father said briskly, before Harry could even speak. “I’m Michael, and this is Petunia and our son Harry. The food’s in the magical trunk,” and Dad made a vague gesture behind him — not quite in the direction of the trunk, as it happened.

“Yes, please, come in,” said Leo Granger. He stepped forward and took the wine bottle from the Professor’s outstretched hands, with a muttered “Thank you,” and then stepped back and waved at the living room. “Have a seat. And,” his head turning down to address Harry, “all the toys are downstairs in the basement, I’m sure Herm will be down shortly, it’s the first door on your right,” and pointed toward a hallway.

Harry just looked at him for a moment, conscious that he was blocking his parents from coming in.

“Toys?” said Harry in a bright, high-pitched voice, with his eyes wide. “I love toys!”

There was an intake of breath from his mother behind him, and Harry strode into the house, managing not to stomp too hard as he walked.

The living room was every bit as large as it had looked from outside, with a huge vaulted ceiling dangling a gigantic chandelier, and a Christmas tree that must have been murder to maneuver through the door. The lower levels of the tree were thoroughly and carefully decorated in neat patterns of red and green and gold, with a newfound sprinkling of blue and bronze; the heights that only a grownup could reach were carelessly, randomly draped with strings of lights and wreaths of tinsel. A hallway extended until it terminated in the cabinetry of a kitchen, and wooden stairs with polished metal railings stretched

up toward a second floor.

“Gosh!” Harry said. “This is a big house! I hope I don’t get lost in here!”



Dr. Roberta Granger was feeling rather nervous as dinner approached. The turkey and the roast, their own contributions to the common project, were steadily cooking away in the oven; the other dishes were to be brought by their guests, the Verres family, who had adopted a boy named Harry. Who was known to the wizarding world as the Boy-Who-Lived. And who was also the only boy that Hermione had ever called “cute”, or noticed at all, really.

The Verreses had said that Hermione was the only child in Harry’s age group whose existence their son had ever acknowledged in any way whatsoever.

And it might’ve been jumping the gun just a little; but both couples had a sneaking suspicion that wedding bells might be in the offing a few years down the road.

So while Christmas Day would be spent, as always, with her husband’s family, they’d decided to spend Christmas Eve meeting their daughter’s possible future in-laws.

The doorbell rang while she was right in the middle of basting the turkey, and she raised her voice and shouted, “*Honey, can you get it?*”

There was a brief groan of a chair and its occupant, and then there was the sound of her husband’s heavy footsteps and the door swinging open.

“Dr. Granger?” said an older man’s brisk voice. “I’m Michael, and this is Petunia and our son Harry. The food’s in the magical trunk.”

“Yes, please, come in,” said her husband, followed by a muttered “Thank you” that indicated some sort of present had been accepted, and “Have a seat.” Then Leo’s voice altered to a tone of artificial enthusiasm, and said, “And all the toys are downstairs in the basement, I’m sure Herm will be down shortly, it’s the first door on your right.”

There was a brief pause.

Then a young boy’s bright voice said, “Toys? I love toys!”

There was the sound of footsteps entering the house, and then the same bright voice said, “Gosh! This is a big house! I hope I don’t get lost in here!”

Roberta closed up the oven, smiling. She’d been a bit worried about the way Hermione’s letters had described the Boy-Who-Lived — though certainly

her daughter hadn't said anything indicating that Harry Potter was *dangerous*; nothing like the dark hints written in the books Roberta had bought, supposedly for Hermione, during their trip to Diagon Alley. Her daughter hadn't said much at all, only that Harry talked like he came out of a book, and Hermione was studying harder than she ever had in her life just to stay ahead of him in class. But from the sound of it, Harry Potter was an ordinary eleven-year-old boy.

She got to the front door just as her daughter came clattering frantically down the stairs at a speed that didn't look safe at all, Hermione had claimed that witches were more resistant to falls but Roberta wasn't quite sure she believed that —

Roberta took in her first sight of Professor and Mrs. Verres, who were both looking rather nervous, just as the boy with the legendary scar on his forehead turned to her daughter and said, now in a lower voice, "Well met on this fairest of evenings, Miss Granger." His hand stretched back, as though offering his parents on a silver platter. "I present to you my father, Professor Michael Verres-Evans, and my mother, Mrs. Petunia Evans-Verres."

And as Roberta's mouth was gaping open, the boy turned back to his parents and said, now in that bright voice again, "Mum, Dad, this is Hermione! She's really smart!"

"*Harry!*" hissed her daughter. "Stop that!"

The boy swiveled again to regard Hermione. "I'm afraid, Miss Granger," the boy said gravely, "that you and I have been exiled to the labyrinthine recesses of the basement. Let us leave them to their adult conversations, which would no doubt soar far above our own childish intellects, and resume our ongoing discussion of the implications of Humean projectivism for Transfiguration."

"Excuse us, please," said her daughter in a very firm tone, and grabbed the boy by his left sleeve, and dragged him into the hallway — Roberta swiveled helplessly to track them as they went past her, the boy gave her a cheery wave — and then Hermione pulled the boy into the basement access and slammed the door behind her.

"I, ah, I apologize for . . ." said Mrs. Verres in a faltering voice.

"I'm sorry," said the Professor, smiling fondly, "Harry can be a bit touchy about that sort of thing. But I expect he's right about us not being interested in their conversation."

Is he dangerous? Roberta wanted to ask, but she kept her silence and tried

to think of subtler questions. Her husband beside her was chuckling, as if he'd found what they'd just seen funny, rather than frightening.

The most terrible Dark Lord in history had tried to kill that boy, and the burnt husk of his body had been found next to the crib.

Her possible future son-in-law.

Roberta had been increasingly apprehensive about giving her daughter over to witchcraft — especially after she'd read the books, put the dates together, and realized that her magical mother had probably been killed at the height of Grindelwald's terror, *not* died giving birth to her as her father had always claimed. But Professor McGonagall had made other visits after her first trip, to "see how Miss Granger is doing"; and Roberta couldn't help but think that if Hermione said her parents were being troublesome about her witching career, something would be done to *fix* them . . .

Roberta put her best smile on her face, and did what she could to spread some pretended Christmas cheer.



The dining room table was much longer than six people — er, four people and two children — really needed, but all of it was draped with a tablecloth of fine white linen, and the dishes had been needlessly transferred to fancy serving plates, which at least were of stainless steel rather than real silver.

Harry was having a bit of trouble concentrating on the turkey.

The conversation had turned to Hogwarts, naturally; and it'd been obvious to Harry that his parents were hoping that Hermione would trip up and say more about Harry's school life than Harry had been telling them. And either Hermione had realized this, or she was just automatically steering clear of anything that might prove troublesome.

So *Harry* was fine.

But unfortunately Harry had made the mistake of owling his parents with all sorts of facts about Hermione that she hadn't told her *own* parents.

Like that she was general of an army in their after-school activities.

Hermione's mother had looked very alarmed, and Harry had quickly interrupted and done his best to explain that all the spells were stunners, Professor Quirrell was always watching, and the existence of magical healing meant that lots of things were much less dangerous than they sounded, at which

point Hermione had kicked him hard under the table. Thankfully Harry's father, who Harry had to admit was better than him at some things, had announced with firm professorial authority that he hadn't worried at all, since he couldn't imagine children being allowed to do it if it was dangerous.

That wasn't why Harry was having trouble enjoying dinner, though.

... the problem with feeling sorry for yourself was that it never took any time at all to find someone else who had it worse.

Dr. Leo Granger had asked, at one point, whether that nice teacher who'd seemed to like Hermione, Professor McGonagall, was awarding her lots of points in school.

Hermione had said yes, with an apparently genuine smile.

Harry had managed, with some effort, to stop himself from icily pointing out that Professor McGonagall would never show favoritism to any Hogwarts student, and that Hermione was getting lots of points because she'd earned *every, single, one*.

At another point, Leo Granger had offered the table his opinion that Hermione was very smart and could have gone to medical school and become a dentist, if not for the whole witch business.

Hermione had smiled again, and a quick glance had prevented Harry from suggesting Hermione might also have been an *internationally famous scientist*, and asking whether that thought would've occurred to the Grangers if they'd had a *son* instead of a *daughter*, or if it was unacceptable either way for their offspring to do better than them.

But Harry was rapidly reaching his boiling point.

And becoming a *lot* more appreciative of the fact that his own father had *always* done everything he could to support Harry's development as a prodigy and *always* encouraged him to reach higher and *never* belittled a single one of his accomplishments, even if a child prodigy was still just a child. Was this the sort of household he could have ended up in, if Mum had married Vernon Dursley?

Harry was doing what he could, though.

"And she's really beating you in *all* your classes except broomstick riding and Transfiguration?" said Professor Michael Verres-Evans.

"Yes," Harry said with forced calm, as he cut himself another bite of Christmas Eve turkey. "By solid margins, in most of them." There were other circumstances under which Harry would have been more reluctant to admit

that, which was why he hadn't gotten around to telling his father until now.

"Hermione has always been quite good in school," said Dr. Leo Granger in a satisfied tone.

"Harry competes at the national level!" said Professor Michael Verres-Evans.

"Dear!" said Petunia.

Hermione was giggling, and that wasn't making Harry feel any better about her situation. It didn't seem to bother Hermione and *that bothered Harry*.

"I'm not embarrassed to lose to her, Dad," Harry said. Right at this moment he wasn't. "Did I mention that she memorized all her schoolbooks before the first day of class? And yes, I tested it."

"Is that, ah, *usual* for her?" Professor Verres-Evans said to the Grangers.

"Oh, yes, Hermione's always memorizing things," said Dr. Roberta Granger with a cheerful smile. "She knows every recipe in all my cookbooks by heart. I miss her every time I make dinner."

Judging by the look on his father's face, Dad was feeling at least some of what Harry felt.

"Don't worry, Dad," Harry said, "she's getting all the advanced material she can take, now. Her teachers at Hogwarts know she's smart, *unlike her parents!*"

His voice had risen on the last three words, and even as all faces turned to stare at him and Hermione kicked him again, Harry knew that he'd blown it, but it was too much, just way too much.

"Of course we know she's smart," said Leo Granger, starting to look offended at the child who'd had the temerity to raise his voice at their dinner table.

"You don't have the tiniest idea," said Harry, the ice now leaking into his voice. "You think she reads a lot of books and it's cute, right? You see a perfect report card and you think it's good that she's doing well in class. Your daughter is the most talented witch of her generation and the brightest star of Hogwarts, and someday, Dr. and Dr. Granger, the fact that you were her parents will be the only reason that history remembers you!"

Hermione, who had calmly got up from her seat and walked around the table, chose that moment to grab Harry's shirt by the shoulder and pull him out of his chair. Harry let himself be pulled, but as Hermione dragged him away, he said, raising his voice even louder, "It is entirely possible that in a thousand years, the fact that Hermione Granger's parents were dentists will

be the only reason anyone remembers dentistry!”



Roberta stared at where her daughter had just dragged the Boy-Who-Lived out of the room with a patient look upon her young face.

“I’m terribly sorry,” said Professor Verres with an amused smile. “But please don’t worry, Harry always talks like that. Aren’t they just like a married couple already?”

The frightening thing was that they *were*.



Harry had been expecting a rather severe lecture from Hermione.

But after Hermione pulled them into the basement access and closed the door behind them, she’d turned around —

— and was smiling, genuinely so far as Harry could tell.

“Please don’t, Harry,” she said in a soft voice. “Even though it’s very nice of you. Everything’s fine.”

Harry just looked at her. “How can you stand it?” he said. He had to keep his voice quiet, they didn’t want the parents to hear, but it rose in pitch if not in volume. “*How can you stand it?*”

Hermione shrugged, and said, “Because that’s the way parents *should* be?”

“No,” Harry said, his voice low and intense, “it’s not, my father *never* puts me down — well, he *does*, but never like that —”

Hermione held up a single finger, and Harry waited, watching her search for words. It took her a while before she said, “Harry . . . Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick like me because I’m the most talented witch of my generation and the brightest star of Hogwarts. And Mum and Dad don’t know that, and you’ll never be able to tell them, but they love me anyway. Which means that everything is just the way it should be, at Hogwarts and at home. And since they’re *my* parents, Mr. Potter, *you* don’t get to argue.” She was once again smiling her mysterious smile from dinnertime, and looking at Harry very fondly. “*Is that clear, Mr. Potter?*”

Harry nodded tightly.

“Good,” said Hermione, and leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.



The conversation had only just gotten started again when a distant high-pitched yelp floated back to them,

“Hey! No kissing!”

The two fathers burst out in laughter just as the two mothers rose up from their chairs with identical looks of horror and dashed toward the basement.

When the children had been brought back, Hermione was saying in an icy tone that she was never going to kiss Harry ever again, and Harry was saying in an outraged voice that the Sun would burn down to a cold dead cinder before he let her get close enough to try.

Which meant that everything was just the way it should be, and they all sat back down again to finish their Christmas dinner.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



INTERLUDE: CROSSING THE BOUNDARY

It was almost midnight.

Staying up late was simple enough for Harry. He just hadn't used the Time-Turner. Harry followed a tradition of timing his sleep cycle to make sure he was awake for when Christmas Eve turned into Christmas Day; because while he'd never been young enough to *believe* in Santa Claus, he'd once been young enough to doubt.

It would have been nice if there *had* been a mysterious figure who entered your house in the night and brought you presents . . .

A chill went down Harry's spine then.

An intimation of something dreadful approaching.

A creeping terror.

A sense of doom.

Harry sat bolt upright in bed.

He looked at the window.

"*Professor Quirrell?*" Harry shrieked very quietly.

Professor Quirrell made a slight lifting gesture, and Harry's window seemed to fold into its frame. At once a cold gust of winter blew into the room through the gap, along with a scant few flakes of snow from a sky spotted with grey night-clouds, amid the black and stars.

"Fear not, Mr. Potter," said the Defense Professor in a normal voice. "I have Charmed your parents asleep; they shall not wake until I have departed."

"No one's supposed to know where I am!" said Harry, still keeping the shriek quiet. "Even owls are supposed to deliver my mail to Hogwarts, not here!" Harry had agreed to that willingly; it would be silly if a Death Eater could win the whole war at any time just by owling him a magically triggered hand grenade.

Professor Quirrell was grinning, from where he stood in the backyard beyond the window. "Oh, I shouldn't worry, Mr. Potter. You *are* well protected against locating Charms, and no blood purist is likely to think of consulting a phone book." His grin grew wider. "And it did take considerable effort to cross the wards that the Headmaster put around this house — though of course anyone who knew your address could simply wait outside and attack you the next time you left."

Harry stared at Professor Quirrell for a while. "What are you *doing* here?" Harry said finally.

The smile left Professor Quirrell's face. "I've come to apologize, Mr. Potter," the Defense Professor said quietly. "I should not have spoken to you so harshly as I —"

"Don't," Harry said. He looked down at the blanket that he was clutching around his pajamas. "Just don't."

"Have I offended you that much?" said Professor Quirrell's quiet voice.

"No," Harry said. "But you *will* if you apologize."

"I see," said Professor Quirrell, and in an instant his voice grew stern. "Then if I am to treat you as an equal, Mr. Potter, I should say that you have gravely violated the etiquette that holds between friendly Slytherins. If you are not currently playing the game against someone, you *must* not meddle in their plans like that, not without asking them *before*. For you do not know what their true design may be, nor what stakes they may lose. It would mark you as their enemy, Mr. Potter."

"I'm sorry," Harry said, in just the same quiet tone that Professor Quirrell had used.

"Apology accepted," said Professor Quirrell.

"But," Harry said, still quietly, "you and I really must speak further on politics, at some point."

Professor Quirrell sighed. "I know you dislike condescension, Mr. Potter —"

That was a bit of an understatement.

"But it would be even more condescending," said Professor Quirrell, "if I were not to state it clearly. You are missing some life experience, Mr. Potter."

"And does everyone who has sufficient life experience agree with you, then?" said Harry calmly.

"What good is life experience to someone who plays Quidditch?" said Professor Quirrell, and shrugged. "I think you will change your mind in time, after every trust you place has failed you, and you have become cynical."

The Defense Professor said it as though it were the most ordinary statement in the world, framed against the black and the stars and the cloud-spotted sky, as one or two tiny snowflakes blew past him in the biting winter air.

"That reminds me," said Harry. "Merry Christmas."

"I suppose," said Professor Quirrell. "After all, if it is *not* an apology, then it must be a Christmas gift. The very first one I have ever given, in fact."

Harry hadn't even started yet on learning Latin so he could read the experimental diary of Roger Bacon; and he hardly dared open his mouth to ask.

"Put on your winter coat," said Professor Quirrell, "or take a warming potion if you have one; and meet me outside, under the stars. I shall see if I can maintain it a little longer this time."

It took Harry a moment to process the words, and then he was dashing for the coat closet.

Professor Quirrell kept the spell of starlight going for more than an hour, though the Defense Professor's face grew strained, and he had to sit down after a while. Harry protested only once, and was shushed.

They crossed the boundary from Christmas Eve to Christmas Day within that timeless void where Earthly rotations meant nothing, the one true everlasting Silent Night.

And just as promised, Harry's parents slept soundly all through it, until Harry was safely back in his room, and the Defense Professor had gone.

This book was formatted by fans of the story. Typesetting was done using L^AT_EX; the starting point source code can be found at github.com/knuesel/hpmor. This book was built on January 2, 2024.